

MUT — 6

# Luigi Ghirri

## Between the Lines

Mutina for Art

MUT — 6

Casa Mutina Milano

# Luigi Ghirri

## Between the Lines

curated by Sarah Cosulich

Mutina for Art

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# Born in Emilia

Massimo Orsini

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I was born in Emilia.

I feel Emilian, but I have always escaped, and I have traveled widely, for long periods in my life. When I was at home, in any landscape I would seek a faraway place, among those I loved: I walked the hills of Sassuolo imagining Arizona; when I visited the canal port of Riccione I was reminded of Coney Island. I always had a need to gaze into the distance in order to feel at ease.

I owe my discovery of my homeland to Luigi Ghirri: I began to love this place through his photographs, first of all, and then in reality as well. It took his perspective to make me feel closer to this region, to understand its beauty. And I have been dazzled by the voyage he took, in the opposite direction from mine, seeking an elsewhere around the corner from home – while I was seeking a home elsewhere – astonished by the fact that “in reality there is always a zone of mystery, an unfathomable zone that in my view also determines the interest of the photographic image.”

Adele Ghirri has told me about the work Luigi Ghirri wanted to realize: “the scattered houses.” They are the houses of the Emilia countryside, those houses that seem to have settled there by chance, without a road nearby, without a direction. Since then, especially when I drive on the motorway between Parma and Modena, I can’t help looking out the window and getting lost, imagining him with his camera, walking through the tall grasses, slowly considering the way to frame a shot. Since then, nothing makes me feel more like I am traveling than the scattered houses.

# Between the lines

Sarah Cosulich

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*"...one starts with a straight line and finds himself with a map, composed of billions of very small signs that are connected and construct a possible horizon."<sup>1</sup>*

Luigi Ghirri

Luigi Ghirri said that his desire to make photographs was triggered by the sight of the first image of the earth shot from the moon.<sup>2</sup> He wondered how a single image could contain the whole world while not, however, making it truly accessible. Man, experience, life were not recognizable in that photograph of a small colored globe. How was it possible, then, for a photograph to convey the universe in its objects and signs of perception, of remembering or imagining? Ghirri's artistic adventure stems precisely from challenging the dualism of photography in its condition of being container and representation at the same time.

Ghirri traveled, searched, investigated, and as he did this he made images that paradoxically find their true force in their incompleteness. The photograph is an impossible image, he said, because it is "static" like that of a painting, but "dynamic" like that of a film screen.<sup>3</sup> We could say that the view of the earth from space narrated by Ghirri reflects the same condition. The world turns on its axis while the moon orbits around it, but we do not physically sense this movement, it is imperceptible, yet it is part of our experience. Ghirri's photographs express movement in their way of being fragments of a whole that comprises also what is not represented, what has been left outside the frame.

This exhibition presents a selection of works from a private collection of which Luigi Ghirri is the central figure. It is a pathway created by images, a road composed of many possible relationships, in order to always recognize something different in the artist's shots. Ghirri loved combinations and associations between photographs, and in fact he almost preferred making photographic books over exhibitions. He was so passionate about books that he founded a publishing house, Punto e Virgola, which was certainly not a financially profitable enterprise. The creation of books with his images allowed him to build a sequence, to have control over the composition, to project his vision inside precise boundaries, those

1. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, Macerata 2010, p.29.

2. L. Ghirri, *Kodachrome*, 2 ed., London 2017, p.11.

3. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, p.23.

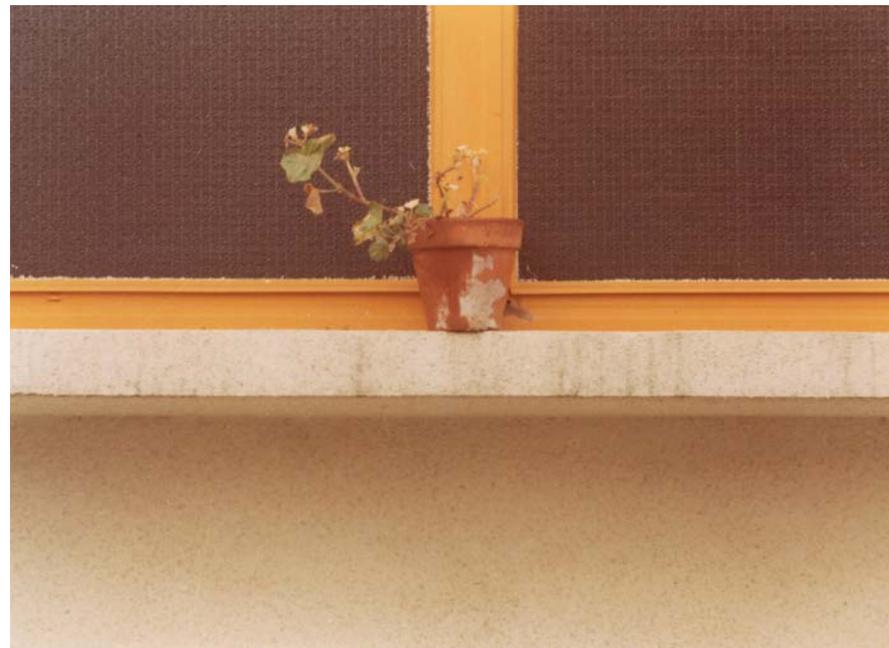
of the orthogonal pages, that always amicable paper. The cover of *Kodachrome* itself – a graph-ruled notebook with a small drawing by his wife Paola – reflects Ghirri's passion for design, for geometry. His past as an architectural surveyor, a profession he abandoned (not immediately) in favor of photography, emerges in the extreme rationality and composure with which he approached imagery. Still today, his great friend and companion of many experiences, the artist Franco Guerzoni, tells of the precise, rigorous spirit with which Ghirri approached the work, setting it in opposition to his equally passionate but more disorderly curiosity.

Ghirri designed the book *Kodachrome* to guide the reader on a voyage through images, just as the constructions of his shots were conceived to guide the gaze of the observer. Paola Borgonzoni Ghirri has written that “Luigi had this idea of the *maquette*, the visualization of a thought and a project”<sup>4</sup>, bearing out the importance of structure for the artist, both in the image and in its presentation display. This exhibition may seem a bit rash in its use of a display approach that is not the classic, neutral white cube. Yet it is anything but chancy to imagine using an exhibit design that references precisely that idea of order, that grid that is seen so often in Ghirri's work. The ceramic surfaces designed by Konstantin Grcic, in their way of playing with the module and its mathematical fragmentation, become a sort of symbolic reference to Ghirri's passion for measurement. The many lines repeated on the ceramic background are undoubtedly more calculated and regular than the lines we see in the photographs, but they contribute to accentuate them, to reinterpret them with closer attention. The pane, the square and its incessant repetition and subdivision in the design of Grcic link back to that idea of “framing” mentioned by Ghirri himself, speaking of architectural objects or landscape, of how in a photograph “even an empty structure can function as a viewfinder, a natural framing.”<sup>5</sup>

To underline the importance of the framing – which Ghirri develops directly in his gaze, and rarely through a subsequent process of cropping – is considered a way to approach reality in its totality, as if the very idea of the boundary of the image could expand it rather than enclose it. His lines appear as a thought structure, an instrument of orientation, and at the same time a method to open the images to the infinity that surrounds them. Poles, grids, cornices or other types of architectural grilles are crossed with those of the

4. E. Re (edited by), Luigi Ghirri. Project Prints, Zurich 2012, p.214.

5. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, p.159.



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973  
vintage c-print  
11,3 x 15,70 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Cadecoppi, 1985  
vintage c-print  
27 x 51 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Argine Agosta  
Comacchio, 1989  
vintage c-print  
25 x 18,5 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

landscape to form new windows through which to narrate man and the way he acts on his habitat. Ghirri's ability to direct us, to urge us to see lies precisely between those lines, as for example in the photographs of landscapes or *scattered houses* in Emilia, in which the choice of a lowered vantage point makes the subjects float on new, hypothetical horizon lines.

It seems almost like a coincidence when the choice of the artist to lower himself with the lens leads him to show partial "checkering" in the foreground. This is what happens in *Lido di Volano, 1988*, the playground on the beach in which the lines drawn on a ping pong table peep out to create a sort of bridge between the eye and the background; or in *Modena, 1973*, where the stripes on the pavement of an empty parking lot become hypothetical overlaid perspective lines that make the cypresses in a row look like pieces ready to be moved on a chessboard. Albeit not corresponding to the physical center of the image, these crossed lines break up, frame, divide, select, becoming the implicit skeleton of the photograph. Many of Ghirri's shots – from his windows to the façades of buildings to landscapes – reveal apparently fortuitous structures that create unexpected viewfinders, giving rise to unpredictable new "fields of attention."<sup>6</sup>



Luigi Ghirri, Lido di Volano, 1988  
vintage c-print  
23,5 x 17 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973  
vintage c-print  
13 x 19,10 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

6. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, p.162.



Luigi Ghirri, Bologna, 1985  
vintage c-print  
29,8 x 46,3 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

The work of Luigi Ghirri centers on exploration, the journey, the idea of an itinerary, a geographical map. The artist portrays with the same passion the landscape and its abstract topographical representation, that of a schematic, essential chart printed on the page of a book. The real world and that of maps mingle together, as in the images of the *Atlas* series. Poetry does not lie in the beauty of the symbol, but in the possibility of a universal sign to stimulate the imagination, transporting the viewer on an ideal voyage inside his own personal experience.



Luigi Ghirri, Atlas, 1973  
vintage c-print  
16,8 x 11,3 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

*Modena, 1973* – from the series *Breakfast on the Grass* – shows a grassy urban zone crossed by a trail, terminating at a wall cheerfully painted with the colors of meadow and sky. In this image that plays with an illusion of continuity, Ghirri underlines the relationship between nature and artifice in the reality modified by man. This photo is a good example of Ghirri's output in the 1970s, in which he moves forward with a more specifically conceptual approach, exploring infinite definitions of the idea of landscape. In the 1980s, his interest in landscape shifts towards representation of its endless possibilities of perception. *Versailles, 1985*, a type of garden that is "quite different" from an urban plot, contains the emotional and evocative thrust found in his later works. Here nature is strictly controlled: there are no disheveled pines, but plants that regularly punctuate the space with their geometric form, paradoxically anthropomorphic in its dialogue with the human figures in the composition.



