

JOSEF SUDEK
SIX PHOTOGRAVURES

IN THE MORNING, Sudek would rise and have coffee and breakfast with his studio assistant, then off he bolted into Prague, dragging around his large format camera. His assistant, Sonja Bullaty, remarks of his uncommon stamina. In the evening dark they would return from their day's work. Exhausted, Sonja would end her day, while Sudek would go out to a concert.

It seems that in his wanderings he enacts a dual (or dueling) state: becoming and disappearing. In walking a city so often, one becomes embedded, psychically and physically within its space. Your self-architecture is bludgeoned and shaped by the wonderful cobblestones of the sidewalks or the humming sounds of life happening all around you. You take up space on the street, displace the grass, rearrange a home, and in turn you take on characteristics of all these spaces. You become sunburned, or your ears have been tuned to recognize the whistling train yard, or maybe gastronomy has its convoluted effects too.

Josef Sudek's work is one of absolute metaphor. Through various circumstances, he arrived at a type of working that was compulsive and itinerant. Gradations and variations of intensity. Absolute metaphor requires its narrator becoming the thing one likens oneself to. His work is never just *like* a thing; something pushes it past pure comparison. Yes, in an instance, Sudek's work becomes a thing—if not the thing visually depicted, then the atmosphere of that thing. The thing itself and its comparison.

In the day, Sudek becomes one with his Prague; they merge by way of an almost-grotesque Cronenberg practical effects. Just as the light bouncing off his subjects affects and alters his photosensitive negatives, so too does he bounce off and embed himself into his subjects. On the ground glass of his camera, a meeting occurs between the eye and the world. There is an impenetrable impasse of visions, of intrusion and extrusion. Or is it extrusion and intrusion? It is hard to keep track of who affects who, the world and eye.

Upon his return home, he is off again, disappearing into the night, lost to the music of Leoš Janáček. Off *In the Mists*. And so, disappearing must go beyond becoming. Disappearing is what happens when all the moments and encounters and things have left their marks on us and there is no longer a recognizable connective tissue. The freedom in becoming is the arrival, becoming strives to become. Once we become, there is void, fulfillment, sensation without elucidation. In the night he is fully embraced by the city and its sounds. It is as if he is going nowhere. The event of disappearance is ecstatic and the only cure for becoming, for the night is all-consuming.

PRAGUE IN THE 1940S was a city learning to hold its breath. While the rest of Europe convulsed through war and reconstruction, Josef Sudek was discovering something else entirely in his cramped studio courtyard: a way of seeing that transformed isolation into a radical form of attention. His photography emerged from the particular conditions of his life: one-armed, introverted, anchored to a single place by circumstance and choice. But what could have been a limitation became instead a different kind of freedom, a permission to look at the world with the intensity that only comes from having nowhere else to go.

The famous window series wasn't really about windows at all. It was about the psychology of thresholds, about what happens when you spend years watching the same frame fill and empty with weather, season, light. These images achieve something remarkable: they make you feel both the bitter cold beyond the glass and the protected warmth of the interior space from which they were made. This emotional temperature isn't metaphorical but literal, achieved through his understanding of how different qualities of light communicate different atmospheric states. The condensation on glass doesn't obscure the view; it becomes the subject, transforming familiar courtyard walls into impressionist abstractions that speak to the fundamental isolation of wartime existence. You're watching Sudek work through the problem of how to make photographs that feel like interior states rather than external documentation.

His still lifes operate similarly, but they push further into psychological territory. "I love the life of objects," he once said. "When the children go to bed, the objects come to life." This wasn't whimsy but recognition of something most adults forget: that the boundary between animate and inanimate is more porous than we pretend. A glass bowl holding fruit becomes a meditation on transparency and containment, yes, but also on the strange relationship between observer and observed that photography makes inevitable. The bowl sees back.

What distinguished him from his contemporaries wasn't just his technical methods (though his commitment to pigment printing did allow him to achieve surfaces that seemed to breathe) but his understanding that photography's real subject was always the act of looking itself. While Henri Cartier-Bresson was chasing decisive moments in the streets of Paris, Sudek was discovering that the most decisive moments often happen in stillness, in the accumulated weight of sustained attention to things that most people walk past without noticing.

