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## *Tableaux of Drawn-out Time*

A conversation between Dirk Braeckman and Eva Wittocx

*Dirk Braeckman has been an artist for over thirty years now, practicing the medium of photography. His work reflects on images today, how we consume them, and on the medium itself. Braeckman does not view his work as documenting fragments of reality: the creative process is drawn out, from taking the photograph to making the gelatin silver print in the darkroom and ultimately presenting his monumental work to the viewer in the exhibition space. We talked to Dirk Braeckman about the specific identity of his work and the kind of images he allows to emerge.*

When did you first become interested in art and photography?

I went to the academy with the intention of becoming a painter. A friend advised me to spend a year studying photography first. A lot of emerging artists—Gerhard Richter and Ed Ruscha, for instance—were using photographs as their raw material in that period, the late seventies. I'd never actually held a camera before I started the course. I learned how to do analogue photography and how to make black and white prints in the darkroom. Thirty years on, I'm nowhere near done with the medium: analogue photography actually fascinates me now more than ever. It continues to challenge me, and I can still see endless possibilities in it.

You found a style of your own in the late 1980s. You present a subject in ways that divulge something, while simultaneously holding a great deal back. Places, individuals and events can't be pinned down. What role is played by the subject matter you select?

The subject is extremely important to me in the process of creation. For the viewer, by contrast, the subject I capture with the camera and then work on in the darkroom doesn't matter. What's crucial to me is the image: I'm not a narrator; I don't tell stories. To be able to make images, I photograph things immediately around me, the places I go, my living environment, my friends, the places I visit. So, in that sense, there's an autobiographical side to my work. I look for good shots—fragments of the world around me that I can register in a picture. I then take them into the darkroom and start working on the negatives. I worked as a portrait photographer for a while after my training at the academy. The general assumption is that a good portrait is one where the sitter looks into the lens and connects with the viewer; all the attention is drawn to the eyes.

I find that gaze too emphatic, too controlling: I was actually able to register more, to give the image greater openness, by having the sitter look away, averting their face or body from the lens. When I left the academy in the mid-eighties, I moved to New York, just as every young artist dreams of doing. I began to photograph what I saw around me, the nightlife I experienced, in a more spontaneous way. I found a book there by a Belgian author and teacher called Luc Sante, who had lived in New York for years. It was a collection of crime scene photos used as evidence by the police. What made the biggest impression on me were the pictures without dead bodies—with just a few traces; seemingly trivial places recorded in pin-sharp detail. I was also confronted by my own response to the images and by the attraction or beauty of these morbid locations where a crime had been committed. There was a crucial latency, which is what I increasingly began to pursue in my own images—a kind of charged void, a certain suggestion, paying attention to what isn't present. What can an empty space evoke? There's a quote too that I like to borrow from Luc Sante, who described my images as 'unexploded bombs'—still, yet full of tension, energy and stories, all on the brink of bursting out.

The art world discovered your work in the early nineties. You made the cross-over from the photography circuit to the world of visual art when Jan Hoet invited you to hold your first exhibition at the Vereniging voor het Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst (Society for the Museum of Contemporary Art) in Ghent in 1995. Your work was presented there in a new context, alongside paintings and sculptures. Your images also became more monumental. The format was very different from that of regular photographers right from the beginning.

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As the eighties progressed, I got a bit frustrated with working in small trays in the darkroom. I was looking for something more physical and tactile, so I began to produce more and more large prints. I built myself a big darkroom in which I could spend a lot of time and move around easily. More a studio, in fact, than a technical space. It can take me a while sometimes before I get down to work. Waiting is like a ritual: waiting for the moment when it happens and I end up making as many as ten prints in a night. Working in the darkroom is crucial to my practice: it's there that my images are really created, even though you obviously can't produce good work from a bad negative. What I most want to achieve with the medium of photography is scale, surface texture and the density of the visual elements. And that all requires a physical approach. I'm not that interested in the technical side. I've never read a camera manual—I learn by doing. Even when I was at the academy, I attempted to manipulate the medium, to make it do what I wanted so I could visually translate my ideas. I like to have a physical relationship with the image. I don't produce documentary photographs or windows onto reality: in my case, the image itself is a reality, an object on the wall. The result is a tableau. Most of my works are large and are never mounted behind glass. The sense of the matt, fragile and tactile photographic paper is part of the experience.