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973  
vintage c-print  
15,9 x 22,2 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Versailles, 1985  
vintage c-print  
20 x 25,5 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973  
vintage c-print  
40,5 x 30,5 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1978  
vintage c-print  
14,8 x 9,9 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

Habitat, classification and sociological analysis emerge in Ghirri's game with reality, with the aim of overturning it. The grass is real and the sky is drawn on a wall, or it is the sky that is real, like the one framing the advertising image of Sofia Loren. Ghirri's love for "consumed" images, commercial posters and abandoned structures allows him to create "natural photomontages"<sup>7</sup> with the camera, fragments of reality overlaid through his gaze, which form totally new images on the paper.

While the human intervention is artificial, the simplicity with which the artist cuts out and assembles is natural. The overlay exists in reality; it is enough to recognize it and use it, flipping it perhaps, as in the back of the attractions of an amusement park that through the lens becomes a paradoxical mountain range, irregular and yet composed of lines.

7. V. Codeluppi, *Vita di Luigi Ghirri. Fotografia, arte, letteratura e musica*, Rome 2020, p.45.

Beauty in Ghirri's work is often to be found in his ways of concealing, hiding, or – as he says – of fascinating with mystery, “through the balance between what is seen and what should not be seen.”<sup>8</sup> A hat placed on a painting, with a reflection of light that makes the image seem like an error. Again, in the still life of Modena 1978 something is missing, or there is something in excess. The hat conceals, covers, questions, transforms, shifts the attention as does the man seen from behind gazing at the coins in a shop window in Luzern 1971. The hatband, the coins, the shirt, are all “Munarian” motifs that repeat, drawing the attention away from that landscape, almost imperceptible but still there, reflected in the glass. Ghirri is like that, ironic and imperfect, but always coherent. In the 1970s, we imagine him accompanied by the music of his beloved Bob Dylan and the Mythologies of Barthes. In the 1980s, we think of him always immersed in Merleau-Ponty and Baudrillard, in cinema and the photography of the American suburbs, in Caspar David Friedrich, the observer seen from behind in front of the magnitude of the world.

Throughout his life Ghirri searched for time and memory in objects, everyday spaces, human behaviors. He is an artist who experienced his land, the soil of Emilia which he imagined and explored at length, a land shared by Mutina and now connected by infinite lines drawn on ceramics, of which the soil is a fundamental ingredient.

8. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, p.195.



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1978  
vintage c-print  
21,5 x 14,4 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Luzern, 1971  
vintage c-print  
17,4 x 12,6 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

# Is photography self-sufficient?

Franco Guerzoni

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Bob Dylan and Bob Dylan, only Bob Dylan. When Franco Ceccarelli and Victor Sogliani of Equipe 84 came to see us on Via Mantegna in Modena – where Luigi and I lived in adjacent houses – in their sparkling and cumbersome Rolls Royce Silver Shadow, Luigi seemed to be almost irritated. Their “beat” was not his thing. As far as he was concerned, the words and notes of Bob Dylan held sway over all other sounds. He stared suspiciously at the colorful outfits of the two musicians, and the well-stocked bar inside the car. Instead, I took a liking to them, since they had brought some color to that suburban area recently developed with row houses, small dwellings adorned with ceramic tiles, flights of swallows, wells in gardens, little shrines intended to hint at a noble past, though in my view bordering on kitsch. The border zone prior to kitsch, in any case, was an expansive space for Luigi, which provided him with opportunities for shots that if observed today open up lofty perspectives, not only in anthropological terms.

It was a true pleasure to converse with Ceccarelli and Sogliani. The sleeve of their single *29 Settembre*, in 1967, featured a photograph by Mario Schifano, an artist with whom they had a certain rapport. Artists all of us, then? They had come to see some of my works set on a large meadow along the rail line, which later became “Parco Amendola”: large sheets folded with different geometric forms, a grand theater of nothing displayed at a distance from the viewer to disguise the flaws caused by the difficult assembly. In short, a big rural lot, which Luigi had obsessively photographed. I was pleased, the proofs placed in a sequence seemed like a film. Perhaps the purpose of those constructions was precisely to vanish, to exist only in Luigi’s images. Which is just what happened: the photographs of the work, in effect, were better than the work itself. Influenced as I was by the model of American Minimal Art, that big piece may have seemed like a black Carl Andre in the countryside.

The two members of Equipe 84 seemed to be interested in my work, just as they seemed intrigued by certain photographs by Ghirri, taken in the vicinity of our house; they talked about them with a reassuring language, which in certain moments seemed ready to veer towards a possible purchase. Luigi listened, with his face twisted into a modest circumstantial smile; instead, I talked, and talked, and talked some more. Suddenly Ceccarelli, as per afternoon habit, announced: “drink!” That word, uttered in English, sealed our fate: he opened the door of the impressive motorcar with familiar dexterity,



Franco Guerzoni, Aia, 1970  
 lacquering boards 500 x 500 cm  
 photo by Luigi Ghirri  
 courtesy the artist

pushed a button, and a small forest of bottles containing various alcoholic liquids appeared, including the indispensable selection of whisky. Drink soon became drinks, cheerfully proffered and imbibed till evening. My installations on the field and Luigi's photos slowly faded, vanishing from their view and mine, replaced by raucous stories of women, motors, songs and whatever the toxic whimsy of the moment brought to mind. Looking back on that scene today, from an indulgent distance, I smile to recall being there with Luigi – who had in any case had much less to drink than I did – leaning on a Rolls with its door open, clutching our glasses, with two flamboyant beatniks in the landscape of the big meadow that was to continue for some time as the proving ground of our improbably installation projects. I am touched and amused to remember that when the car had gone on its way, with its cargo of euphoria, Luigi looked at me and whispered: "I told you so... beatniks are not to be trusted."

I never ceased to be amazed by Luigi's one-track mind when it came to music; and I had no idea that I was about to plunge into the same malaise. One day, while visiting Franco Vaccari, he suggested we listen to an LP by Pink Floyd, which if I'm not mistaken was *Atom Heart Mother*, from 1970: that dreamy, epic sound has stayed with me always. With their various musical creations, before, during and after, Pink Floyd provided the soundtrack for my work in the studio. Even today, when I start painting I listen to one of their tracks, taken at random. A few years later, Franco Vaccari generously wrote something for Luigi's first exhibition in Modena, and also wrote about my work, as the preface to a booklet titled *Affreschi*, published by Geiger – which was the publishing company run by Maurizio Spatola, brother of the poet Adriano.

After the installations in what was to become Parco Amendola, which I like to call "the unresolved works," we began to take little trips around the city in search of ruins. In the countless particulars photographed by Luigi amidst these ruins, they were not so different from the Roman or Egyptian remnants we had seen in books. It was precisely this similarity that prompted me to seek them and use them for my work, aimed at an archaeology of everyday life. In search of old abandoned houses, we explored the plains, venturing beyond Modena towards Bologna or Mantua, where there were more specimens. A friend suggested a place in Viadana, an old villa that became the subject of many photographs, all absolutely overexposed:

the light that seeped in through doors and windows that had been closed for some time did not permit proper shooting, but for my purposes I was pleased with the images, with the vague results that emerged in the printing. In that time of major doubts about the pathways to follow, the dialogue with Luigi was constant: he thought the photograph had to suffice on its own, while I – like many other artists at the time, I believe – thought that something more could be added. For me, the photographic image of those abandoned interiors became the surface on which to cultivate saltpeter and mildew, or – had I been able, had I known how – entire settlements of lichens, or bonsai ivy. It felt like I was offering the photograph some depth, a thickness, an additional overlay of information.

I've always been a bit reluctant or distrustful of photography; it wasn't for me. Some friend of mine – actually not much of a friend – suggested the reluctance came from my proximity to great photographers. Instead, I believe the desire to “delegate the shooting” – in this case to Luigi – was the forbidden fruit of the great influence I absorbed from American minimal and conceptual art.

What purpose would a photo taken by me have? The photographs that impressed me most were the imperfect ones, humanized by error or lack of light, the sudden, lunatic image. I was also very attracted by photographs from the early days, by daguerreotypes for example, or by prints on various surfaces, such as plaster. In my tireless search I tried a thousand paths, often with disappointing results. In those outlandish experiments, Luigi was no longer on board.

On Via Emilia, heading towards Bologna, we had also searched for “exteriors,” often large barns that might suggest the forms of a Greek or Roman temple, or large Mongolian huts. With the photograph, we seemed to carry them away with us, as if they were going to vanish from one moment to the next. A true theft. Actually those temple-like constructions are still there, bearing witness to a past with their archaic presence. Then came the matter of the tin constructions, shacks of corrugated sheet metal that seemed to unwittingly ape early Christian or Viking structures. Having obtained the black and white prints, I juxtaposed them with fragments of corrugated plaster that were supposed to point to a sort of archetypal dwelling, through casting and imprints. It took us ages to decide how to shoot them: I was aiming for a terse, frontal, cold result; Luigi, who had nothing cold about him, not even in winter, wanted them to be mobile, and off center. After getting my hands on a print, I would sneak off to



Franco Guerzoni, Affreschi, 1973  
silver salt print and pigments on scagliola board  
48 x 53 cm  
courtesy the artist and Galleria Studio G7, Bologna



Franco Guerzoni, Archeologie, 1974  
scagliola and saltpeter on silver salt print  
44,5 x 32,5 cm  
courtesy the artist and Galleria Studio G7, Bologna



Franco Guerzoni, Dentro l'immagine, 1974  
saltpeter on chromogenic print  
17,5 x 23,5 cm  
courtesy the artist



Franco Guerzoni, Archeologie, 1972  
silver salt print and scagliola fragment  
46 x 41 cm  
Collection Mutina for Art



Franco Guerzoni, Archeologie, 1973  
silver salt print and scagliola  
50 x 35 cm  
courtesy the artist and  
Galleria Studio G7, Bologna

airbrushing experts, photo retouchers – whom he despised – to remove anything that might disturb the main subject, whether that meant too many trees or other buildings in the background.

Lacking as I am in terms of in-depth knowledge of the world of photography, I admit that even today I look at it with a certain diffidence. Furthermore, when I attempt a shot, if only with the built-in camera of a phone, the results are always rather dull. In any case, I don't think to not-so-friendly friends were correct. Looking at Luigi's photographs, also after that decade of camaraderie, I can clearly see his poetics, certainly not in terms of the perfection of the shot. I also believe that the decade during which Luigi Ghirri was close to the artists in the city was formative for him as well. In the decades to follow his photographs went on to free themselves of the slight conceptual leanings of the early works, soaring towards a sort of docile, rather Verdian image, which perhaps expressed the nature of my friend the photographer: the frost, the snow, the night views, the pathways of Chaplin.

