

CHEERFUL YET SOMEWHAT TRAGIC

WOUTER DERUYTTER

LIKES TO SEE HIMSELF AS TINTIN

In New York, Wouter Deruytter lived among the top 'drag queens'; in Egypt he discovered charming little circuses; with the artistic duo McDermott and McGough from New York, he lived in the past. Small and odd little worlds within this world are documented in sober black and white photographs. This classic purity enhances the peculiarity of it.

What seems to be staged is real. This is the reality that Wouter Deruytter explores. The 29 years old photographer travels from one pole to another. Extremes meet each other spontaneously. The images are serene and extravagant, cold and passionate, cheerful yet tragic. They search for the surreal and show the world as it has rarely been seen before. A world where everything is authentic and pure.

Wouter Deruytter likes to see himself as Tintin. He travels around and lives an adventurous life. From his home base in Roeselare, where he lives with his parents, he continuously travels between East and West. Through contacts and encounters, he goes from one adventure into another. As a student at the Academy in Ghent, he started to talk to Keith Haring at a preview exhibition. Portraits taken by Deruytter and afterwards painted by Haring show their playful collaboration. He thought that his series of nudes showed the perfect boy and the perfect girl. That is why he asked Dille, fat Dille whose reputation he was acquainted with, to pose nude. And that is how he got introduced to the world of drag in Brussels. Just when a famous New York drag queen was performing there: Jem Jender, the ballet dancer. For his finals, he went underground in Brussels nightlife for two years, photographing the edges of the city. 'The most beautiful of Brussels is its ugliness' is the subtitle of his photo book, 'Brussels...?', published in 1990. The introduction was written by Maurice Béjart, whose ballet company was photographed by Wouter during rehearsals and performances.

CHEERFUL REBELLION

The young photographer is no longer interested in the perfect beauty. From now on, he digs the beauty out of the ugly, the extreme, the eccentric. The year that he studied in New York at the International Center of Photography, he penetrated the glitter and glamour world of drag queens. He photographed these queens of disguise during their wild and exclusive parties. But Wouter Deruytter never limits himself to showing magnificent highlights. He exposes all aspects of his subjects. In portraits, taken at their homes where they usually live like men, their vulnerability is touching. The series 'Transgenderism'

ends with photographs of transvestites in full glory, on Wall Street, in Central Park, in a church, ... The sudden out-of-place situation causes strange yet funny clashes. He participated as the only Belgian photographer in the production of a book, inspired by Jem Jender. 'Drag Diaries', translated into Dutch as 'Drag, de wereld van de travestie', was published late 1995 and is already out of print. The word 'drag' – originally meaning the train of a gown – has become common knowledge now, and is fully commercialized. Above all, Wouter Deruytter saw a rebellion in it, an optimistic rebellion filled with humor. Now that the edge has been taken off this rebellion, the chapter is dosed for him.

THE COMPRESSED TIME

The student years were a perfect alibi for networking. Now the result is convincing and the work speaks for itself. His dealer in New York is Harry Lunn, who also supported Robert Mapplethorpe from the early years on. He also distributes the photographs of David McDermott (1952) and Peter McGough (1958). The two inseparable friends experiment with time. 'Every time period exists at the same time', is their motto. Not only do they paint and photograph like in the past, they consequently also live in the past. In the mountains outside of New York, they live in the eighteenth century, with a horsedrawn carriage. In their house in the East Village, they live in 1800: no electricity or telephone. Time goes on to the thirties, where they live in an old bank building in Brooklyn.

Wouter Deruytter has been following them for several years. They crossed the Atlantic on old cruise ships like dandies of olden days. He captured them while they were taking photographs with their old camera in Paris and Ireland. He does not ask for a pose, he does not stage, yet at times he suggests an environment. He always lets people lead their sometimes very odd lives. Photographs like the Romeo and Juliet scene or the above artistic duo reflected in an eighteenth century mirror are not prearranged. The success of a photograph also depends on coincidences. 'But it does not work only by coincidence', says Wouter Deruytter, 'you also have to provoke it'.

The series 'Anachronism Abroad' were to be completed by 1997, for the exhibit in the Museum of Modern Art in Ostend. At present, the first episode can be seen in Amsterdam, and a sequel will be presented in Antwerp.

NEW ADVENTURES

Wouter Deruytter likes bringing back the past, which unfortunately gets caught up with the new too fast. 'I want to show that we can create our own little worlds, without participating in what the world is doing to itself', he says. Fascinated by the beauty of decay, he photographs dilapidated cemeteries wherever he goes. Possibly

this will result in a new series. Everything needs to stay pure and authentic, including the photography, rather inspired by the past. The negatives are printed almost entirely without further treatment. It starts with a documentary record and ends in penetrating images.

While teaching in Cairo and working for an Egyptian choreographer, he was touched by the small and somehow improvised circuses rising up next to mosques during big parties.

Bearing Tintin in mind, he likes to see his photographs publicized as if they were cartoons, with always a new adventure. The small catalogue 'Circus in Egypt' is inspired by English circus programs of the fifties. However the motives around these pictures are Egyptian hieroglyphs.

CROSS-POLLINATION

Circuses are a marginal phenomenon in Egypt. They are forbidden, especially in larger cities. Wouter Deruytter searched for the shabby circuses in the most remote corners of the country. They are an odd mixture of East and West. The shooting galleries look like unreal structures, army-inspired. Often you can see a metal doll on a helmet in front of a wire fence. Everything is strewn with small bombs, as if they were paper balls. The only prize you can get is the noise of the explosion. Again, not only the performances are photographed here, but also the acrobats practicing in narrow streets, or father and daughter rehearsing in their living room with their snakes. The tricks are modest and that makes them charming: acrobats, the girl in the vase, the cow with five legs, ...

He may find the great show with Siegfried and Roy, two magicians living with their tigers in their house outside Las Vegas. Their Rolls Royce is full of scratches, apparently from the tiger claws. 'These are theatrical worlds', says Wouter Deruytter, 'I always feel at home there. But I do not leave for a country in order to search for something. I take photographs coming from my stomach. And then afterwards, I notice that it is always all about cross-pollination: between a man and a woman, the present and the past, East and West.'

Christine Vuegen, Kuntsbeeld, 1996