While using the medium, you simultaneously reflect on it. This isn't a window onto reality: viewers can see it's a photograph. You actively use the camera flash as an element in the construction of the image. The reflected flash is part of the autobiographical aspect of my work: it makes me present in the image, shows that I was 'there', 'then'. It adds a kind of different space or layer—something I bring into the image. It's no longer purely an image: the flash explicitly makes it an image of an object—which isn't an image any more. It emphasizes the materiality and becomes part of my new image.

Does your work also reflect on the status of the image?

We're overloaded with images nowadays, not least online, via the internet, social media and advertising. My images aren't seductive in the way that they can be taken in at a glance. They demand slowness, a patient gaze that allows time to let the image sink in. It's true that my work runs counter to the constant flood of images, but it's not a direct reaction against it. I was working on this supposed response long before there was any question of a digital image revolution. Working on an analogue basis with unique images that resist instant consumption has been my main tool for thirty years now, and is more relevant today than ever. Digital photography fascinates me as well: I'm not against it as a way of creating images and I too can see the many possibilities it offers. Analogue and digital photography sometimes interact in my practice, although digital photography isn't a tool I've mastered to the extent that it has become my own language. Analogue photography is an organic process, from the film roll to developing and printing negatives with chemicals on baryta paper. Digital photography is purely mechanical. My images are the result of a slow process, and you can sense that inherently. I work with rolls of film, which I develop and then print myself on paper in my darkroom. It's not out of nostalgia: film and prints are simply the tools that I've mastered and with which I've developed my visual language. I also use digital techniques in my work, but that doesn't lead as readily to the desired result.

You shoot onto rolls of film. Could you describe the process? At what point do you take the negatives into the darkroom? How do you archive the material you've shot?

After I've taken the pictures, the negatives often lie around for months, if not years. Only after some time has passed do I head into the darkroom with them. I made a new image yesterday from a two year-old negative. A certain distance helps you see the quality of the composition; it's easier for me then to choose from among the negatives. The memories or emotions I had at the moment I took them have disappeared. I sometimes ask for other people's advice about new images; the fact that they weren't there when the picture was taken makes them more objective. I then take several negatives into the darkroom and create the print. The precise cropping or composition is almost always determined when the photograph is taken. That's when I frame the content, and this choice strongly determines the final image: what falls inside and outside of it. It was common in photography in the 1970s to include the black edge of the negative in the print, as proof that this was the entire frame or 'reality'. That kind of thing leaves me cold.

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You've been working in your darkroom for thirty-five years now. While experimentation is a central focus for you, surely all that experience means that you're now more in control of the process. Presumably you know what actions on your part will lead to what result.

I definitely don't have a sense that I can control everything: I'm always receptive to accidents and I like to challenge myself. But I'm obviously learning more all the time about how the film and the paper might react. When I'm taking a photograph, I sometimes think about what I might be able to do with it in the darkroom, how the print might turn out. Generally, though, it's fair to say that I have no idea what's going to happen in the darkroom. You could say that waiting is an important element of my practice: the time given to the work, or which seeps into it, is also inherently recognizable in a sense in the final result. The same goes for when I shoot the photographs. Whenever I spend time somewhere, I often wait until the last moment and take photos just before I leave. Likewise, when I'm photographing people: in many cases, I find myself waiting until a certain fatigue sets in. I've had chance by that time to absorb the atmosphere of a location or situation, which means I can take the right picture. The first impression is often overwhelming: I can only get a good shot once I've taken everything in.

\*As you said earlier, your work is autobiographical in a sense: you photograph your immediate surroundings. But there are recurring elements too, such as doors, curtains, glimpses of other spaces and frames. Isn't it fair to say that there are certain fixed subjects that draw your attention?\* My work is autobiographical in the sense that I don't have to travel to be able to take photographs; I don't go out looking for subjects or locations to shoot. I almost always have a small analogue camera in my pocket, in case anything strikes me. I don't stage the photographs; and I rarely move around physically to choose different angles. First and foremost, I'm trying to determine the precise composition: which details to include in the image and which to exclude. To me, selecting a fragment of reality is a significant intervention and a form of staging in itself. The choice of location is largely decisive. What attracts me to these subjects relates subconsciously to the way I divulge and withhold information. Doors and windows represent the same kind of showing, covering, concealing, suggesting, and so on that I want to achieve in my work. They give something away, but they also cover something up. Spaces like that are the biotope in which I live and work. I regularly use existing images too—reproductions of other places. I was in Poland a while ago, taking a walk in a magnificent landscape. When I got back to the hotel, I spotted a tourist poster of the spot where I had just been walking. In that situation, I prefer to photograph the poster rather than the reality; I want to reconstruct, to rephotograph the image that already exists. The expression *huis clos* does seem applicable to my work: behind closed doors and windows; sealed spaces full of suggestion. It also fits in with a certain Belgian—possibly surrealist—tradition.

