

NEWS

# ON SHOW

As his first UK exhibition goes on show in London, **Michal Cala's** imagery is starting to gain the international acclaim it deserves. Anna Bonita Evans reports on the Polish photographer's enigmatic monochrome series *Silesia*.

All images © Michal Cala



Slagheaps of the Rymer mine, Rybnik, 1978.



A housing estate next to Pokoj steelworks, 1978.

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The photographs about to take the spotlight at London's MMX Gallery show the coalfield towns in a south-west region of Poland before the fall of communism. Created by Polish photographer Michal Cala more than 30 years ago, the silver gelatin vintage prints have never been exhibited in the UK before. Endlessly fascinating, the work reveals a part of the country's history now gone and Cala's continuous fascination with presenting the landscape and how we use it.

The photographs were taken in Silesia over a ten-year period, from the mid 1970s to 80s, when the district's heavy industry was at its peak. The area was rich in natural minerals and experienced massive development at a rapid rate. It had more than 41 mines by 1970 and quickly became one of the world's leading coal producers. It wasn't until after the revolutions of 1989 that stricter policies were introduced,

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which helped slow down the rate of environmental destruction.

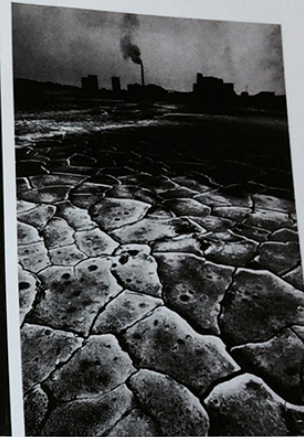
Struck by the rapidly changing landscape, Cala focused on newly built industrial buildings, labourers' housing districts and vast coal heaps, and their dichotomy – or surprising synthesis – with the surrounding environment. Resisting a straightforward depiction of the district's fast decline into an industrial wasteland, Cala – like W Eugene Smith, Josef Koudelka and Robert Frank before him – was able to find poetry in the grim reality of a dark post-war world.

He sought out the sombre beauty of his surroundings and presented it in his own unique way. He achieved this through a heavily symbolic style, where he transformed complex scenes into exquisitely simplified forms. A political reading of the pictures could be made when considering how the vast buildings contrast with the people – who are often dwarfed by the surrounding scenes in each frame. Individualism and autonomy are lost when faced with the gigantism and homogenising of the communist regime.

Born in 1948 in the northern Polish region of Toruń, Cala studied aircraft construction in Warsaw at the University of Technology in the early 1970s. He first visited Silesia in 1974, where he worked as an engineer until 1983 and photographed the area in his spare time. His day-to-day life in heavy construction must have played a part in his appreciation



Slagheaps and trees, Walbrzych, 1978.



Landscape around Marcel mine, Radin, 1978.

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and awareness of how it was used. In 1977 he moved to Tychy in Upper Silesia, where he co-founded the photographers' association KRON and became a member of ZPAF (*Związek Polskich Artystów Fotografików*) – the Union of Polish Art Photographers.

International Photo Awards. The same year he was classified as one of the most important Polish photographers of the last century in a major exhibition held at his home country's capital. This year he was a winner in the Open

Submissions category at Belfast Photo Festival. Now London's MMX Gallery join the supporters in cementing Cala's legacy with a comprehensive exhibition of his compelling pictures that eulogise a bygone era.

For Cala, living in an isolated country caught up in the 44-year long Cold War meant accessing materials not strictly linked to Soviet propaganda proved difficult. However, using a basic 35mm EXA 500 camera and innovative darkroom printing techniques Cala was, through his imagination and skill, able to produce highly personal work.

His individualism paid off and Cala has since been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Grand Prix at the Polish Landscape Biennale (first in 1979 and then in 1983) and was the winner of the 2007 Pilsner

## MICHAL CALA: SILESIA 1975-1985

Runs from 15 September to 4 November at MMX Gallery, London, SE14; [mmxgallery.com](http://mmxgallery.com)

A talk by the photographer takes place on 28 October, check gallery website for details.



The Lagisza power station, 1978.