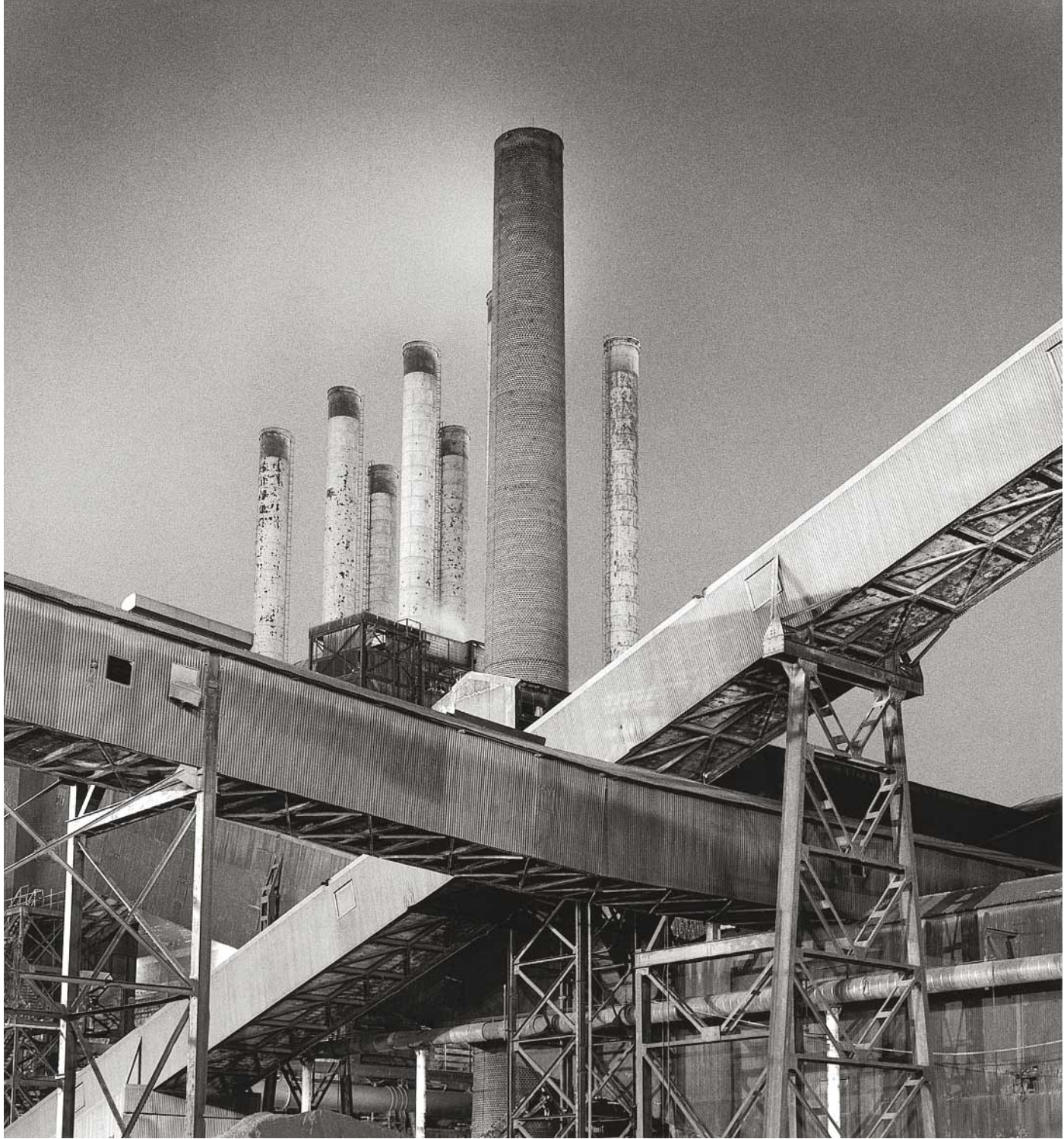


**ROUGE**



Michael Kenna

# ROUGE

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## **THE ROUGE**



**MICHAEL KENNA'S  
INDUSTRIAL VISION  
AND THE ROUGE**

James Christen Steward



Charles Sheeler,  
*Criss-Crossed  
Conveyors, River  
Rouge Plant, Ford  
Motor Company,*  
1927, gelatin silver  
print, Museum of  
Modern Art,  
New York  
©Photo SCALA,  
Florence, 2016

