

WOUTER DERUYTTER: KNIGHTS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

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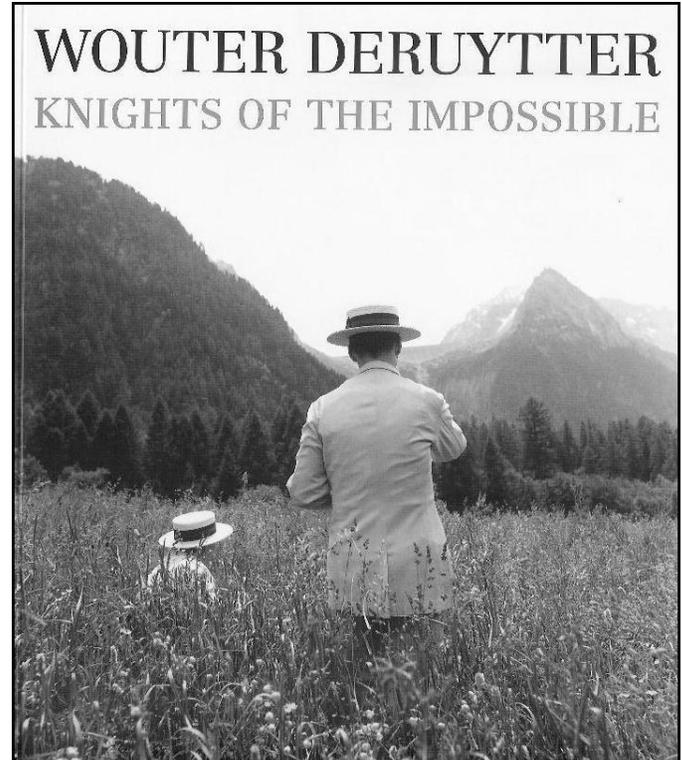
For a number of years Belgian photographer Wouter Deruytter has been taking photographs of people who live their lives very differently than the majority of us. He spent time in the Middle East photographing the Royal families and their horses. He went to Cairo to shoot circus families doing their acrobatic act on the street. He has also traveled around the world with an artist duo who live a 1920s lifestyle.

In each location, the people he depicts are unusual because they seem to be able to invent themselves. Rather than taking things for granted, everyone seems aware of everyday life as a form of theatre. For instance, we see svelte Jem Jender dressed in a skin hugging, sleek black and white costume in a pose reminiscent of Richard Avedon's 1958 Dior fashion shoot. There is such gentle humor in this Avedon photo, partly because of the contrast between the elegant transvestite posing by the Central Park fountain and the middle-aged African American women sitting on a nearby bench.

In Deruytter's "Transgenderism" series nothing merely "is" and most of the images seem to yearn for something beyond the familiar and prosaic. Deruytter refers to many 20th-century iconic images but these images are usually not camp. Although these images help "denaturalize" what we understand to be reality, they do not have what Susan Sontag describes as camp's "level of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration". Deruytter's photographs are both serious and frivolous and thus they encourage new definitions of what lies beyond camp. The theatrical is seen as the norm in these images and Oscar Wilde would have been utterly at home in many of these shots, even if his acerbic wit would not have been appreciated by the gentle looking male artists in their splendid 19th century settings.

His images of Peter McGough and David McDermott in Ireland, Switzerland, Manhattan, and Paris are extraordinary concoctions. In a typical image taken in 1996 the two artists are wearing tweed jackets, waist-coats, and hats in front of a dodo bird skeleton in Dublin's Museum of Natural History. We are immediately reminded of the Victorian predilection for collecting, preserving, and categorizing creatures (and not to mention rendering them extinct). We are also invited to reflect on the status of the museum and why these 19th-century cabinets don't appear to have changed much since they were built over one hundred years ago.

Deruytter's people in this book are often "somewhere else" and these images are a reminder that "reality" isn't a given but a construction manufactured by people who imagine



and realize the impossible. As social beings, we all live our lives somewhere between fantasy and reality and these images unabashedly appreciate that these fantasies don't have to be slavish copies of contemporary style magazines.

Deruytter's book suggests that anyone can fantasize and in fact, most of us do this without even conscious of it, even if it manifested in dressing up to go clubbing. Deruytter's book gives us permission to be idiosyncratic, to pursue our own passions whilst being acutely aware of the fact that we are being viewed by others. Even the animals in the portraits – of Gaucho the falcon, the pure bred stallions and the Saluki dogs – seem to be saying "look at me".

Knights of the Impossible ultimately represents the antithesis of an unthinking acceptance of how things are. In some ways this book is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's phrase "*It is we who put the life into stones and pebbles*". Decorous, slightly wistful and far removed from the crudeness, complexity, and conflicts of everyday life, the subjects in this book are all part of a kind of performance. Even the Native Americans dressed as rodeo cowboys are performing some kind of fantasy of macho invincibility, although this may only last for eight seconds or so. Deruytter seems to be saying that everyone should live like this once in a while, whether this means running away to the circus or dressing up as aesthetes from the 19th century.

TEXT: SIOBHAN WALL
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