

Viewing conditions: conditioning the viewer

Constantin Brancusi, the vanguard Romanian sculptor, used a camera to portray the changing panorama of his studio. He savored the assemblages that happened as his finished and unfinished works shared the stage with his raw materials, tools, found objects, and the occasional vase of flowers. That practice flourished after he moved to a studio complex developed by sculptors on a dead-end street in Montparnasse in 1916. After becoming a French citizen in 1952, he made plans to bequeath his entire studio to the nation.

The Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, located in a former international exposition building known as the Palais de Tokyo, acquired the studio and its contents after Brancusi's death in 1957. There were 137 sculptures, 87 handcrafted pedestals, 41 drawings, 2 paintings and over 1,600 glass photographic plates and original prints. In 1962 a partial reconstruction of the studio went on public view in the Palais de Tokyo. By the end of the decade, the government was planning a civic arena that would absorb the Musée d'Art Moderne into a giant complex focused on art and literature, which is now known as the Centre Pompidou. Completed in 1977, it included a replica of Brancusi's studio housed in its own building; alas, in 1990, a flood led to its closure. Another replica was unveiled in 1997 in a pavilion designed by Renzo Piano. It was touted as a way to see Brancusi's studio just as he left it, even though the works were presented behind glass.

In 1977, Pontus Hultén, the founding director of the Centre Pompidou, produced the first book about the museum's collection of photographs by Brancusi. It was a beautiful publication that evoked the unique ambience of the sculptor's studio and confirmed that Brancusi's original prints were opportunities to look at the works through his eyes. The photographs ranged in mood from nuanced, emotional and haunting to grungy and honest. Brancusi's prints have become an essential counterbalance to latter-day experiences of seeing his works in squeaky clean, brightly lit museum settings.

In 1979 an exhibition from the Pompidou began a 6-city U.S. tour, accompanied by an English edition of Hultén's book, titled *Brancusi, Photographer*. Ian Jeffrey made his recent collages in response to that publication. They are comprised of two sheets, each a page from *Brancusi, Photographer*. The artist used an Xacto knife to cut windows in the sheet he intended to place on top. These windows or negative spaces replicate the outlines of pedestals seen in the studio photos.

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Brancusi famously carved bases and pedestals for his sculptures, and evidently considered them works of art in their own right. In some works, Jeffrey excised the image of a pedestal from the top sheet; in other cases, the negative space is the outline of a pedestal from a different page. The tension between what is seen and what is obscured connotes flux and old school Cubist multiplicity. Jeffrey's title for the series – *After Brancusi, Photographer* – invites viewers to think about reality-versus-fiction and the fact that people and artworks behave differently in the studio and in the gallery.

Trevor Fairbrother, August 2026

