

MADE IN THE USA

Chris Payne captures the American textile industry

While we all wear clothes manufactured in factories and mills, we rarely see the inside of these industrial spaces. Having trained as an architect and self-taught in photography, Chris Payne has gone on to explore the textile industry in America. Although Chris's photographs have a relation to architectural drawings, with each image meticulously capturing mechanical processes and details, they are also painterly in the way that movement and colour play key roles. Chris tells Selvedge's Grace Warde-Aldam a little bit about these secret textile worlds.

GW:What led you to the textile industry?

CP: When I discovered an old yarn mill in 2010, tucked away in a sleepy hamlet in Maine, I had no idea it would turn into a long-term project. I returned to the mill several times, and from conversations with employees, learned of other textile factories in the northeast. Since then I have gained access to an industry that symbolises, more than any other, the decline of traditional manufacturing in the United States. Several decades of overseas competition, unequal trade policies, and a flood of cheap imports have decimated American textile mills.

Today, most people assume this industry has vanished yet it survives, albeit on a much smaller scale, and (for the most part) out of public view. The jobs in apparel may be gone, but the modern definition of textiles is broad and encompasses much more than clothing. With last year's presidential election, the debate over the importance of manufacturing has once again

become a charged political topic. Yet few people nowadays have ever been inside a factory and have little idea what manufacturing really means. My photographs offer a view into this world, showing how one industry has evolved and transformed, and what its future may hold.

GW:What is your approach?

CP: The challenge of this project is to find those moments in the choreography of production that are both beautiful and informative, and worthy of a picture that will hold an outsider's interest. I seek the intersection where art meets documentation, where the mechanical process of making a sweater becomes something poetic. More than anything, I want my work to convey the value of manufacturing and craftsmanship.

Since beginning this project I have developed a greater appreciation for how clothing is made, especially the various machines and mechanical processes of weaving and knitting, and all the intermediary steps that transform raw materials into a finished fabric. It's like architecture and construction on a smaller scale. I'll never look at denim the same way!

GW:What draws you to specific factories ?

CP: The size or age of a mill, and what it produces play a small role in determining whether or not it will yield a good picture. I've visited many spinning and weaving mills, and after a while they all look alike. For this project, timing is everything. If a mill is running bright colours or vibrant patterns, or performing a complex ▶









operation requiring intricate handiwork, then chances are it's worth a visit.

GW:Your previous work seems to be about dereliction. Do you draw any parrallels between this and textile manufacturing?

CP: My new work is really an extension of the old, a celebration of manufacturing and craftsmanship that's happening in the present instead of the past. Given my background in architecture, I have always been interested in how things are designed, constructed, and how they work. When I was photographing state mental hospitals for my book *Asylum*, I was particularly fascinated by their operation as self-sufficient communities, where almost everything of necessity was produced on site, including food, water, power, and even clothing and shoes. Some of the first textile mills I photographed reminded me of the hospital workshops, but while those places had long been abandoned, the mills were fully operational.

GW:Tell me a bit about who you portray in the textile industry.

CP: The people I meet are a cross-section of young and old, skilled and unskilled, recent immigrants and veteran employees, some of whom have spent their entire lives in the textile industry. I'm often told of the days when jobs were so plentiful that you could leave one mill, walk down the street and get a job at another the same day. While these old-timers might view the past with a tinge of nostalgia, they regard their present situation with the same matter-of-

factness as anyone struggling to make ends meet. There's nothing romantic about working in a factory. It's hard, repetitive physical labour, but they take pride in what they do and possess a hands-on expertise that no book can teach.

The demographics of mill workplaces reflect the surrounding community, whether it's Latino, Asian, white, etc. — usually it's a mix. Almost all of the employees at a mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, are from the Azores and speak Portuguese. The Southwick suit factory in Haverhill, Massachusetts, employs hundreds of people from all over the world and offers in-house ESL classes. Recently, there's been much talk in the US about the adverse affects of immigration. From what I've seen, if it wasn't for immigrants, many of the mills would be out of business.

GW:What next?

CP: I have been working on this project on and off for six years now, and there are still many mills to photograph down south. Like any creative endeavor, this has been an organic process and I'm not sure how or when it will end. It could take a lifetime. For now, I'm enjoying the journey. ...

As You Sew - Sew Shall You Reap: A Selvedge symposium on sustainability in textile production, Saturday 15 July, 10-5pm. Speakers include Lucy Siegle, journalist and author on ecological and ethical lifestyle matters, and Luisa Cevese of Riedizioni. Bucks New University, High Wycombe; Queen Alexandra Rd, High Wycombe HP11 2JZ www.selvedge.org