Self-portrait at the MTA’s 207th Street Overhaul Shop, where New York City’s subway cars are maintained.
Arts & Humanities

Christopher Payne Captures the Unexpected Beauty of American Factories

The industrial photographer’s new book, *Made in America*, celebrates the rich history and fresh promise of US manufacturing.

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Self-portrait at the MTA’s 207th Street Overhaul Shop, where New York City’s subway cars are maintained.

“Most people I know have never set foot in a factory,” says photographer Christopher Payne ’90CC. “Today we have little idea where or how the shirt on our back was made.”

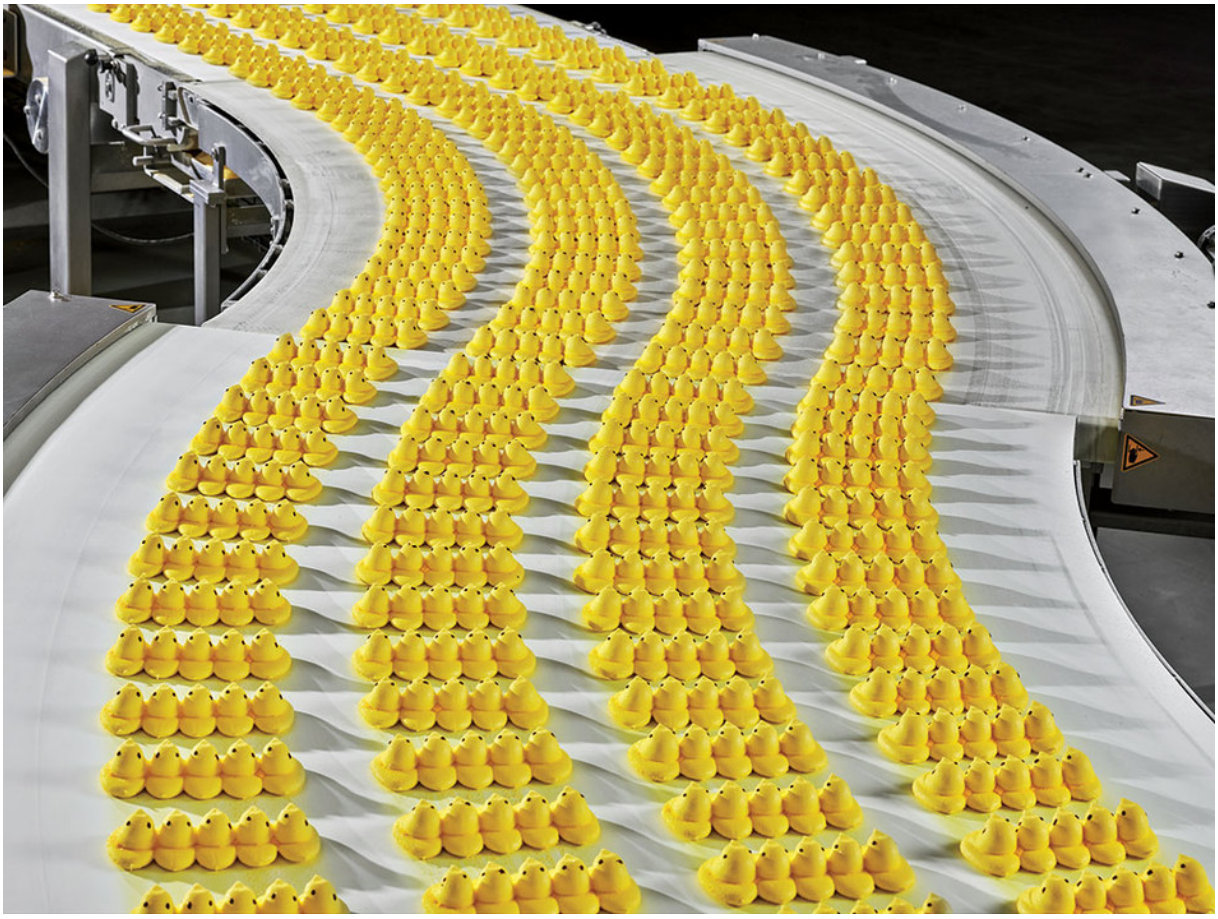
Payne has spent a decade traveling the country, documenting the manufacturing industry, and his new book, *Made in America*, celebrates both its storied past and what he sees as its hopeful future. In vibrant, intricately detailed images, he captures the making of everything from Peeps marshmallow chicks to forty-ton subway cars. He showcases the traditional craftsmanship and vintage machinery of boat building and textile weaving, while embracing the new technologies needed to make high-voltage undersea power cables and commercial aircraft.