It goes without saying that the more the work took me towards a sort of materiality in the use of photography, the more Luigi drifted away. Without a shot being fired, of course, he shifted slowly, so I wouldn't realize it. I often say that when I remember Luigi, a strong feeling of friendship arises in me, which would be there even had he continued in his profession as a designer of buildings, and never taken any photographs at all. The not-so-friends said that together we made up one normal person, thus revealing our difference of character. But there was also something true in that statement. We might say that while he calmed me down, I made him agitated, in those long conversations that started out vague and then lit up in infinite projects, only to wind up just as vague and blurry as they were before, also perhaps due to the smoke of endless cigarettes. I still have the negatives and the photographs, strictly in black and white, which he took of works of pocket or table art, while I set them up before his lens at the Botteghino di Vignola, a family tavern where we spent many hours in those days. And what about the shots he made of me, dressed up like a bear, moving clumsily near a row of poplars at Campogalliano? I regret having lost the rolls of film with many little country roads, images taken after a rainstorm, showing the ruts made by tractors, shoeprints, animal tracks. After all, that was the time of imprints, and I don't think I was the only one to be dazzled by the work of Manzoni or Klein.

Among the many negatives by Luigi I still conserve, I'm lacking the images related to an audacious project in which a starry sky was refracted on the first hill into a swarm of fireflies. I have even suspected that at times, faced with reckless proposals but unable to say no, Luigi simply refrained from loading a roll of film into the camera. A camera – a Canon FT, if I'm not mistaken – which we had purchased together, fifty-fifty. Today I tell myself it might be a good thing that I used it so seldom, while he shot and shot, printed and printed, perhaps selecting just one image in the end. He was driven by the same compulsion that seized him at flea markets, where he chased after small notebooks, rulers, postcards that did not belong to some ancient time, but were objects of his childhood, which perhaps he did not want to utterly abandon. He was so enamored of checks that he often wore them, also in the form of shirts. I am aware of the fact that every friend who spent time with him will have his or her own Luigi to describe, and that all of them, with different shadings, can convey aspects of his kindly personality. I remember him with an emotion that goes beyond his remarkable work as a photographer.

I often tell Massimo Orsini about episodes from those by now faraway days, and he laughs, amused by my tales. The more he laughs, the more I tell. Those are memories I dig up from zones of memory that are so feeble, at this point, that to convey them I have to draw them out of obscurity, and I too find it amusing. I also believe that I have accompanied him, for many years now, towards Luigi's photography: it has been wonderful to see his genuine interest develop regarding the poetry of those images. One day we went together to Reggio Emilia to visit Giulio Bizzarri, who had many beautiful works by Ghirri; he spread them out before our eyes, and in each image he found stories to tell about his experiences with Luigi. He seemed to want to yield them, but at the same time to want to hang onto them. Massimo and I refrained from pressing him on this, which might have felt like a theft of sentiment. In the graphic adventures attempted together with Luigi – all in vain – Giulio Bizzarri was the true graphic designer, to whom the mutual friend and writer Ermanno Cavazzoni assigned the status of an artist, rightfully so, I believe. Together with Ermanno, Giulio was also the inventor of that school of irony known as *Università del progetto*, a school in which during different periods both Luigi and I taught courses. Giulio made an effort to get us involved in projects that had a certain artistic potential – ad campaigns or other initiatives

– which above all could enable us to earn some money. But we were not very attracted by those jobs, and even when we tried to design a collection for Ceramiche Zeta, we didn't have much success. Our efforts were seen as too daring for the time. Today Sassuolo is an absolute apex of the production of premium decorations, obtained with super-sophisticated technologies, but towards the end of the 1970s, when it was the homeland of fake cowhide tiles, our fantasies met with no acclaim whatsoever. Luigi seemed to be incapable of photographing them. We were far away, by then on our way into the adventure of art: anything that might distract us ended up irritating us, though we didn't openly reveal that to Giulio. In later years, I had a chance to see beautiful photographs made by Luigi of the products of leading ceramic companies, pictures that had nothing in common with traditional industrial photography. I saw that they were thoughtful, delicately conceptual. I am certain that had he been able to see the beautiful products of Mutina, Ghirri would have liked them and perhaps also photographed them. This exhibition displays, on walls decorated by fine ceramics, a large body of photographic work by Luigi, which Massimo Orsini has acquired over time. I think this is an objective demonstration of Mutina's long-term interest in art, a word cluttered with meanings but which, in the palimpsest of ceramics and photography, breaks free into the plural term of arts.

# Modena in the Seventies: Reading suggestions

Sofia Silva

35

The author of this essay on Luigi Ghirri was born in 1990 and is no longer capable of getting lost. She could do that as a child, in the few years in which she belonged to the 20th century. To get lost in meaning, in joy, in despair, in the self? To get lost in space. If I am at a crossroads in the countryside and don't know which way to go, I grab a smartphone, a smartwatch, a GPS device. If it's not mine it belongs to a passerby. There is always a passerby. If I choose to leave my mobile at home and not to ask for help, I'm getting lost on purpose, or pretending to get lost. This false losing of one's way is the spatial equivalent of buying a bluetooth radio with USB charger, hopefully also splashproof, designed in retro style, with a cream-colored housing and a medium-wave II dial that indicates Leningrad, an imitation of a tube radio from the Forties: it's ugly. The true, basic experience of getting lost contains, or should involve, the thrill of not having expected it. Instead, wherever I am, I know it, I know I am *there*, and that then I should turn right, after which I should take the third road on the left. I may take some time to understand it, I may rebel against the directions, I may refuse to rely on others because it gets on my nerves, but there is no escape: it's 16:45 and I am *there*.

I think it is easier, or actually *truer*, to manage to get lost in the past, in a family album, for example, even in the faded photographs of some disposable camera, in those that turned out badly not just from an aesthetic standpoint, but also in terms of intent: the idea was to photograph a son, but he ran out of the shot and all that remains is an empty football field. So there, I think I could still get lost in that football field. One remedy for the loss of getting lost in space, coming across the unexpected with astonishment and euphoria, is to continue to gaze at things together with Luigi Ghirri.

## *Many viewfinders*

Family and friends have described Luigi Ghirri as a very gentle man, born and raised in the countryside, fond of dilapidated Volkswagens and his eyeglasses with dirty lenses; a man who planted trees, who let himself be robbed out of distraction though he was no stranger to poverty, a man for whom the more prosaic aspects of life, debts and rental payments, brought a veil of despair. Family and friends always describe themselves as being *beside*

Luigi Ghirri, on the front seats of a car, or at the edge of a table, sifting through papers, and this sensation of being *beside* him certainly permeates his photographic work as well: we are by his side, welcomed, never pushed away, when he rummages in cities and countrysides to find the runways of a visual takeoff, what he called “pathways already marked for looking at reality.”<sup>1</sup> Pathways, not spectacles, never spectacles.

Ghirri did not photograph what he saw, but what reality itself suggested he should see, offering small clues (lines, rectangles, repetitions, spontaneous double exposures) scattered in the real, almost as if some time earlier a divine optician had lost his gigantic dials, telemeters, prisms and perspective devices in the fields and on the beaches.

Ghirri called these clues “mirini,” viewfinders, gunsights. Describing photography as a “window open to the world,” he taught his students that in reality there are “many ‘viewfinders,’ many windows already outlined,” which can be “the television, the screen at the cinema, the triumphal arch in the plains, the open gate inside a painting, the door left open on the landing, or the window of our room.”<sup>2</sup>

I think that looking at a photograph by Luigi Ghirri can require intense semiotic reasoning, for those interested in this type of interpretation, closely connected with the history of painting, especially where perspective and composition are concerned. I think that many “already outlined windows” detectable in reality were blank windows, or separated from the walls in front of them by just a few centimeters, and that the photographs that bear witness to these particular windows are the most earthy, materic, suffocating, difficult – in other words, the ones that are most intriguing to analyze.

### *La finestra cieca*

In this essay, I would like to concentrate on the relationship between Luigi Ghirri and the blank window, the wall of the image, the surface on which the field of sight comes to an end. The place it stops. Choosing this topic, I resolve to track down *possible* (and with this term I also mean *personal*, i.e. not related to intentions confirmed by the author) lines of interpretation of the more cerebral and ironic

1. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, Macerata 2010, p.162.

2. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, p.162.

Ghirri, the Ghirri who perhaps asked himself: how the heck am I going to photograph this? That Ghirri who could not find the beloved infinity of the sea, because the brutality of the land imposed a limit.

“An Italian painter would never have cut a column,” Luigi Ghirri says in the *Lessons in Photography*, regarding the composition of a painting by the Dutch artist Pieter Jansz. Saenredam (1597-1665) showing an interior view of a Gothic church crossed by ogival arches resting on circular columns.<sup>3</sup> The painting frames that glimpse of the central nave from the vantage point of a person in a lateral aisle, looking beyond two columns and “cutting” their surface as the margin of the viewer’s sight. For Saenredam, cutting the column had the meaning of creating a lateral border for the penetration of the view, which plunges into the perspective at the center, as in a funnel. A modern, grave choice that has its weight, where there is furthermore a lingering ambiguity: cutting the columns, or framing the perspective view, the sense of depth of the vision is sharpened, but this happens only if we yield to the illusion; if the spectator is reluctant to yield, the column-frames instead heighten the sense of two-dimensional character of the image contained between them, which becomes “an image in the image,” to use one of Ghirri’s favorite expressions. The perspective illusion works only if we believe in it.

Among the countless enigmas opened up by Ghirri’s photography, there is the question of what is two-dimensional, the surface, and what is space, or indeed what *we are willing to believe* a space is. Take the night, for example, or the fog; how do they differ from a wall, a surface, a cut column, a set of shutters? The night and the fog are atmospheres for those who experience them, but they could become partitions for those who look at them in a photograph. In one of the famous *Lessons in Photography* Ghirri narrates his friendship with the night. The darkness “erases,” carrying out a task of editing of sight, choosing what to conceal or what to emphasize.<sup>4</sup> The same can be said of fog; it is an impediment with respect to the photographer’s vision, which is nevertheless allowed to delve into it; instead, it becomes a true barrier for the viewer of the photographic image, who cannot pass beyond its curtain. In a photograph, night and fog block any possibility of getting “beyond” – they form a wall. Living in a foggy region, Ghirri had an innate sense of the visual limit, which we might call an “inclination for the wall,” as is borne out by some of his pictures from the Seventies which I will now set out to interpret.

3. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, p.111.

4. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, p.37.

*Carpi, 1973* is a vertical photograph that shows five surfaces, different from one another (three of masonry, one of blinds, one of shutters), and a softer surface, that of a dress. The upper margin of the photograph corresponds to the upper edge of the frame of the window. The shutter of the store seems to taper towards the top, while the two portions of “columns” widen towards the bottom. The lines bordering the shift between one surface and the next are not orthogonal to the perimeter of the photograph, though Ghirri may have photographed the image perpendicular to himself.

Ghirri has stepped back from the subject in such a way that the photograph concludes in the upper side in precise coincidence with the border of the window. Another variation of this subject exists, another more classical shot that includes a large portion of vertical space, and thus comes closer to the anthropomorphic impression by which the eyes, the windows, are always accompanied by an upper surface, the forehead. But in this specific shot Ghirri, like Saenredam, makes an irritating, and hence mysterious, important cut. Had he backed up further, the dress would have become a *punctum* of color in an architectural composition; had he moved closer, perhaps cutting the blinds, the photograph would have been a portrait of the dress. This balancing of the surfaces is the only one among many framings that transforms the photograph into an enigma of planes, conserving the metonymic interpretation (the dress stands for the human). It is a very well-gauged visual approach, and a courageous photograph.

The photograph *Modena, 1973* is harmoniously subdivided, and the upper and lower halves of the image are equivalent. The upper half, in turn, is split into two squares, divided by the window frame; one is black, and the other contains the raceme of a plant dried by the sun, placidly welcoming that single asymmetrical detail that introduces a shift into realism, like a painting from the 1300s. Many crucifixion scenes are divided in two, between the ground of Calvary and the sky. Just consider the one by Beato Angelico in the former chapter house of the monastery of San Marco. But even without such explicit references, the visual unconscious of the viewer grasps the outline of the crucifixion in this photograph, and the pot immediately takes on the dimension of an offering.



Luigi Ghirri, Carpi, 1973  
vintage c-print  
16,8 x 11,3 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973  
vintage c-print  
11,3 x 15,70 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973  
vintage c-print  
13 x 19,10 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

The photograph *Modena, 1973* is subtly ironic. There is no “cut column”; nine young cypresses stand in a row, entire, in front of a wall subdivided into rectangles. In front of the row of cypresses there is an asphalt surface on which rectangles have been traced as parking places, thus becoming a surface reflecting that of the wall. The cypress is a tree connected with mourning, both in myth and in current practices. It populates our cemeteries, because its roots grow straight down, not disturbing possible adjacent graves. The ironic touch is provided by the lack of orthogonal order in the photograph; the row of cypresses seems to slide towards the left margin, to slip away from an image so painstakingly encapsulated by a grid, that of the wall and the parking lot, which suggests the marble of the grand perspective floors of famous paintings of the 15th and 16th centuries. The operation is not so different from the one enacted by Caravaggio in the famous *Basket of Fruit* (1599), where the “threshold,” to use a term favored by Ghirri, is not asphalt but the slim edge of a table on which the wicker basket casts a shadow, to emphasize that it is not placed at the center, but protrudes over the edge, as if ready to fall. There are images, like the basket or Ghirri’s cypresses, that rebel against the composition in which they are portrayed.

These are examples of three photographs in which Ghirri, in a very natural way, has charged everyday visions marked by the presence of difficult limits or surfaces – the wall, the shutter, the windows with opaque glass – with semantic value. Nevertheless, Ghirri does not limit himself to being an authoritative and ironic activator of pathways of viewing: he is also, above all, a dreamer, in the most childlike sense of the term.

The photograph *Modena, 1978* published in *The Land of Toys* shows the encounter between two ruined surfaces, one in tile, the other a plastic panel. The ceramic surface shows the grid of its installation, which in turn suggests the splitting into segments of an image seen through a perspectograph, a drafting tool represented, for example, by Albrecht Dürer in *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman* (1538). The plastic panel, with its damaged, broken edge, up against the tiles, forms the profile of a mountain chain. In the focusing, Ghirri does not apply the options of someone photographing a two-dimensional surface from up close, but those of someone photographing a landscape. This marvelous picture reminds us, in fact, of certain plates in the treatise of

Alexander Cozens, *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape* (1785).



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1978  
vintage c-print  
14,8 x 9,9 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

Cozens took a rectangle in a format very similar to that of Ghirri's photograph, and he split it into sky and earth by means of a jagged line, the sole graphic sign in the composition. He had also developed a method, known as "blotting": a blotch of ink fallen on a sheet of paper would suggest the landscape to the artist, and the landscape would emerge from the stain without the need for further speculation. Writing his treatise, Cozens linked back to the *Treatise on Painting* by Leonardo, first published in 1632, Part 2, Precept 63, which states:

*"Look at walls splashed with a number of stains, or stones of various mixed colors. If you have to invent some scene, you can see there resemblances to a number of landscapes, adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, great plains, valleys and hills, in various ways. [...] Do not despise my opinion, when I remind you that it should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of*

*walls, or the ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places, in which, if you consider them well, you may find really marvelous ideas. The mind of the painter is stimulated to new discoveries, the composition of battles of animals and men, various compositions of landscapes and monstrous things, such as devils and similar things, which may bring you honor, because by indistinct things the mind is stimulated to new inventions."*<sup>5</sup>

The extraction of a landscape from the stains on a wall is the same procedure of which Ghirri speaks in the *Lessons in Photography* when he uses the expression "to find images in reality" or to find photomontages there.<sup>6</sup> The circle seems to find closure, or maybe not. Ghirri's everyday reality emerges as an infinite source of already constructed images ready to be underscored by photography, and of those "viewfinders" of sight discussed at the outset of this essay, hidden on beaches or amidst fields. And the human being? What is the role of that human, which appears only at times in Ghirri's photographs, and never with the intention of making a portrait? For the answer, we can turn to another photograph from the same period: *Scandiano, 1975*.

The Seventies were the years of extensive international studies on Caspar David Friedrich. In 1972 the first major retrospective on the painter was held at the Tate in London, followed in 1974 by exhibitions in Hamburg and Dresden. Luigi Ghirri loved Friedrich. Just consider the famous painting *The Monk by the Sea* (1810): a small human figure is placed towards the center of a landscape composition of three zones that threatens to collapse into abstraction. Friedrich's human figure is seen from behind, a *Rückenfigur*; the viewer thus looks at someone who, in turn, is looking at a landscape. The comparatist and theorist of landscape Michael Jakob has written: "Friedrich's great theme is therefore the awareness of the landscape enacted. [...] To penetrate Friedrich's landscapes means wanting to enter a place already taken by another which the viewer, in turn, would like to observe. A relationship of identity and at the same time of difference characterizes the relationship of the viewer with the other view of nature in the image."<sup>7</sup> This applies to the man in *Scandiano, 1975*, a *Rückenfigur*, a viewfinder scattered in the image of reality, who watches the time represented by the movement of the waters into which he has thrown a stone, inside a landscape of three segments, ready to dissolve in the soiled lenses of Ghirri's eyeglasses.

5. L. da Vinci, *Modo d'aumentare e destare l'ingegno a varie invenzioni*. [Source Wikisource]

6. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, p.77.

7. M. Jakob, *Il paesaggio*, Bologna 2009, p.66.



Luigi Ghirri, Scandiano, 1975  
vintage c-print  
24 x 36 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

### Agadez

*“I think the voyage on a map, also a preferred theme of many writers, is one of the most natural mental gestures, for all of us [...]. The happy islands cherished by literature and in our hopes have all been described by now, and the only possible discovery or voyage seems to be that of discovering what has already been discovered. Likewise, the only possible journey seems to be inside signs, inside images: in the destruction of direct experience.”*

Luigi Ghirri, 1979<sup>8</sup>

In a dimly lit room, the author connects to Google Maps and writes “Modena.” A gray patch surrounded by green appears; certain names can be seen: Bricoman, Policlinico di Modena, Piazza Grande, Enzo Ferrari Museum. I click on the “satellite” option. I see the roads and the patchwork of planted fields. I select the little yellow man at the right of the screen, and hold the mouse down to drag him into the middle of the city. When I release the mouse the little figure falls, even raising its arms as it plunges. By chance, the little man has ended up in a park named after Sandro Pertini. The satellite image has cut off the head of a man passing by on a bicycle, while at the stoplight there is a red van of a company that installs climate control systems in buildings. I click on the streets and the satellite enables me to move down them in great strides, I can see other lopped off heads, and a few clicks away there is a change in the weather.

Luigi Ghirri devoted an entire lesson on photography to the concept of the threshold, or the boundary. In reality the thresholds are gates, fences, the entrances to dirt roads; they are at the threshold “of something, the threshold to go towards something.”<sup>9</sup> The thresholds, in other words, are the “pole position” of a gaze. There are no thresholds in Google Maps; I click wildly, aiming the arrows towards the sky and the pavement, I don’t know where I am because the map on the left is too small to be consulted, and my eyes are getting tired. Like the most jaded of voyeurs, I snort and lower the laptop’s screen. Google Maps, you’re not satisfying. Immediately an idea comes to me, and I log back on. Just as when I was a little girl, and I would spin the globe and then stop at the ocean, with one finger, I send Google Maps out of control, stroking the touchpad until I have reached Niger. Then I drag the little yellow man over Niger and let him drop onto a city called Agadez. The little man won’t drop. In Modena he can crash into the midst of pedestrians, but in Agadez that is not allowed. The city can only be seen from above. Agadez is still just a name in an atlas.

Not so long ago, Modena was Agadez and Padua, to the north, was Arlit. In the past there was Agadez, the mirage of a name in an atlas, the promise of an exploration, the encounter with a threshold, the possibility of getting lost, of taking a map out of the glove compartment of the car and turning right or turning left. Today, we can all continue to search for our own Agadez in the photographs of Luigi Ghirri.