This philosophical position had practical consequences. His one-armed operation of large-format cameras forced him into a relationship with time that was fundamentally different from his contemporaries. Every exposure became a negotiation between intention and circumstance, requiring him to pre-visualize not just composition but the entire sequence of movements



Josef Sudek, *Labyrinth in my Atelier*, 1960
Silver gelatin, 9 ¼ × 11 ½ in.

needed to achieve it. The resulting images carry this deliberateness in their DNA: they feel thought-through rather than captured, constructed rather than found.

But construction, for him, was never manipulation. Sometimes this construction required a different kind of collaboration entirely, with assistants who understood that atmosphere could be fabricated as precisely as any other photographic element. In the deep spaces of Prague's Romanesque halls and cathedral crypts, Sudek would position his camera while his assistant moved through the shadows, vigorously waving cloths and blankets to raise clouds of ancient dust that would catch and scatter the thin streams of available light. These weren't accidents but orchestrated revelations, moments when the partnership between photographer and assistant allowed hidden luminosities to emerge from stone and air. The dust became a medium of translation, transforming architectural space into something more atmospheric than documentary, more felt than seen. What appears in his cathedral images as mysterious, ethereal light was often the result of this careful choreography: a collaboration that understood how to make the invisible visible through the most humble of materials.

His arrangements of objects, his careful positioning of his camera relative to windows and walls, his patient waiting for specific atmospheric conditions were not tricks but forms of collaboration with the world's existing tendencies. Working in an era when film emulsions were considerably slower than modern standards and light meters were luxury items, he developed an almost supernatural ability to read illumination by eye alone. His nighttime street scenes of Prague, captured during impossibly long exposures on slow emulsions, demonstrate how limitation became liberation. The technical constraints of his era (what would now seem like handicaps) forced him to develop a relationship with light that was fundamentally different from what became possible later. He learned to work with morning light the way a jazz musician works with a standard, finding infinite variations within apparent repetition. The spider web study exemplifies this approach: he didn't create the geometric perfection of the web or the optical properties of morning dew, but he understood how to position himself where these existing phenomena would reveal their hidden relationships.

This collaborative approach extended to his printing, where he pushed against the technical possibilities of his time. While most photographers had embraced convenient enlarger-based processes, he remained committed to contact printing: pressing large-format negatives directly against paper in wooden printing frames. This wasn't nostalgia but necessity born from understanding. His mastery of the demanding pigment printing process, increasingly marginalized as silver gelatin became standard, allowed him to achieve tonal qualities impossible through conventional

silver gelatin methods. The technique required hand-coating papers with light-sensitive pigments, then controlling density and contrast through multiple exposures and washings. This process was so labor-intensive that few bothered with it. But this difficulty yielded prints that seemed to breathe, their surfaces holding light in subtle gradations that created the illusion of inner illumination. Each pigment print became a unique object, carrying information about both the original scene and the specific conditions under which it was realized in the darkroom. This wasn't photography trying to be painting; it was photography discovering its own material possibilities through historical accident and personal obsession.

During the war years, when Prague was under occupation and materials were scarce, these methods became forms of quiet resistance. His window photographs from this period don't document political events directly, but they preserve a way of seeing that refused to be diminished by external circumstances. The condensation patterns on glass, the play of shadows across walls, the simple fact of paying attention to beauty in a time designed to eliminate such luxuries became acts of cultural preservation that operated below the threshold of censorship.

His later work pushed these investigations into increasingly personal territory. The labyrinthine arrangements in his studio weren't just explorations of optical effects but mappings of interior space made visible. Objects accumulated through friendships with artists and writers created an environment that functioned like an external memory palace, each element positioned not just for visual effect but for the associations it triggered. Photography became a way of thinking through relationships: between objects, between memory and perception, between the artist and the world that both nurtured and constrained him.