Charles Sheeler,  
*Bleeder Stacks,  
Ford Plant,  
Detroit, 1927,*  
gelatin silver  
print (1941),  
Museum of  
Modern Art,  
New York  
©Photo SCALA,  
Florence, 2016



**THE ROUGE** plant in Dearborn, Michigan, was once considered the most advanced factory in the world and an icon of American industrial achievement. Designed by Albert Kahn, house architect to Henry Ford, it was mostly constructed between 1917 and 1927 in response to Henry Ford's belief that the Highland Park plant—home to the Ford Motor Company's Model T—was obsolete. It was here at the Rouge, including the “B” building used for final assembly that was a quarter of a mile long, that the modern-day industrial complex was born, using shed architecture and glass walls that were both lightweight and inexpensive and brought diffused light directly onto the factory floor. Albert Kahn's vision of the Rouge for Henry Ford was the dream of a functional modernity of efficiency, economy, and balance.<sup>1</sup>

From its origins, the Rouge came to be a vast complex containing miles of railroad tracks, blast furnaces, coke ovens, a foundry, and vast storage areas for holding the raw materials to be used in manufacturing—a veritable city unto itself for the industrial age.<sup>2</sup> More than 100,000 workers toiled at the Rouge at its height, requiring their own fire department, police force, and hospital. The entire manufacturing process was carried out on site, from the arrival by river of ships carrying iron ore to the final assembly of cars—all intended by Henry Ford to allow his company's production to be as nearly self-sufficient as possible. Indeed, the Rouge was the only factory in North America to function in this way; even the electricity needed by the factory was produced on site. From the Model A in 1928, to the first V-8 in 1932, to the Mercury, to the production of aircraft engines and parts during World War II, the 1,200 acres of the Rouge were literally the power behind the Ford Motor Company.

At the core of the complex, the eight 320-foot stacks of the powerhouse towered over the rest of the Rouge and during peak production delivered enough electricity to supply the domestic needs of a city of a million residents. This was Henry Ford's favorite haunt at the Rouge, and the powerhouse stacks were and are the emblem of both the Rouge and of American industrial might.

From almost the beginning, the Rouge drew visitors. From 1924 to 1982, as many as a quarter of a million visitors a year toured parts of the Rouge, including the steel operations, assembly line, and occasionally the engine plant and glass plant. Visitors found in the Rouge an icon of invention and progress, including essayist Edmund Wilson, who saw in the Rouge and in Detroit more generally the whole structure of industrial society. For a time, the Rouge drew visitors seeking inspiration for the new, including artists such as

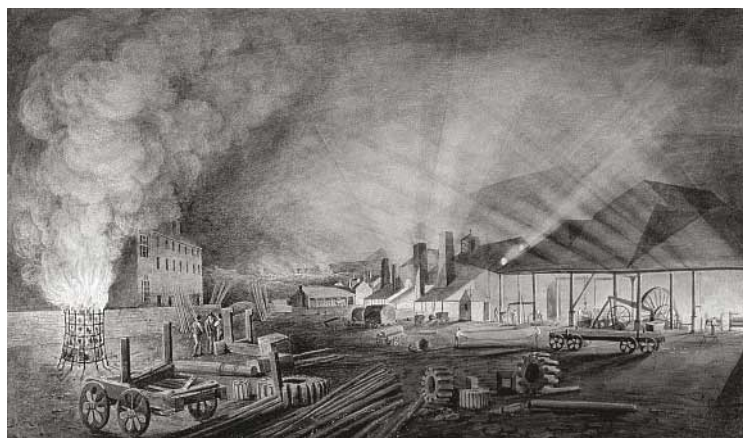
Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, who spent time studying the Rouge's facilities for Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals (Detroit Institute of Arts, 1932–33).<sup>3</sup> One of the earliest of these visitors was the American photographer Charles Sheeler, who was commissioned in 1927 by the N.W. Ayer & Son advertising agency—seemingly influenced by Henry Ford's son Edsel—to carry out a series of photographs that would exalt the achievements of this new emblem of industrial progress.