8. A. Desideri (curated by), Luigi Ghirri. *L’omino sul ciglio del burrone*, Florence 2020.

9. L. Ghirri, *Lezioni di fotografia*, p.157.

# An open book

Adele Ghirri

47

*“The deletion of the space that surrounds the framed image is as important as what is represented; it is thanks to this deletion that the image takes on meaning, becoming measurable. This image continues, of course, in the visible realm of the deleted space, inviting us to see the rest of reality that is not represented.”*

Luigi Ghirri, preface to *Kodachrome*, 1978

I have always found this phrase particularly useful for an understanding of Luigi's work, and of his thinking. There are different levels of interpretation of a photographic image; it is always the result of a choice, of a process of discarding and exclusion. What we see, as John Berger wrote, is always the relationship that exists between us and things.

To acknowledge an importance, an existence of that which remains outside the frame, of what is not openly stated by the work, is a principle Luigi extended to his way of looking, and – as a consequence – to the choice of the subjects of his photographs.

The boundless variety of his entire artistic output is the indication of a gaze free of criteria of ranking, which is capable of augmenting the meaning and comprehension of the real, starting precisely from awareness of the fact that human sight, like the photographic image, is inevitably partial, the expression of a coexistence between visible and invisible, extraordinary and ordinary, between what is narrated and what is omitted. The images he has left us are themselves a suggestion to linger over the so-called discards, to recall the existence of objects and places that are often overlooked because they are considered ordinary, or apparently of little interest. A flowerpot on a window sill of a house, amidst lowered blinds, a dish drain.

His work can thus be seen as an invitation to read *between the lines* of the world, to “see the rest of reality that is not represented.” This does not imply a feverish search for hidden messages, concealed or “ulterior” meanings in his photographs; instead, it indicates the possibility of taking stock of the endless store of possible gazes on things.



Luigi Ghirri, Capri, 1982  
vintage c-print  
15,6 x 24,7 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

Inside Massimo's collection, we find well-known shots alongside others that I hope will be utterly new for some of the people who peruse this catalogue. The impressive windows of Versailles coexist with a window with a lowered blind, on which a red velvet dress has been placed outside on a precarious hanger. Small trees utterly similar to those of the majestic garden of the palace can also be found in the parking lot of an industrial shed on the outskirts of Modena. This is the same suburbia where in the Seventies Luigi photographed the walls of apartment buildings and houses clad in tile, for the series *Catalogo*, a project on the geometric surfaces similar to mosaics applied to buildings.

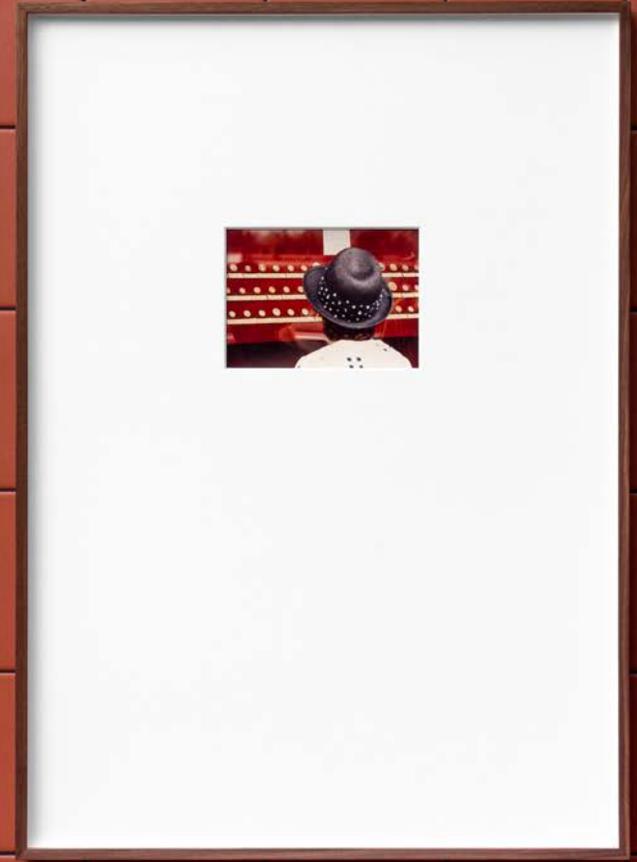
He wrote: "The rigorously geometric similarities of these photographs coincide with the architectural analogies, with my cultural background (*Luigi had studied and worked as a geometer, ed.*), nevertheless without forgetting, as always, that inside the traced schema the expressive combinations of the tiles are infinite. If these *garments* of the houses seem to be blocked in an icy rigor [...], it is also true that on a closed shutter the inscription '*colori*' offers a glimpse of infinite combinations."

This short quote seems almost to reference the spaces of Casa Mutina Milano, in which the works by Luigi coexist together with DIN, the new collection designed by Konstantin Grcic, and are placed on the walls almost as if they were pinned to the pages of a notebook of graph paper, colored and out of scale. My father Luigi often spoke of his work by comparing it precisely to a big book, made of infinite possible narratives in images. My deepest thanks to Massimo and Sarah for having opened this book, with this exhibition: now we may enter.

# **installation views**

**“Here is a small but playful observation: most living spaces use the rectangle as their constructive foundation. The DIN collection is based on this premise. Luigi Ghirri’s photography captures the reality of life in a rectangle – the print. *Between the Lines* superimposes Ghirri’s oeuvre on DIN’s architecture.”**

**Konstantin Grcic**



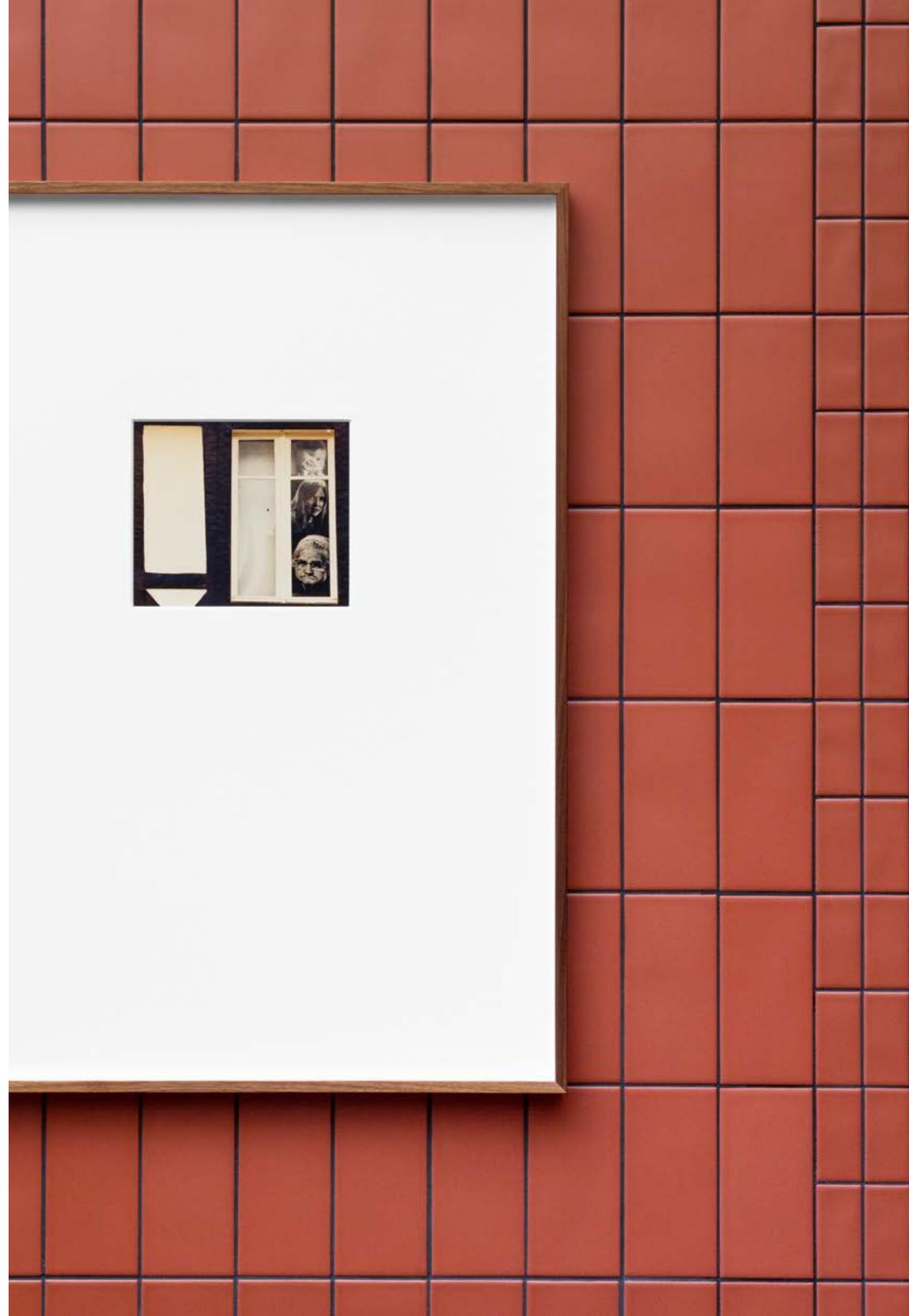


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installation view.

Opposite page:  
Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973



Luigi Ghirri, Quimper, 1972





Previous page:  
installation view.

