

When is a negative not negative?

With this series of photographs, Wouter Deruytter uncannily succeeds in lifting up the “veil” of the Arab world. At first glance, these very austere and dark images are almost shockingly disapproving of the figures and backgrounds that they embrace. It is only by lingering a bit on each representation, that the strength of the individuals and magnificence of their surroundings begin to emerge so clearly and so forcefully.

So much has been written recently about the veiled world of the Arab civilization. Deruytter quickly sidesteps the political debates and challenges his viewers to look at this culture with a new empathy. By choosing to print large format “negatives”, Deruytter turns his subjects inside out and, in so doing, we as viewers, are forced to appraise the picture and then look deeply within ourselves. Like most really stimulating art, Mr. Deruytter’s evades easy readings. He does, however, ask the viewer to examine these images of confrontational men, their magnificent thoroughbreds, their uncompromising buildings, and their harsh landscapes, with a sense of thoughtfulness and humanity. Many of us in the audience might, for the very first time, begin to understand this Arab world and its interconnecting role on this small planet.

Today, more than ever, as wars between cultures get more formulaic and arguments for such conflicts get less credible, we need artists like Wouter Deruytter. In an era when there seems to be so much to fear out there, we need visionaries like him who have already gone to the boundaries and who have returned with splendid images and their innate stories to share with us. Through his skillful use of photographic negatives, Deruytter ironically forces us to lift our Western “veils” and look with new compassion and an unprejudiced concern at these pictures of an ancient society and its complex struggle to find its place in the modern world.

The portraiture Deruytter creates does indeed raise serious questions about traditions, religion, sexuality, and history. He does this with a very assured formal style. But he does not force answers upon us. He requires us to open wide our eyes and gaze with freshness and sensitivity. Put simply, he teaches us to look anew at people and places we assumed we recognized.

As we watch the small, solitary figure of the robed youngster quietly entering the shadowed archway, we cannot help but set aside our qualms of the present moment. In this silent moment, we are briefly allowed to hope that both this Arab child’s future and that of children everywhere may be filled with the same peace and serenity that this picture so perceptively offers us.

When is a negative not negative? When it is in the accomplished and caring hands of a remarkable photographer: Wouter Deruytter

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