

JAN SVOBODA & JAROSLAV BENEŠ / LENTICULAR POETRY

American University Museum, Washington, D.C., USA

September 6th – December 7th, 2025

Curated by Pavel Vančát

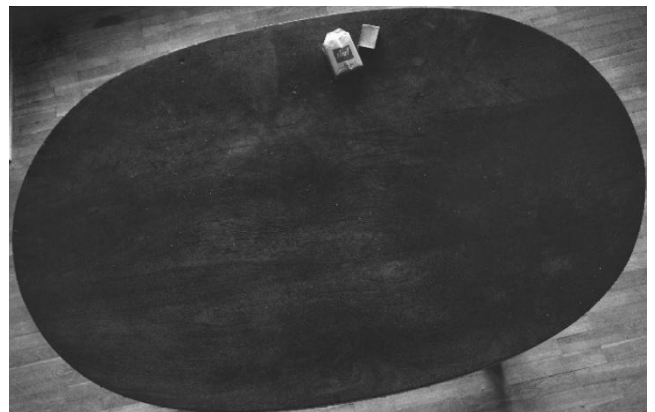
The exhibition brings together two important photographers who extend the rich tradition of Czech Modernist photography. Jan Svoboda (1934–1990) is considered one of the most innovative Czech photographers of the 1960s, bridging the fields of photography and fine art in an original mix of symbolism and conceptualism. For Jaroslav Beneš (b. 1946), Jan Svoboda was a major inspiration and one of the first to recognize the qualities of his minimalist light compositions. Their mutual dialogue is thus a meditation on light and minimal forms, but also a commentary about the formats and limits of photography. Both artists, renowned in European photographic circles, are being shown for the first time in the United States.



Czech photographer **Jan Svoboda** (1934–1990) is considered one of the world's pioneers of photographic appropriation and a forerunner of conceptual photography through his groundbreaking experiments with form. Svoboda's work sought to redefine the language of photography in relation to painting and sculpture, bridging the traditions of Symbolism and Romanticism with the conceptual and self-reflexive tendencies of late Modernism.

Jan Svoboda began experimenting with photography in the late 1950s, initially using it to illustrate his poetry. Strongly inspired by fellow Czech photographer Josef Sudek, Svoboda's early work encompassed systematic observations of suburban Prague and metaphysically charged still lifes. Since the early 1960s, Svoboda was in close contact with other important Czech contemporaries working in painting, sculpture, and installation such as Zdeněk Palcr, Stanislav Kolíbal, and Jan Švankmajer. By the end of the 1960s, Svoboda's work, almost entirely studio-based, began to interrogate the boundaries of the photographic image itself. Series such as *Halves*, *An Attempt at an Ideal Proportion*, and *An Attempt at Expressing Space* played with process, composition, and tonality while questioning the physical substance of the photographic work. Between 1969 and 1972, Svoboda produced some of his most radical and philosophically self-reflexive works, often directly quoting and deconstructing his images. During this time, he devised a distinctive exhibition method, mounting his photographs on cards affixed to iron rods, which gave them a striking floating effect on the wall.

After his supreme creative period, Svoboda photographed only occasionally from 1972 until his untimely death in 1990, just weeks after his country was liberated from Communism. His recent retrospective exhibitions were held at the Moravian Gallery in Brno (2015) and The Photographers' Gallery in London (2020). A major monographic exhibition is planned at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.



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Jaroslav Beneš (b. 1946) began his career as a theatre photographer at the Alfa Theatre in Pilsen. Later, he worked as an archivist and photographer at the Prague Waterworks. He co-founded several photographic associations: Aktiv volné fotografie (1989), Prague House of Photography, (PHP, 1991), and Czech Woody (2000).

He is best known for his long-term series of photographs from the Prague underground, taken during the 1980s, where the subject matter is mainly architectural details of the subway stations and the composition of light, its intersections, and "animations" in the space. He is also the author of a series focused on other architectural complexes such as the Défense quarter in Paris, the industrial area in Katowice, and the villa of architect Otto Rothmayer. In his most recent work, he also incorporates both color and digital technology.



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