



**ARTIST**

Rafal Milach

**TITLE**

From the series #13767

**DATE**

2019

**DIMENSIONS**

19.5" H x 24.75" W

**MEDIUM**

Inkjet Prints

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

2019.050

**CURRENT LOCATION**

2432-2D

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**RAFAL MILACH**

**BORN**

1978

**BIRTHPLACE**

Gilwice

**GENDER**

Male

**CITIZENSHIP**

Poland

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Polish

**LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP**

Artist-in-Residence, 2019

## BIOGRAPHY

Rafał Milach (b. 1978 in Gliwice, Poland) – visual artist, photographer, author of photo books. His work focuses on topics related to the transformation in the former Eastern Bloc. Lecturer at the ITF Institute of Creative Photography of the Silesian University in Opava, Czech Republic and Katowice Film School at the Silesian University, Poland. His award-winning photo books include *The Winners*, *7 Rooms*, and *The First March of Gentlemen*. Rafał Milach has received scholarships from the Polish Minister of Culture and National Heritage, Magnum Foundation, and European Cultural Foundation. Finalist of the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize 2018 and winner of the World Press Photo competition. Co-founder of the Sputnik Photos collective. His works have been widely exhibited worldwide, and can be found in the collections of the MoMA Warsaw, CCA Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, the ING Polish Art Foundation, Kiyosato Museum of Photographic Arts (Japan), and Brandts Museum in Odense (Denmark). Rafał joined Magnum Photos in 2018 as a nominee member.

## ESSAYS

In 2015, Poland's far-right Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or PiS for short) regained power. The new regime immediately initiated an onslaught on the country's hard-won civil society and democracy that continues to this day. When I visited Warsaw for the first time in the summer of 2016, Rafał Milach and I spoke about this situation, with the US presidential election serving as the background. Trump would win, Milach said, and he would do exactly what PiS had done in Poland. Milach was right on both counts. While the details might differ, both country's ruling parties peddle an open mix of xenophobia, nationalism, and racism, while demeaning the free press and attacking their opponents in ways that clearly echo the tactics of totalitarian regimes. One of the main differences between the two countries has been the vigorous civil resistance in Poland, which has taken many forms. Large peaceful demonstrations have become commonplace in Poland, and these demonstrations have come with their own visual language. Poles went to the streets to fight for their constitution, to protest against the already very strict abortion laws, and to protest against PiS' attack on the independent judiciary. These developments encouraged Rafał to turn his attention to what was happening in his home country, after having spent much time working in Russia and other former Soviet republics, where he looked for mechanisms of control and propaganda. Specifically, his photography and art making itself became part of the larger Polish protest movement. Embracing modernist collage techniques during a residency, he produced *The First March of Gentlemen*, a radical departure from his previous straight photography. He also started drawing (Rafał has a background as a graphic designer, which explains his proficiency in techniques that many other photographers simply don't have), and he co-founded the Archive of Public Protests, a repository of images created by a variety of photographers covering the protests and demonstrations in recent Polish history. On top of all of that, he became a junior member of Magnum Photos. There is another major difference between Poland and the US. Poland lacks any actual physical manifestation of the aforementioned mix of xenophobia, nationalism, and racism. The US, in contrast, has the wall that the current administration is now constructing at the border to Mexico—or rather adding to already existing fortifications. Mexico obviously isn't paying for it, as Donald Trump had promised. I personally cannot tell whether Trump is merely oblivious of the wall's toxic symbolism or whether he in fact cherishes exactly that (a late 2018 article in *The Atlantic* magazine by Adam Serwer entitled "The Cruelty Is the Point" has me think it's the latter). In light of walls having been focal points for many Magnum photographers, it's not surprising that a number of them converged on Trump's wall, too, including Rafał Milach. The problem with walls, of course, is that they're incredibly easy to photograph, but it's really hard to make pictures that speak of more than their sheer physicality. Symbolic as they might be, in a photograph that symbolism often shrinks to a clunky, overly obvious device. As a proficient photobook maker, Rafał is fully aware of how the form of the book can serve to bring out something that one cannot photograph or that one can only photograph in the most obvious—flat—way. Many of his books he creates in collaboration with his wife, Ania Natęcka-Milach, one of Poland's leading photobook designers. For the wall, they teamed up again during the Light Work residency to appropriate a 2018 US government document that discussed tests of new border-wall mock-ups. Heavily redacted, the original document is an unintentional piece of art on its own. With Rafał's photographs superimposed and some clever re-use of elements of the original text, the resulting book combines the physical violence of the actual wall with the bureaucratic one that exists in the background. Rafał has used photographs that run the gamut from more documentary-style images to portraits to still lifes. Some of the more straightforward photographs become abstract through the choice of subject matter, for example those that emphasize surfaces or capture barbed wire with a strong flash against the blue sky (there are clear echoes of Aaron Siskind's famous abstract photographs here). Taken together, the book speaks of the intended structural violence it embodies as much as of the physical and mental violence it enacts on those who are forced to deal with it. If the cruelty is the point, then it is exactly such cruelty that we as viewers must reckon with here. Jörg Colberg Jörg Colberg is a writer, photographer, and educator based in Northampton, MA. Rafał Milach lives in Warsaw, Poland, and completed his residency at Light Work in November 2019.