

DIRK

BRAECKMAN



Dirk Braeckman, *L.V.-V.L.-(3)*, 2016, courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

By Grete Simkutė

It is a 'wet dream', a 'victory for Belgian photography', and above all, 'a new beginning'; the expectations of Dirk Braeckman, the artist chosen for the Belgian Pavilion, are high. His initial impulse to pull out all the stops with tons of work ('it is a circus, after all') has now been put aside. 'My work is quiet. I will remain true to myself.'

Slow to Develop

His photographs are generally grey and half-dark, blurry and vague, strange to the point of puzzling. And yet Braeckman (born in 1958), deemed the godfather of contemporary photography in Flanders by many, is one of the most successful artists in the land. So successful, in fact, that he and Eva Wittocx (born in 1975), his partner-in-crime and curator of Leuven's Museum M, were picked last year by the Flemish Minister of Culture and a jury as Belgium's representative for the Venice Biennale in 2017.

For years he had been dreaming about having a solo exhibition in the Belgian Pa-

vilion in the Giardini, says Braeckman in his studio in Ghent. The symmetry, the beautiful incidence of light, the atmosphere. Yet he had momentarily considered dropping the whole idea in the beginning. The Flemish selection procedure, which had been different than usual this time, was quite an ordeal. Instead of an appointment by a committee, there was an open call for artists and curators to pair up and submit a dossier. 'I have been at this for thirty years; suddenly it was like I had to take an exam', says Braeckman. Later on, a press announcement that the jury preferred 'a proposal with a positive and beautiful message' cau-

sed a total cramp in the Flemish art scene. At that moment, right after the attacks in Brussels and Paris, everybody was very concerned about Belgium's image. But you do not actually say something like that. 'An artist is not an advertising agency that works on commission', said Braeckman to Belgian magazine *Knack* at the time.

Nevertheless, he really wanted to do this, and by now he has put that behind him ('let us just say it was a beginner's mistake'). At present he would rather concentrate on what is ahead. Together with Wittocx, who among other things curated his retrospective exhibition in Museum M



Dirk Braeckman, *H.M.-H.P.-11*, 2011, courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

in Leuven in 2011, Braeckman wants his exhibition to be a response to the daily merry-go-round of glaring images and the cursory glances that they elicit. 'Subconsciously, though', because Braeckman does not really go in for discourse. He does not stick to a story with a theme or narrative anecdotes. 'That is why you [the press - ed.] find it so difficult to write about my work. This is not a criticism, mind you, just a conclusion; I offer very little to go by in terms of content.' He prefers to erase everything that 'leads to a story': place, date, images of people (shadowy and vague, never portraits) who remain anonymous; a hushed oeuvre recognizable by its large formats, dominance of black-and-white,

austere interiors, occasionally a nude. 'I do not want to steer you in any direction when it comes to deciphering an image. Maybe I actually want to make things that you cannot decipher at all. This does give cause for misunderstandings, though. How often have people asked me if I am "feeling okay" and if I am "really so depressed". People always think that I suffer a great deal.'

Braeckman's work is about plasticity, formal composition, texture; he manipulates photographic parameters such as the frame, the fleetingness of a 35mm shot, the calligraphy of black-and-white or colour, the light. Rather than being a concrete representation of reality (which is

what people usually expect of photography, after all) the work sooner suggests an impression or experience of that reality. In that sense, his images sometimes seem similar to paintings; they require a slow gaze, patience. Although an evolution cannot be explicitly indicated in his work (Braeckman works in a continuous whole, sees his oeuvre as a 'total work of art'), Wittocx notes that his experiments in the darkroom may be more important now than ever. The artist is known for using brushes and sponges to spread the developer across the paper in strokes and areas and manipulating the surface with various sources of light.