A hydrogen-cooled generator at GE Gas Power, Schenectady, New York.

Payne, who studied architecture at Columbia, says a class with history professor James P. Shenton ’49CC, ’54GSAS “lit a fire” in him to explore the industrial remnants of New York City, and after graduating, he began photographing the city’s electric substations, then the Steinway piano factory. He worked as an architect for twelve years, but he realized that he preferred chronicling existing spaces to designing new ones, and he turned to photography full-time.

The images in Payne’s book, many of which were originally commissioned by the *New York Times*, are visually arresting, but they also tell a bigger story about our cultural and economic climate. With environmental crises and political instability threatening the global supply chain, American manufacturing is making a comeback, and Payne is excited about the shift. “There is, for sure, a certain romance in the idea of making our own goods here in the US,” he says. “But it is no longer entirely nostalgia: it is also opportunity and necessity.”



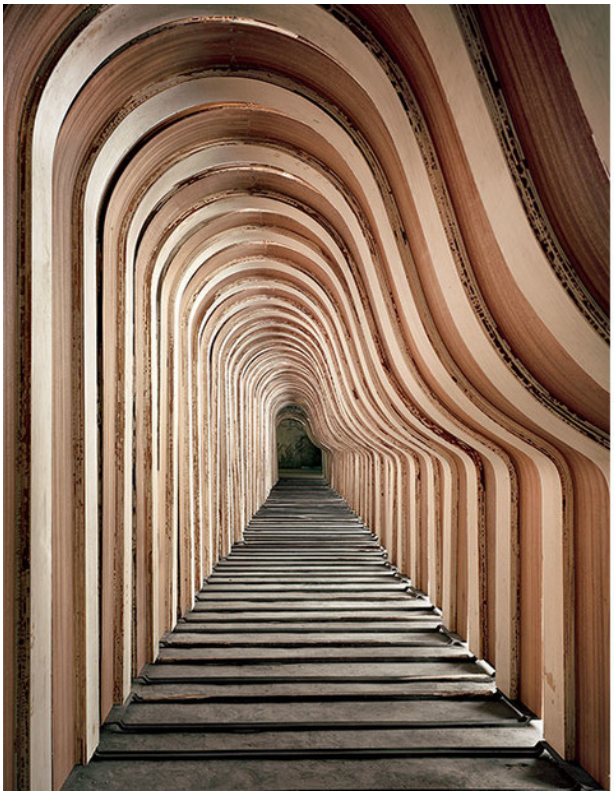
Peeps marshmallow chicks cool on a conveyor belt at Just Born Quality Confections, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

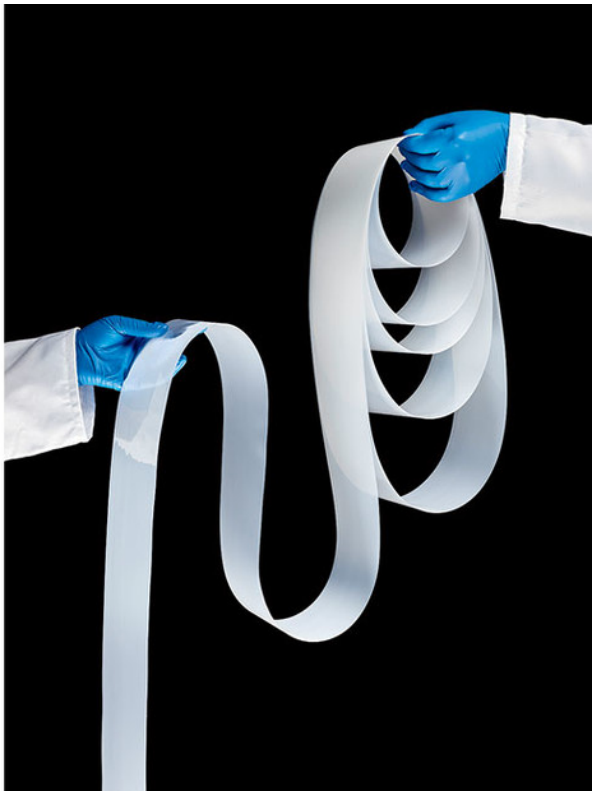


Workers assemble Boeing 737 Max fuselage sections at Spirit AeroSystems, Wichita, Kansas.



Pencils are sharpened on a high-speed sanding belt at General Pencil Company, Jersey City, New Jersey.





Left: Piano rims sit in the rim-conditioning room at Steinway & Sons, Queens, New York. Right: Ribbon ceramics at Corning Inc., Corning, New

York.



Spools of yarn, which designers use to create custom carpet-tile prototypes and samples, at Interface, LaGrange, Georgia.

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Guide to school abbreviations

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