What emerges from sustained engagement with his work is a model for how photography can function as philosophy through material means rather than conceptual abstraction. His images don't illustrate ideas about perception, time, and attention; they embody these concepts through their specific material properties and the historical circumstances of their creation. The soft, atmospheric quality of his pigment prints wasn't decorative but epistemological, suggesting that knowledge itself might be more atmospheric than precise, more felt than analyzed. When you consider that he achieved these otherworldly effects using technology that predated reliable exposure meters, electronic flash, or films faster than what we would now consider unusably slow, his accomplishment becomes even more remarkable. He was essentially working blind by contemporary standards, relying entirely on accumulated experience and an intuitive understanding of how photographic materials respond to different conditions.

This integration of method and meaning offers contemporary practitioners something more valuable than technical instruction. In an era when

image-making has become increasingly rapid and dematerialized, his example suggests that certain kinds of understanding can only emerge through sustained, physical engagement with subjects and materials. His spider web study, with its perfect marriage of natural geometry and optical accident, demonstrates what becomes visible when you learn to collaborate with the world's existing patterns rather than imposing your own.

The chair positioned near the rain-streaked window in *At the Janaceks* (1948) becomes, in this context, not just a compositional element but a surrogate for the photographer himself: solitary, contemplative, positioned at the threshold between interior and exterior worlds. The emotional temperature of these images (simultaneously cold and warm, protected and exposed) emerges directly from his understanding that all photography is autobiography, even when it appears to be about other things.

His influence extends far beyond the technical realm into questions that every serious photographer must eventually confront: What does it mean to look? How do we transform seeing into understanding? What is the relationship between attention and love? His work suggests that these questions can't be answered abstractly but must be worked through in the specific conditions of individual practice: one exposure at a time, one print at a time, one moment of sustained attention at a time.

In the end, his legacy lies not in any single image but in the accumulated evidence of a way of being in the world that insisted on the extraordinary nature of ordinary experience. Through methods that demanded patience and yielded images that reward slow looking, he demonstrated that photography, when approached with sufficient seriousness, becomes a form of research into the fundamental nature of consciousness itself. His prints, with their unique surfaces and atmospheric depth, continue to offer this invitation: to slow down, to look more carefully, to discover in the act of sustained attention something that might be called wisdom.

—ÖYKÜ KOLAT

AN OLD PROFESSOR of mine teaches a class about windows and thresholds. They're rich photographic subjects because of the multiple, stacked thresholds that they contain. The interior/exterior relationship is expressed through different light (and therefore color and tone) values, which typically underscore the difference in literal content between inside/outside. When one edits an image of a threshold, one has to choose which component is going to show up "correctly" in the final reproduction—the outside, the inside, or the in-between space. Or one could choose to cheat it, mask the different areas and have them all show up clearly. However, this invites the danger of lessening the impact of the difference between these components.

Images of windowsills and doorframes can express the threshold as a subject in and of itself, and this is where Sudek's images of windows tend to dwell. As opposed to a Tillmans photograph of objects on a windowsill, the Sudek images of the glass itself strike me as less referential of painting and more related to issues inherent to photography and seeing. The condensation that blocks our view of the outside and limits reflection means that we only have the partitioning glass itself in the image. Sudek's studio window images are often written about in the context of the Nazi occupation of Prague.

Sudek fought as a draftee in the first world war, during which he lost his right arm. One might imagine that his images of the not-quite-transparent, not-quite-barriers between himself and the city that he loved as well as the specter of war, were images of both protection and fragility. I can't help but make a connection to Ariella Azoulay's idea of the invisible curtain that the camera creates between the photographer and the subject, and which she argues is a necessary psychological element undergirding photography (especially in the context of imperialism and journalism). The Sudek window images fully contain both paranoia and safety, confinement and freedom, love for one's city and fear of the nationalist attitudes that define the city, wrapped in a complex set of contradictory feelings. They are an embrace of and a challenge to restrictions.

When one looks at the window but cannot see the outside, nor the inside. One sees the apparatus of seeing.

One looks at the looking. Looking that precludes seeing.

A photo print, a photo negative, a photogravure—all like windows into the past, frosted over by the fastness of the frozen residue we call an exposure.

When you look at the window, what do you see? The glass? The water? The photograph? The self? What are you looking at? What is looking?

—CALEB MACKENZIE-MARGULIES



Winter From The Window Of My Atelier

Negative: 1940

Print: 1978

Photogravure, 7 1/2 x 9 3/4 in.