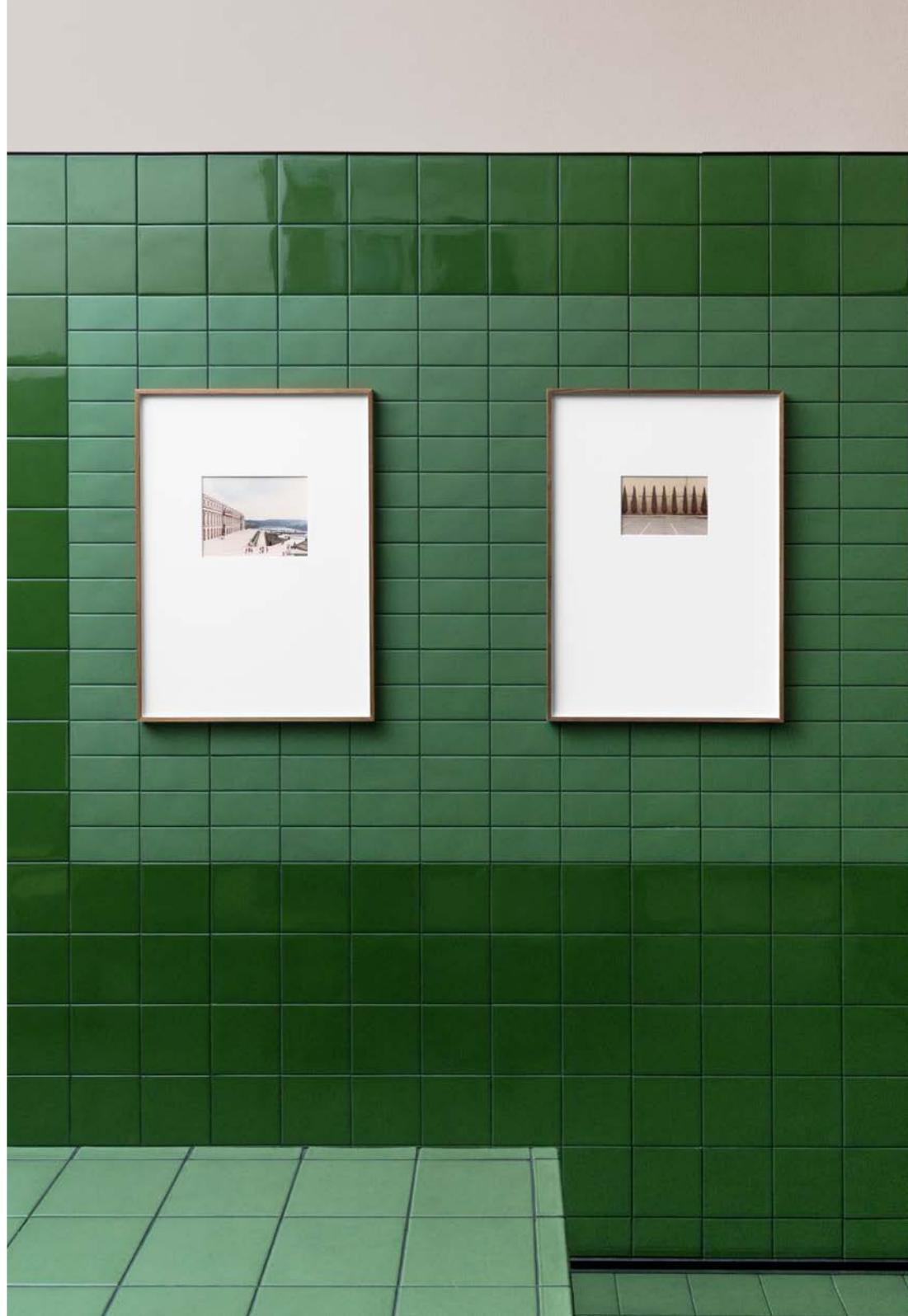
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Luigi Ghirri, *Toward Lagosanto*, 1989





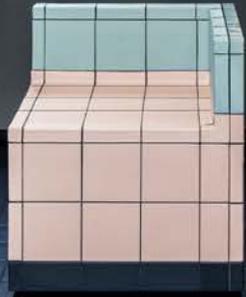
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Luigi Ghirri, *Modena*, 1973

Opposite page:  
installation view.



Luigi Ghirri, Versailles, 1985



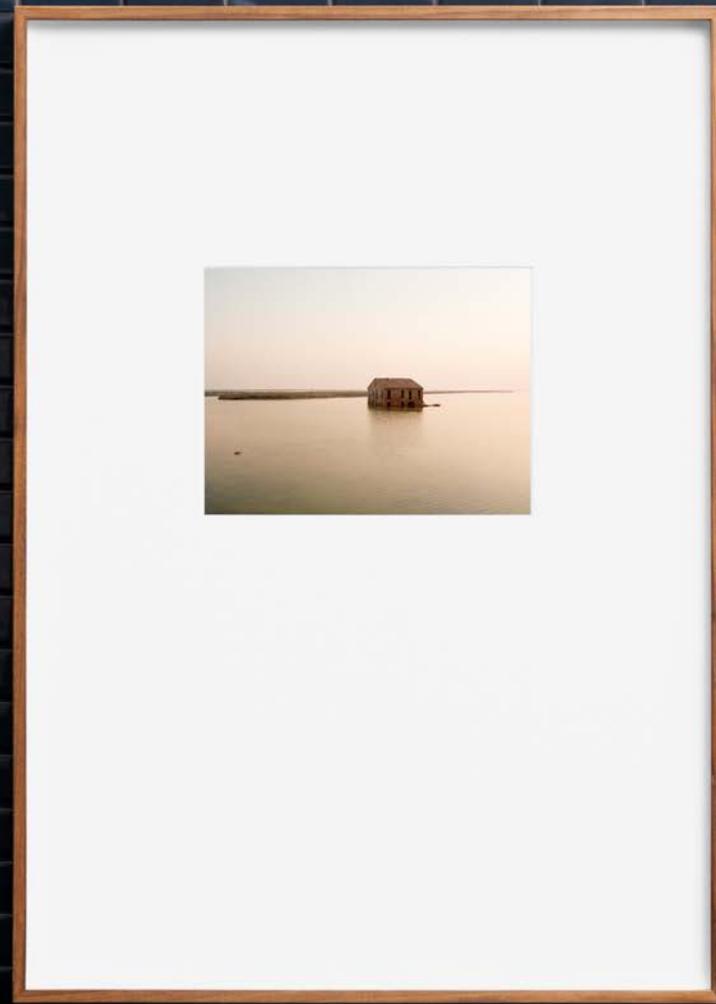


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Opposite page:  
Luigi Ghirri, Bologna, 1985



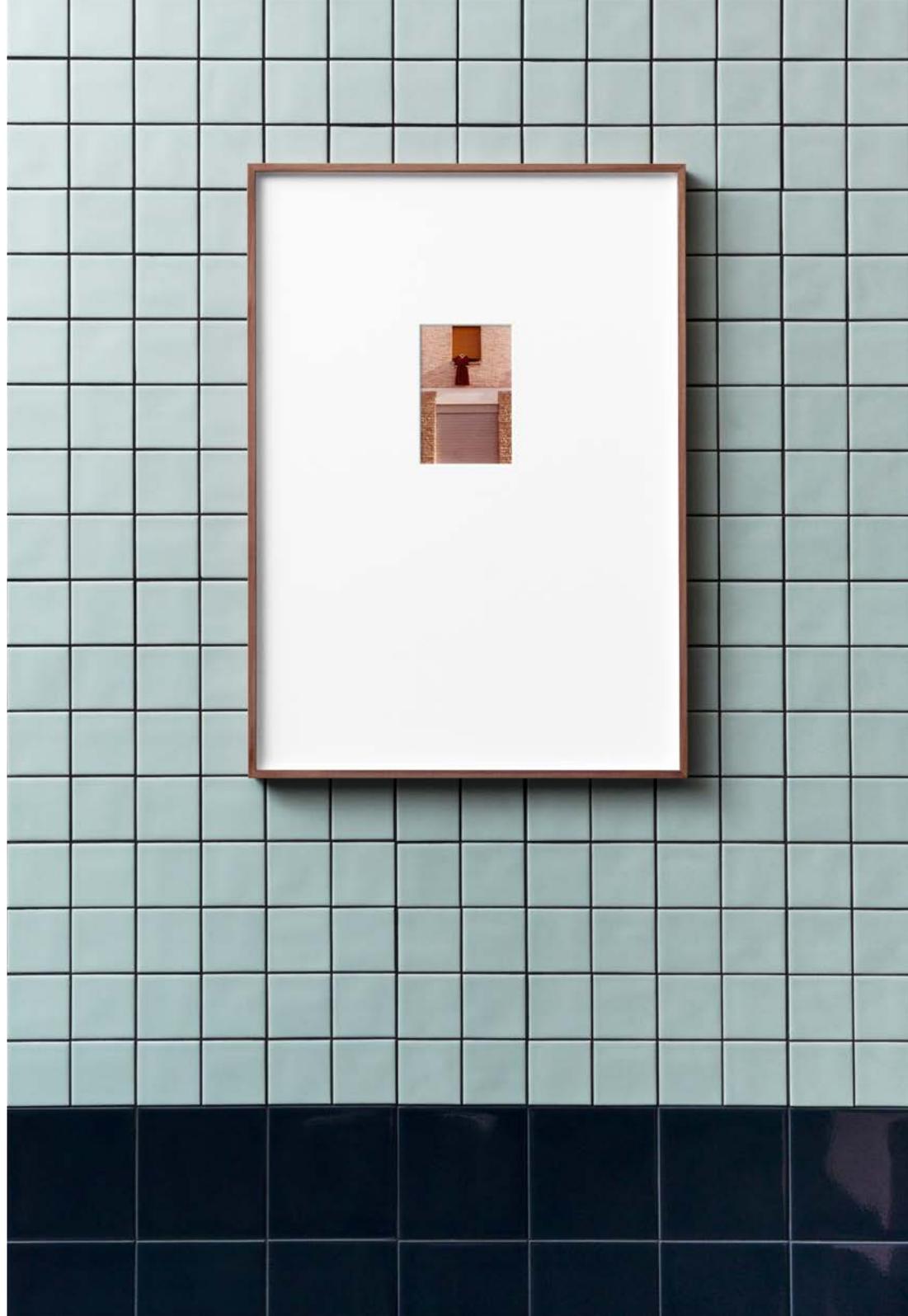
Luigi Ghirri, Argine Agosta Comacchio, 1989





