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BART MICHIELS

Bart Michiels (born Diest, Belgium, 1964, living and working in New York) shows in the series *The Course of History* beautiful, pure landscapes which were once the worst battlefields in history. These photos are posing questions about territory, memory, and history. Recently he had a big show at the Foley Gallery in New York and his solo exhibition at the Fifty One Fine Art Photography Gallery in Antwerp will take place from April, 27th until June, 23 2006. His work is held in the permanent collection of the Fotomuseum in Antwerp, le Musée de la Photographie in Charleroi and in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

by Saskia Ooms

Saskia Ooms: Where did the idea for the series “*The Course of history*” come from?

Bart Michiels: Well, I think it had very much to do with the fact of living abroad in the US, away from my home country for some 13 years, at a crucial time in history : the new millennium and the ‘so-called’ presidential elections of 2000.

I started thinking more about the difference between the two continents in regards to their domestic and international policies and attitudes towards war : multilateralism of the EU and the new unilateralism of the Bush administration.

When you live abroad for a long time, develops a desire for reconnection to the homeland : could I still consider myself Belgian or European, after being absent from all the historical changes that took place in Europe during the 90’s : Berlin Wall, The Balkans, EU policies and the euro.

I believe that the experience of the horror of the world wars in Europe still has an underlying influence on daily life and politics in Europe, even if it is dwindling with each generation, something which you can see in a more modest attitude of Europeans towards things in life.

At the same time I was reading a lot of literature on war related subjects, the rise of western power, etc. It helped me identify the seeds of war and see the connection with today’s events, since all that happens today, has happened before in some sort of form (l’histoire se répète).

So, in a way to reconnect – in looking for my roots with Europe – I focused on the war experience and the recurring nature of it. Were all those battles part of something larger, something that identifies us today? Is war inevitable and part of the natural process of being human, a necessary evil?

The title of this project could be interpreted in three ways : “Course” meaning a series of lessons, a path, or development and an area of land or a field.

S. O.: Your photographs are depicting beautiful peaceful landscapes, which at one point in time were the scene of the worst battlefields in Europe (which are mentioned in the title, date). Can you explain to us your view on the memory and the history of war and its consequences on these landscapes?

B. M.: With the absence of evidence of battle that is particular in these photographs, it is what we don’t see that I’d like to evoke, what happens to a place when it is stripped of the very subject it is infamous for. They are somehow unremarkable landscapes that rely for a great deal on the viewer’s knowledge or memory of their history.

With this absence of evidence is also our loss of memory. Without the evidence, we have no reference and these landscapes are perceived as idyllic places, the opposite of their historical and violent past.

The perception and understanding of images that depict territory depends on the evidence and knowledge we have of it.

Words like Verdun, Monte Cassino or Waterloo will evoke different meanings to different people.

With the absence of evidence of battlefields in my photographs I challenge the viewers memory of it. In order to bring back evidence and reference into the image (the titles of the photographs are helpful), I look for features and artifacts in the landscape that could be read as testimonial metaphors.

S. O.: How do you proceed? Which places do you choose and why? Do you undertake a preliminary reading on the specific battlefield before you go?

B. M.: One criteria I had for choosing the sites was that the battle had to be a turning point in a war and so also in history. What if the outcome of a battle would had been different? The other was more about casualty quota, places where a lot men died. At Cannea the Roman Legions suffered a terrible defeat with a loss of 45000 men killed in one day, but the battle did not bring down the Republic in the end. Waterloo was a battle that ended an era and empire and so the course of history.

I read a fair amount of literature about the campaigns and battles, studying maps to find specific locations and trying to understand the landscape before I see it.

Sometimes, I go back to the same place and shoot during a different season, seeing the place under different conditions.

And often, after the first visit to a battlefield I indulge in more reading about the battle. After reading the whole book on Monte Cassino, I am going back this spring for a more profound survey of the battlefield.

