

The New York Times

LUIGI GHIRRI

Through Dec. 19, Matthew Marks Gallery, 526 West 22 Street, Manhattan; 212-243-0200, matthewmarks.com.

For Luigi Ghirri, an Italian photographer of memory and melancholy, a picture wasn't something you took; it was something you fashioned. His plaintive images of interiors, billboards, blank walls and empty squares imbue everyday sights with a metaphysical charge, and display a modesty that belies their careful construction — tightly cropped, printed at small scale and usually shot with Kodachrome color film, faded and softened like a half-remembered dream. More than two dozen of his photographs, cerebral and bewitching at once, appear in a new show, "The Idea of Building," at Matthew Marks, curated by the painter Matt Connors and on view both in the gallery and in a robust digital representation.

Ghirri was born in 1943 and died before his 50th birthday; he lived and worked in Emilia-Romagna, in Italy's prosperous industrial center. There he found a landscape in which a rich Italian history crashed into commercial, personal or just banal modern life. An empty nightclub, a frayed record sleeve, the red hood of a car in the Ferrari factory: These unprepossessing objects and settings become, through Ghirri's rigorous framing, fragments that seem to hang between reality and artifice. The photographs' muffled coloring — whites gone sallow, reds and blues tempered, grays turned beige — may seem now a shortcut to nostalgia (especially

to a younger generation weaned on Instagram one-touch filters), but the truth is that Ghirri's art seems wrenched out of time entirely. In one heart-stopping picture, Ghirri places a worn bowler hat atop a scratched, pitted portrait of some forgotten woman of the 19th century; the doffed hat is a compliment to the past, and an act of leave-taking from the present.

During the lockdown, I read a novel by another nostalgist from Emilia-Romagna: "The Garden of the Finzi-Continis," Giorgio Bassani's aching reminiscence of the last years of a Jewish family in Ferrara. "Objects also die, my friend," says Bassani's young heroine — an embrace of beauty and transience affirmed by every one of Ghirri's photos. "And if they must also die, then that's it, better to let them go. It shows far more style, above all."

JASON FARAGO



ESTATE OF LUIGI GHIRRI AND MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

In "Modena," Luigi Ghirri places a worn bowler hat atop a portrait of a 19th-century woman.