Photography is the medium par excellence for the multiple reproduction of images. In the early part of your career you used the same negative to make a variety of different prints—something you've been doing more frequently in more recent years.

I initially worked in a more expressionist manner—the German *Neue Wilden* painters were getting a lot of attention at the time. Nowadays, I work in a different, more subtle way. Each print is individual, unique. The same goes for works that form a series: to me, each one is a different image, even if they are all based on the same negative. I sometimes show those works separately, sometimes together.

The signature of your work might be described in formal terms as registering indefinable places in combination with a black and white style that includes countless grey tones. How do you achieve all these nuances between black and white?

It arises from the way I have worked since the very beginning: by experimenting in the darkroom. Technically, it's a combination of how I shoot the subject, how I develop the films and how I expose the photographic paper when printing. In the darkroom I use different light sources to over- or underexpose the print, and extra kinds of tools, such as brushes, dust and different chemicals to disturb and control the process of developing. All these factors together define the grey tones. The dark tones seem to conceal things, yet at the same time they are inviting, they let in light... It all draws the viewer into the image. That's what I aim to achieve. To me, colour photography is essentially a different medium, with a

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different way of looking and thinking. What's more, I started out in black and white, where I could do everything myself in the darkroom, where you can work with light and see and manipulate the image as it appears on the paper. It's a different process to colour photographs.

The images remain very open and, in a sense, subjective.

I never comment on my images; supplying anecdotes destroys them. The story dissipates the power or magic. That's also the reason I don't give my work titles, just a code for archive purposes. It's also significant that the date of each work records the moment the print was made in the darkroom. Unlike most photographers, I don't date them by the moment of recording. For me, the element of creation occurs primarily in the darkroom: that's where my work arises. It obviously takes a good shot and negative to make a successful print, but in my case what comes next is even more decisive.

How does an exhibition come about? How do you choose which works can combine and intensify one another in an exhibition space?

I find it quite a difficult process; it's hard to make choices. How to show enough, how to create space, how combinations interact. Setting up an exhibition is a critical moment. It's the one part of my work that I'm willing to do in collaboration with someone else. I like to work entirely on my own when taking the photographs and printing them. But when it comes to exhibiting them, I'm looking for feedback and dialogue, because I'm much too close myself to my work. Sometimes, you bring two works together that create a story you may or may not want to permit. The links grow more complex as more works are included. Specific combinations determine the magic of a good presentation. These combinations are an inherent part of my practice, in which I don't work thematically, but where everything is part of a single continuum. I see my entire body of work as a single piece. I can choose among all my existing works for each exhibition. For the show at M – Museum in Leuven in 2011, for instance, we showed a selection from a period of twenty-five years, including several new works. It's always important to me to mix works from different periods, to forge connections.

The Belgian Pavilion in the Giardini in Venice is an architecturally striking setting. How are you approaching this exhibition and how do you see the relationship with the Biennale context?

I'm focusing on new work for the Belgian Pavilion in Venice. But I also want to present a few earlier images, which give my work a kind of context or basis—key images that can enter a dialogue with the new compositions. The architecture of the Belgian Pavilion is magnificent—the way the space is arranged, for instance, and the lighting. It's long been one of my favourite exhibition spaces. I've been to Venice many times, and the Giardini in particular and the Belgian Pavilion have always had an especially powerful attraction for me. I photographed the surroundings years ago, including the stone figures scattered around the park, partially damaged and virtually unnoticed. Since I was selected for the 2017 event, I've been looking more closely at the history of the city and making connections with my own interests. I've been exploring several options, that might or might not be included in the final selection. My way of working is similar to the invitation I received from the BOZAR – Centre for Fine Arts in 2013 to interact with the Antoine Watteau exhibition. In that case, I decided to photograph fragments of paintings by Watteau in different collections and to combine them in a new composition. Watteau himself was a painter who often reused and recombined sketches and figures—a kind of Photoshop avant la lettre. He also made new compositions and new stories with different, existing figures. Several connections to Venice might appear in the more recent works, although these connections are mostly important to myself. Although I view my work as a continuum, it is also informed by external impulses—exhibitions, locations and invitations. What I most want to achieve is to create powerful tableaux, and a subject with an underlying connection with Venice is a good prompt for that. Above all, I want the exhibition to be true to the way I work. It will be on the sober and stripped-down side, a little out of step perhaps with the huge, overwhelming spectacle of most of the Venice Biennale.

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