The Magic Garden During a Summer Shower

Negative: 1954

Print: 1978

Photogravure, 7 ⁷/₈ × 9 ⁷/₈ in.



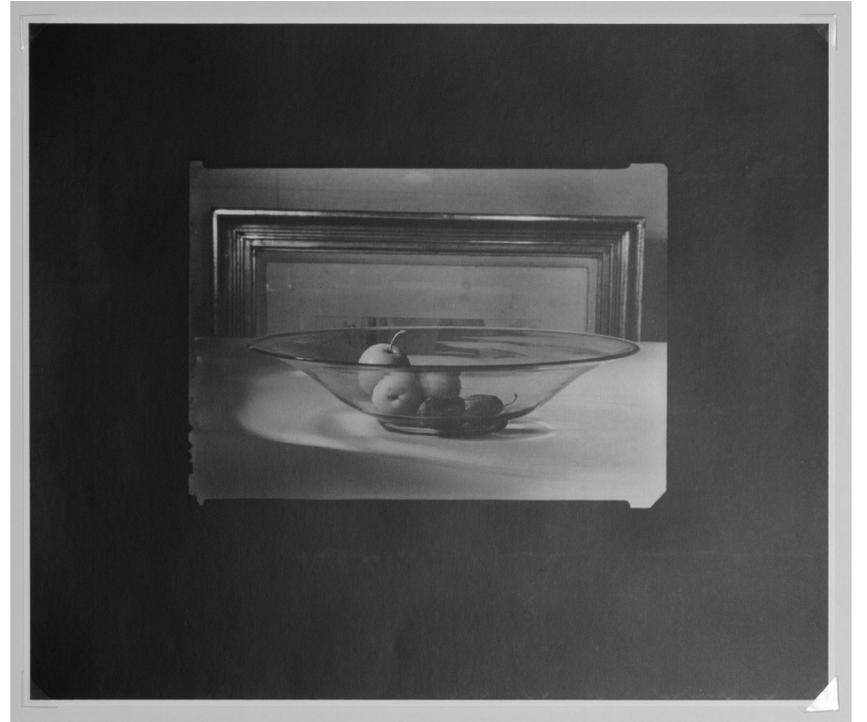
At The Janaceks
Negative: 1948
Print: 1978
Photogravure, 4 1/2 x 6 1/8 in.



The Coming Of Spring
Negative: 1968
Print: 1978
Photogravure, 8 3/8 x 7 in.



Orosena Pavucina – (Dewy Spider Web)
Negative: 1929
Print: 1956
Photogravure, 6 × 8 3/8 in.



Still Life
Negative: 1936
Print: 1978
Photogravure, 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ \times 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.

Published on the occasion of

Josef Sudek
Six Photogravures

From 9.20.2025 to 12.6.2025

Josef Sudek (1896–1976) was a Czech photographer, born in Kolín. He trained as a bookbinder originally before becoming a photographer, studying at the State Graphic School in Prague. In World War I he lost his right arm. He is one of the most important photographers of the 20th century.

These photogravures were produced for two distinct projects, first for the monograph *Fotografie* (1956) by the Czech publishing house SNKLUB. The second was for *Sudek* (1978), printed and published by the Swiss company RotoSadag S.A.

Met him pike hoses

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Met him pike hoses was founded by Julian Van Der Moere in 2025 and is located in Pilsen's Midland Building. Pronounced as either *metempsychosis* /mə-ˌtɛm(p)-si-ˈkō-səs/ or as *met him pike hoses* /ˈmɛt ˈhɪm ˈpɪk ˈhɔːzɪz/, the name makes reference to a recurrence in James Joyce's *Ulysses*: a mispronounced word that comes to stand in for errant phrases or encounters, something muttered under one's breath or to be stumbled over in one's mind. The model for this space is anti-strategic, with an interest in general disjunction or with being out of time; presenting local artists, international artists, historical works, bootlegged works, anonymous works, non-art objects, performances, texts, films, etc.

This booklet was typeset by Lucas Reif in Matthieu Cortat's *Louize* (2011), a revival of Louis Perrin's *Augustaux* (1855).

This first edition of 200 copies was printed and bound by Chicago Printworks.