'You can see this as a reaction to the emergence of the new media, as a result



Dirk Braeckman, 27.1 / 21.7 / 026, 2014, courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

‘My tools just happen to be the camera, film and the darkroom; that is what I know how to use. It is not prompted by nostalgia’



Dirk Braeckman, E.N.-C.K.-12, 2013, courtesy of Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

of which everybody suddenly thinks they are a photographer and we are now living amongst a kind of bombardment of images. But again, this is not a conscious strategy’, says Braeckman. ‘I have always worked in an analogue manner, so I have actually just carried on doing what I always did. My tools just happen to be the camera, film and the darkroom; that is what I know how to use. It is not prompted by nostalgia, which is what many people think. In recent years I have also occasionally used digital tools, but there I miss the slowness of the process, the mystery. When you photograph digitally, you immediately see the results on your screen. When you photograph on film, you have no idea of what it is going to look like exactly. I like to be surprised by coincidences, which I sometimes provoke. I also need that distance, that time: sometimes a film will be lying around for years before it gets developed. Playing with negatives in

the darkroom, the printing process: it is a physical story that unfolds organically. My image does not exist until it is printed on paper.’

Recently Braeckman has also, wherever possible, stopped making print runs; sometimes he makes several unique prints from a single negative. ‘I manipulate one image in a variety of ways and sometimes show the results together, sometimes separately. In doing so, I want to put the focus on the value of the image itself and reemphasize that I am not interested in a story, but in the image I am presenting.’ The fact that he will shortly be stealing the show with some thirty of his (mostly new) large-format works in the Biennale is something that Braeckman sees as a victory for Belgian photography, although he does feel it necessary to add that he has always been more involved in the world of visual art than in the photography scene. ‘In the nineties, the medium of photography was

very popular; when you went to an art fair, seventy percent of it was photographic work. In the last ten or fifteen years, photography took a real blow because painting came back again. I know that period well; in that time there was less demand for my work, both commercially and in terms of exhibitions. For a while now, it has been an upward trend again.’

Last summer he had a well-received solo exhibition at ROSEGALLERY in Los Angeles; people from the film world, the Getty Museum: they all want to ‘do something with Braeckman’. Wittocx says that ‘being in the Biennale is coming at a good time for boosting Dirk’s career to a higher level. From an international point of view, he has always had a loyal but small audience. Because of its physical nature, his work needs to be seen and experienced in person.’ Braeckman adds: ‘I would rather not peak too quickly, that is not my style: I am slow to develop. But everything does make me feel that this is the right time and the right place. My doubts and the critical voice in my head are more motivating now than anything else.’

As for Wittocx, this is not the first time she has accompanied an artist to the high mass of the art world in Venice. In 2001, she went as the right hand of Jan Hoet, curator for Luc Tuymans at the time. Asked about that experience, she says: ‘Luc’s exhibition had a very clear theme: Belgian colonialization. The first matter of importance was the concept. Months in advance, we knew which works we were going to exhibit and where they would be hung. With Dirk, everything will change seventeen times. We are going to Venice now, weeks before the start of the Biennale, and the layout will come together there, an organic, slow process – actually, just like how he creates his work.’ As a curator you end up with a slightly schizophrenic line of reasoning, she continues. ‘You have to constantly remain well aware that you are only a small part of a very large whole. On the one hand you “just want to make a good show” that stands on its own, the way you would in a museum, and on the other hand, in the back of your mind you are always comparing it to what is going on in the other fifty pavilions. How will Dirk’s work come across to viewers who have never heard of him? You want to show as much as possible of his work, naturally, but we are doing this through diversity, not quantity, with a selection of strong images. There is already so much to experience at the Biennale; your senses get overloaded. We want to present a purified whole, be a point of rest.’

This is not boring in the least, by the way; there is no drama in Braeckman’s work but there certainly is not a lack of (restrained) tension. Although he often questions and comments on the meanings ascribed to his oeuvre in the media, Braeckman has often said that there is one description of his images, by Luc Sante, that seems most suitable to him: ‘unexploded bombs’. ‘You feel the tension, but nothing is happening.’ The Belgian Pavilion as the eye of the storm.

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