Sheeler's work at the Rouge lasted some six weeks, during which time he moved from overall views to individual forms and finally into the factory's interiors.<sup>4</sup> Sheeler's photographs dramatically advanced the Rouge's renown and were regularly published and exhibited throughout the decades that followed. Sheeler's *Criss-Crossed Conveyors, River Rouge Plant, Ford Motor Company Plant* (1927) became perhaps the best-known single image of the Rouge, admired for its structural elegance and embraced as a photographic icon of American modernism—"the finest image of technological utopia."<sup>5</sup>

Sheeler's images of the Rouge are often cited as paragons of machine-age precisionist art, even as they occasionally soften the image with the incorporation of trails of smoke or clouds of steam. There are hints that Sheeler intended these photographs as parables for the vitality of American society writ large, a stand-in for the American landscape itself. When he titles one of his photographs of the core of the Rouge complex *City Interior*, the interconnected landscape of the industrial complex becomes a substitute for the American city. Based on Sheeler's photographs, the Rouge itself was understood by *Vanity Fair* as "the most significant public monument in America."<sup>6</sup>

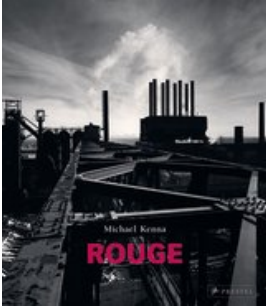
Artistic images of industry pale numerically in contrast to those of the rural landscape; but even so they have a rich history, especially in the hands of British artists, perhaps because modern industrialization first took root in Britain. Thomas Hornor's *Rolling Mills* (1819) is a dramatic and detailed image of Wales at a time when it was already the greatest iron-producing country in the world. Two generations later, Lionel Walden's *Steelworks, Cardiff, at Night* (1895–97) gives us an image of blazing steel furnaces lighting up the night sky. His was an image of the most advanced steelworks in the world, but in its nighttime color palette and its vivid reds and oranges, the scene is at once enthralling and forbidding, evocative of the poet William Blake's "dark satanic mills." Another generation later, Charles Sheeler was both a painter and a photographer. His gouche painting *Totems in Steel* (1935, Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester) is pure paean to the valor of industry in its thrusting verticals and diagonals.

Thomas Hornor,  
*Rolling Mills*,  
1819, (original in color), watercolor  
and pencil with  
gum Arabic on  
paper mounted on  
card, Amgueddfa  
Cymru—National  
Museum Wales  
© Photo by  
National Museum &  
Galleries of  
Wales Enterprises  
Limited/Heritage  
Images/Getty Images



Lionel Walden,  
*Steelworks, Cardiff,*  
*at Night*, 1895–97,  
(original in color),  
oil on canvas,  
Amgueddfa  
Cymru—National  
Museum Wales  
© Bridgeman Images





James Steward

## **Michael Kenna Rouge**

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Michael Kennas Rouge: Industrielandschaften in meditativem Schwarzweiß

Über mehrere Jahre hinweg hat Michael Kenna die berühmte Industrieanlage des Architekten Albert Kahn in Michigan immer wieder fotografiert. Erbaut zwischen 1917 und 1928 in Dearborn bei Detroit, war der Ford River Rouge Industriekomplex die größte Fabrik weltweit. Die Anlage erstreckt sich auf einer Fläche von nahezu 4 km<sup>2</sup>, 100.000 Menschen waren dort in der Blütezeit in den 1930er-Jahren beschäftigt. Kenna fühlte sich zu diesem Industriemoloch stark hingezogen und schuf im Lauf von drei Jahren einen großen Teil seiner herausragenden minimalistischen und sehr poetischen Aufnahmen in Schwarzweiß. Beeindruckend fangen die Bilder die rauchige Atmosphäre, dramatische Formen und kontrastreiche Silhouetten ein. Das Resultat sind bildgewaltige Aufnahmen, gleichzeitig nachdenklich machende Symbolbilder einer unaufhaltsamen Industrienation.

 [Der Titel im Katalog](#)