

Wouter Deruytter's *Arabian Knights*

by
John Wood

Who has not seen thousands of photographs of mosques, Arabian horses, men at prayer, men dancing, Arab children, and the like? Until I encountered Deruytter's *Arabian Knights*, I never felt the uniqueness of such pictures, for they all looked to me like the kind of thing one found in "travel" magazines. I never saw the humanity of such images and never identified with the people in them. But when you look at a Deruytter photograph, you immediately *know* the people in it and you *care* about them.

Who could gaze on those happy, smiling girls in Oman (plate 3) or the boys in Abu Dhabi (plate 17) and not care about them, their lives, and who they are? Who could look at the line of dancing Princes (plate 9) and not feel the nobility of those individuals? And who could look at Deruytter's brilliant animal photographs, especially King Hassan's personal Arabian (plate 2) and not feel part of nature's wonder? Such a photograph of such a horse makes us think of Shakespeare's words in *Henry V*:

When I bestride him, I soar, I am a hawk. He trots the air,
the earth sings when he touches it, the basest horn of his hoof
is more musical than the pipe of Hermes. . . . He is pure air
and fire, and the dull elements of earth and water never appear
in him but only in patient stillness while his rider mounts him.
. . . Turn the sands into eloquent tongues and my horse is
argument for them all. . . Wonder of nature--- (III,vii).

Pictures like these make us want to return to them again and again merely to be renewed by their beauty.

Though Deruytter's work could always be called beautiful, he might best be described as the great photographer of myth and mask. These are the subjects he returns to again and again to weave into his art. His well-known book *Knights of the Impossible* is an eccentric but brilliant mix of five mythic yet "impossible" orders of knighthood placed in jarring juxtaposition to one another, but it is also a collection of our public personae, those masks of who we are, presented in five suites that involve and intermingle the

warpings of time, identity, and gender.

All of Deruytter's knights--be they cowboys, circus performers, men dressed as women, artists dressed in antiquated clothes, or true Arab kings and princes--suggest a multiplicity readings. They tell mythic tales; they suggest historical parallels; they force us to remember vanishing things we like to think of as permanent; they document changing ways of life; and they often exude a sensuality the sitters themselves may be unaware of. Deruytter's new book *Wouter Deruytter: Cowboy Code* is a particularly brilliant example of this ability of his to tell a single story with many different plots.

What one will always find in any Deruytter photograph regardless of the subject is a finely chiseled, classical precision that produces artistic and emotional revelation through near documentary exactitude. His is a vision of clarity and brilliance that in itself is emotionally affecting, rather like the work of Hoyningen-Huene or Herbert List, and it is particularly striking in his *Arabian Nights* series.

Those beautiful girls of Oman, the Museum of Modern Art in Sharjah (plate 6), the man holding the Royal Falcons of Sharjah (plate 18), and so many others are pictures that simply stop us. They arrest our sight as powerful art always arrests our sight. They make us stare and return to stare again, and it is then that we begin to see and to appreciate the psychological levels Deruytter has constructed in them.

Deruytter's Arabs, unlike the subjects of some of his other photographs, are not trying to cultivate antique personae for themselves; they already possess ancient and fabled ones. They are trying to create modern ones for a modern world, a Western world, which often does not understand or appreciate the Arab world. No other Western photographer has presented the power, the beauty, and the dignity of Arab culture and society as Deruytter has. His sympathetic affinity with this world stems from the honesty of his vision, the fact that he can depict something's grandeur along with its eccentricity. That is the way he captures a subject's humanity and makes us identify with it.

For example, in another line of dancing men (plate 1) all dressed alike and equal before God, we notice one wearing a Rolex. In another photograph, we see camel drivers with cell phones. And in another of a prince's entry into a village, we see no dazzling caravan proceeding over the finest, hand-woven carpets laid out in welcome before him, as we might expect in the old *Arabian Nights*.

He arrives in an automobile which drives over those same fine carpets.

It takes a great photographer to make us see with new eyes, to show us what we have seen before but allow us to see it differently, afresh, and with deeper understanding. Few artists are capable of such revelation. But it takes an even greater artist to make us look at a picture and care about the person in it. Wouter Deruytter can do both because his art yokes revelation to the depths of feeling.

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