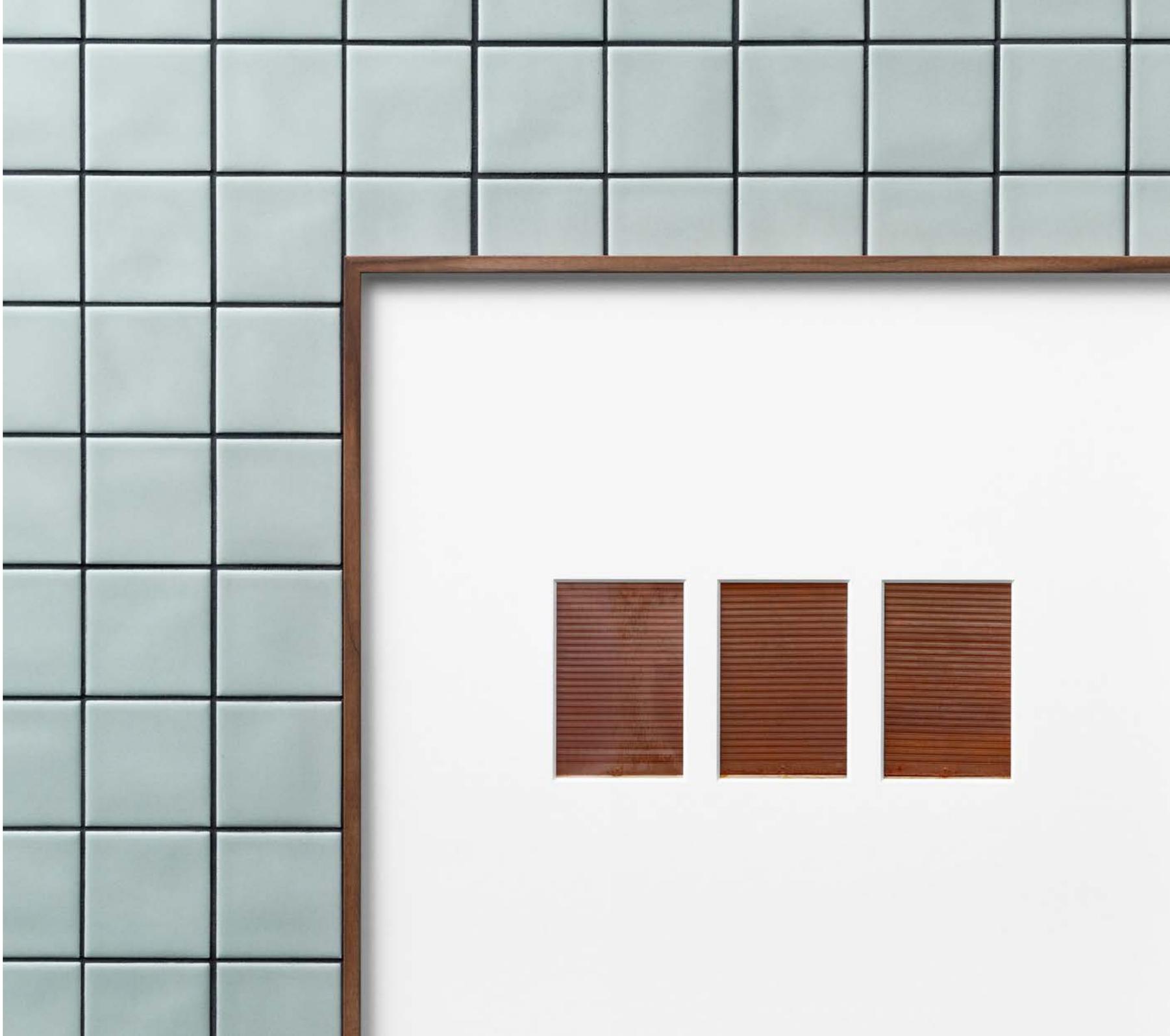
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installation view.

Opposite page:  
Luigi Ghirri, Carpi, 1973



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973





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Luigi Ghirri, *Modena*, 1972

Opposite page:  
Luigi Ghirri, *Cadecoppi*, 1985



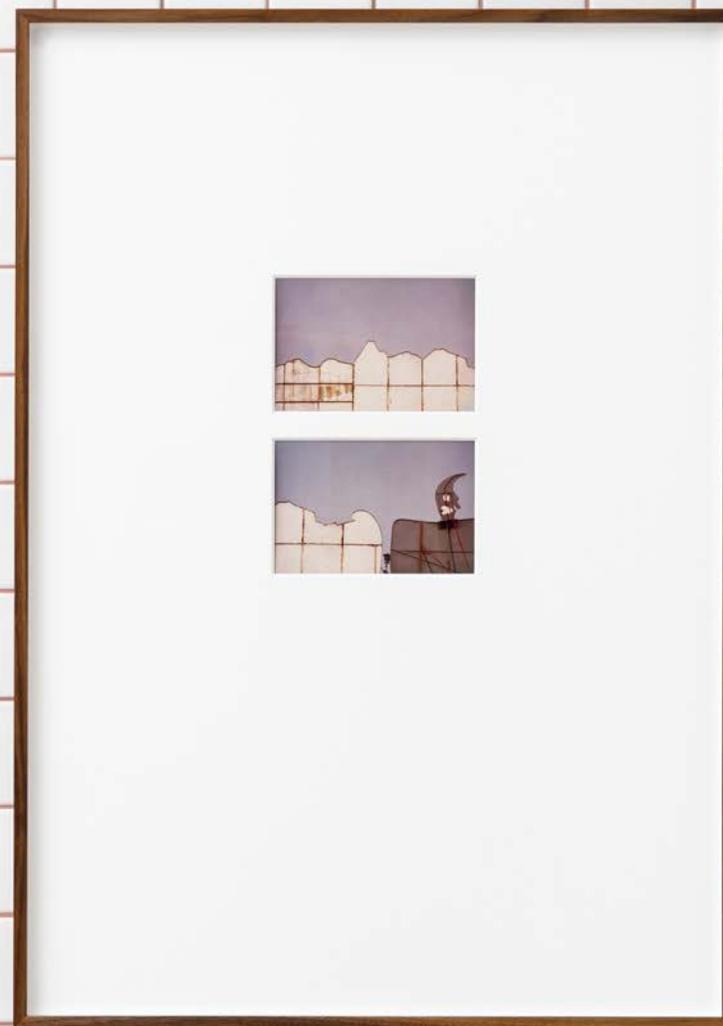
Luigi Ghirri, Atlas, 1973  
Luigi Ghirri, Atlas, 1973





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installation view.

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Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1978  
Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1978



Opposite page:  
Luigi Ghirri, Lido di Volano, 1988

Next page:  
Luigi Ghirri, Lido di Spina, 1974  
Luigi Ghirri, Lido di Spina, 1974



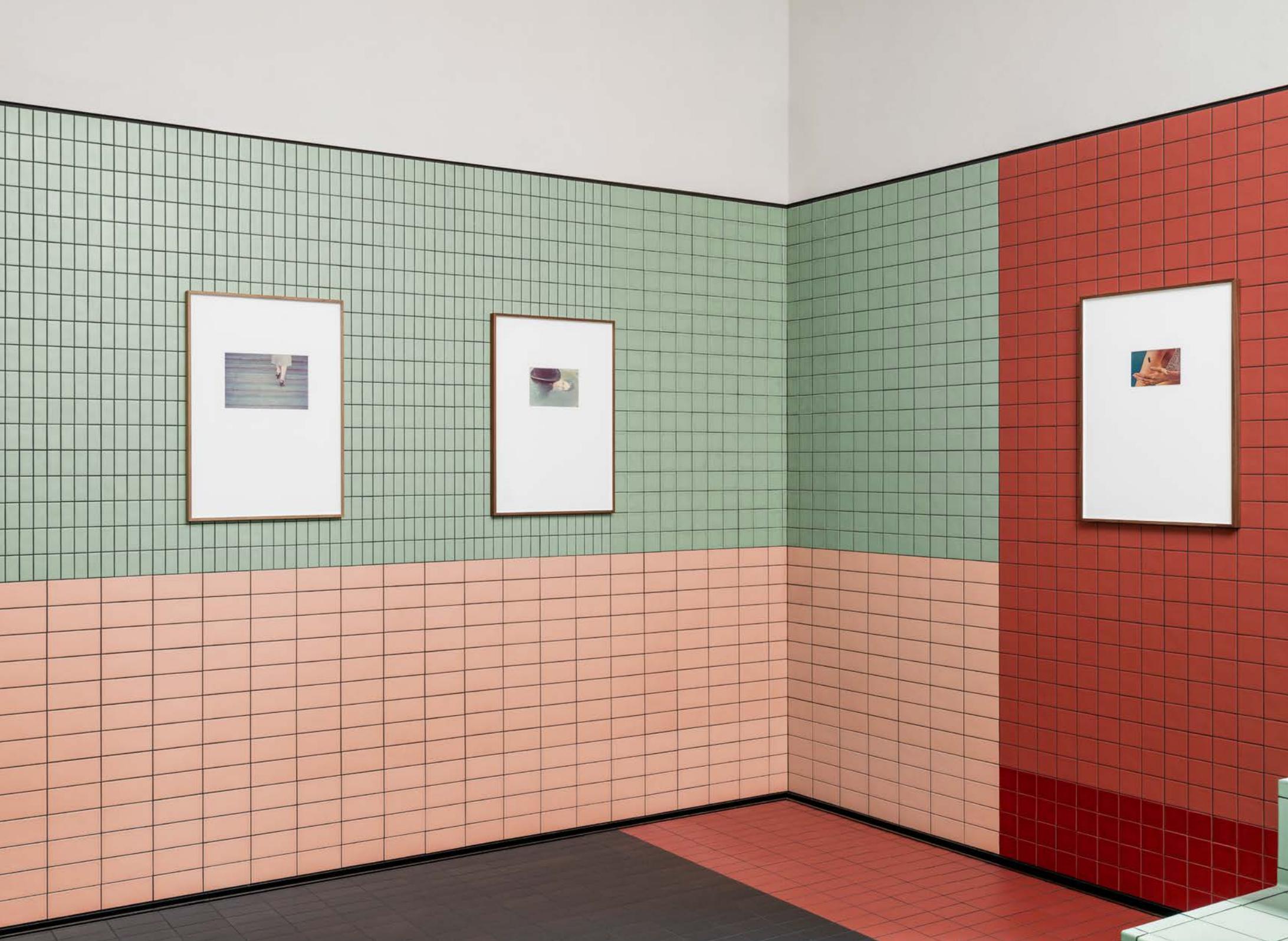




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Luigi Ghirri, Amsterdam, 1973

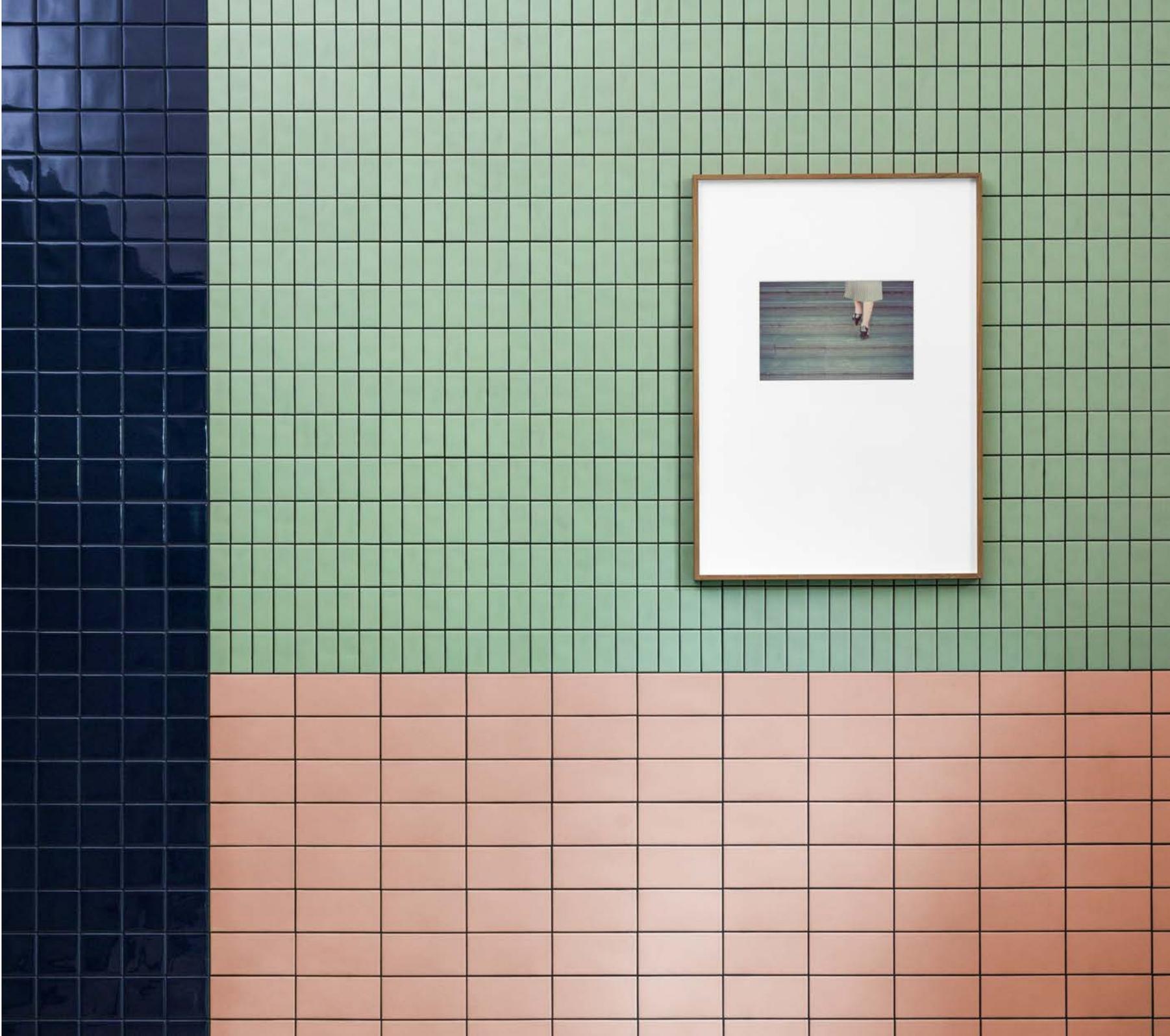




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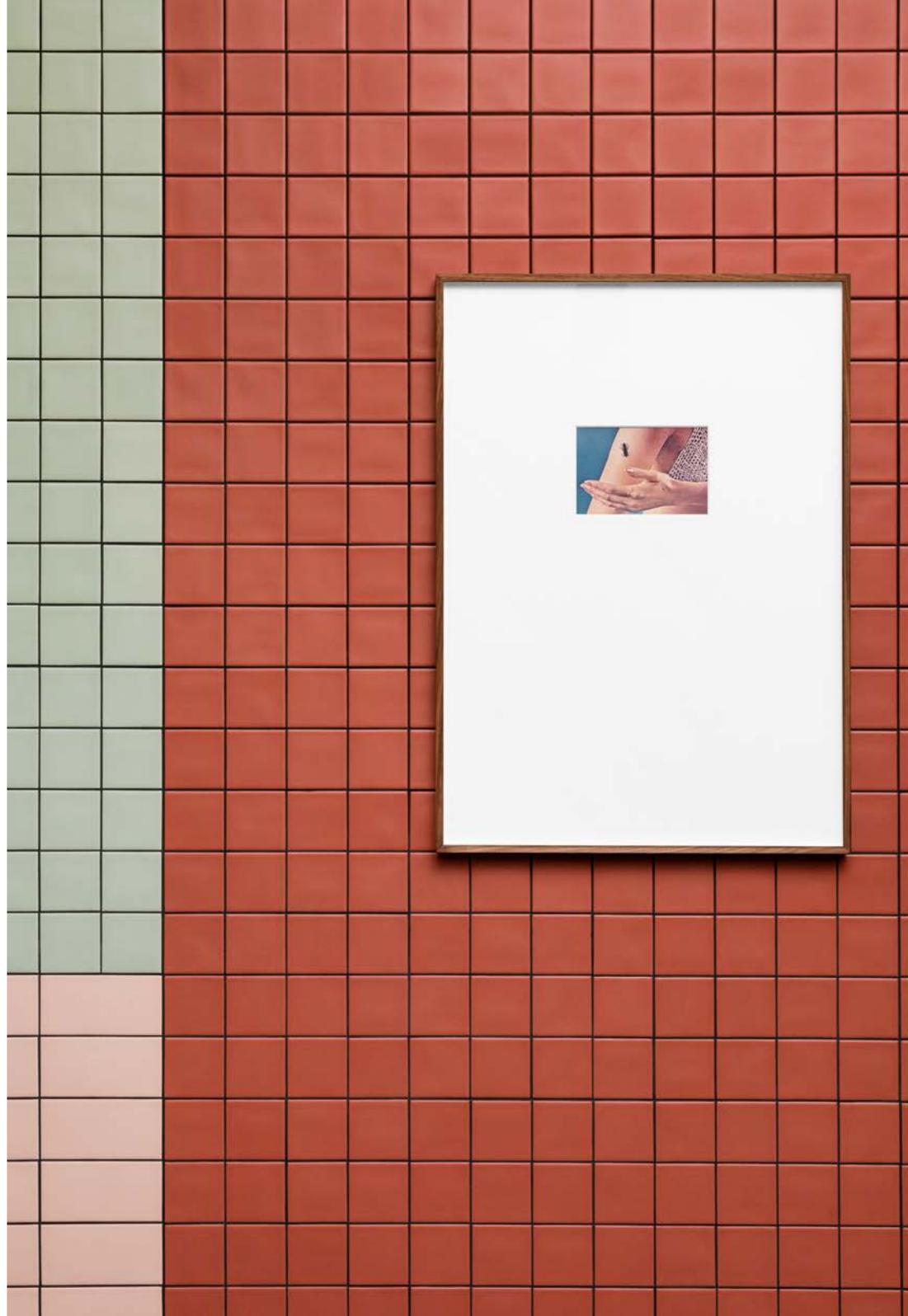
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Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1978





Previous page:  
Luigi Ghirri, Paris, 1972

Opposite page:  
Luigi Ghirri, Luzern, 1971



# list of works



Luigi Ghirri, Luzern, 1971  
vintage c-print  
17,4 x 12,6 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973  
vintage c-print  
40,5 x 30,5 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973  
vintage c-print  
13 x 19,10 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Versailles, 1985  
vintage c-print  
20 x 25,5 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Quimper, 1972  
vintage c-print  
17,8 x 15,2 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Toward Lagosanto  
(Ferrara), 1989  
vintage c-print  
36,5 x 48,7 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Argine Agosta  
Comacchio, 1989  
vintage c-print  
25 x 18,5 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Bologna, 1985  
vintage c-print  
29,8 x 46,3 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1972  
vintage c-print  
24,8 x 11,7 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



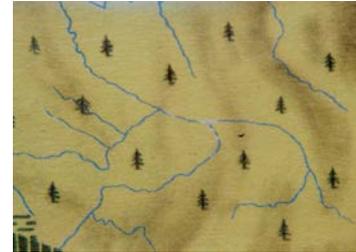
Luigi Ghirri, Carpi, 1973  
vintage c-print  
16,8 x 11,3 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



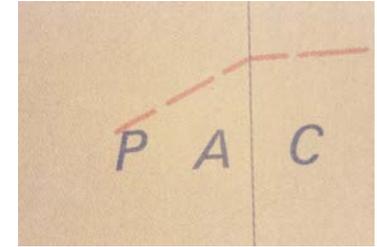
Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1973  
vintage c-print  
11,3 x 15,70 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Cadecoppi, 1985  
vintage c-print  
27 x 51 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Atlas, 1973  
vintage c-print  
16,8 x 11,3 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Atlas, 1973  
vintage c-print  
16,5 x 11,4 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1978  
vintage c-print  
14,8 x 9,9 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1978  
vintage c-print  
15 x 10,1 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Lido di Volano, 1988  
vintage c-print  
23,5 x 17 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Lido di Spina, 1974  
vintage c-print  
13 x 19 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Lido di Spina, 1974  
vintage c-print  
13 x 19 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Amsterdam, 1973  
vintage c-print  
25 x 17 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Luzern, 1971  
vintage c-print  
17,4 x 11,5 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Modena, 1978  
vintage c-print  
21,5 x 14,4 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri



Luigi Ghirri, Paris, 1972  
vintage c-print  
19 x 29 cm  
© Eredi Luigi Ghirri

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the occasion of the exhibition

Luigi Ghirri  
Between the Lines  
curated by Sarah Cosulich  
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All works in the exhibition  
Collection Massimo Orsini

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MUT Mutina for Art  
Casa Mutina Milano  
Via Cernaia 1A  
20121 Milano, Italy  
T +39 02 36725920

[www.mutina.it](http://www.mutina.it)  
[info@mutinaforart.it](mailto:info@mutinaforart.it)

Catalogue

Edited by  
Sarah Cosulich

Texts by  
Sarah Cosulich  
Adele Ghirri  
Konstantin Grcic  
Franco Guerzoni  
Massimo Orsini  
Sofia Silva

Translation  
Stephen Piccolo

Installation images  
Delfino Sisto Legnani

Graphic Project  
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