From the beginning, I started to see a pattern that was similar in many battlefields, especially in the ones on the Western Front of WWI, one of a sloping hill that had to be taken for strategic reasons (the high ground).

And those were also the sites where most casualties fell (Verdun, Le Mort Homme, The Somme, Usna Hill, The Hindenburg Line,..).

It was this framing (placing the horizon in the middle) that I wanted to follow as much as I could. In others, I turned the camera to the ground, eliminating a horizon, and evocating a contemplative way of looking down at the 'sacred' ground.

Since these landscapes were mostly without evidence of the battle that took place (a fact I was very well aware of and used as a starting point for the series), I needed to bring something back into it. Features like tractor tracks, a crater or a depression in the ground, would become references or metaphors for the battle.

The tracks in the wheat field of Le Mort Homme could be tanks tracks. Mud was omnipresent during the battle of Paschendaele in 1917¹ and severely hindered operations (Tyne Cot#1) and the fog surrounding Monastery Hill at Monte Cassino could be seen as the smoke of the bombing barrage on the monastery.

S. O.: Do you want to express in these landscapes that they marked an important strategic territory in the past: a territory whose significance was based on war and human occupancy?

B. M.: Foremost, I wanted to reconnect with these places since I saw them as part of my identity and heritage. I grew up and lived where many soldiers fell and died. The strategic value of the battlefield is not the essence of the work or at least the starting point of it.

But I know I am not alone in this experience, it is the collective experience of all Europeans.

S. O.: Do you feel your photos function as a memorial or on the contrary do they imply that the wars have been senseless?

B. M.: Of course, one can say that war is senseless, but that would be a simplistic statement.

I don't know if they are senseless. Cruel, violent, depriving, heart-wrenching, yes.

I think starting one is senseless, definitely an ideological one. Finishing one is not.

The subject is very complex of course, especially in the light of current events, post 9/11.

What interests me more is the question of how much war, with its recurring or repetitive nature, is imbedded in our genes. Do humans resort to war because something went wrong, or just the opposite, because it is the only rightful way of nature and that evil is inherent in man's nature?

I could have named the title of my work : The Course of Natural History or The Natural Course of History .

In this way, my photographs are a memorial to the repetitive character of war throughout our history.

S. O.: From the very beginning of photography war scenes have always been pictured. (Roger Fenton in The Crimean war, La Commune de Paris, The Civil War, to name a few examples).

¹ These series are also known as Ypres.

Photography has always been an excellent medium to captivate the battlefields (much more precise than history painting). Sontag states in her book “Regarding the pain of others” on how we perceive the images of war. She declares: “The argument that modern life spoils our appetite on showing us the horrors of the war every day, is one of the keystones of the criticism on modernism , this argument is almost as old as modernism itself .(referring to Wordsworth, 1800 and Virginia Woolf 1938 etc.).²

The fact that the images of war are part of our daily routine in newspapers and on television is maybe less shocking today but is always troubling.

Your approach to these war scenes is of course a more conceptual one. The pictures are about the cruellest war scenes in history, however they show a serene pure landscape. If the viewer didn't read the titles, he wouldn't be confronted with the idea of war. Do you want to teach him a lesson (all you see is not what you get)?

B. M.: Though it is not my intent to be the teacher, I do like to bring up the subject of perception, of how we see things and in this case, nature. These serene landscapes possess also something dark. It is that nature is not as beautiful as it looks sometimes. Nature is cruel and evil, just like war, thus war is inherent in man's nature (reflecting Wordsworth). It's the ying and yang principle, the dichotomy of nature : beauty and evil. My approach comes from the loss of innocence in nature, and war as the loss of innocence of men.

So, yes, I guess I teach the viewer a lesson by challenging him about the interpretation of things, by putting beauty into question.

Joel Sternfeld (On this Site) comes to mind : “About the question of know- ability :...you never know what lies beneath a surface or behind a façade. Our sense of place, our understanding of photographs of the landscape is inevitably limited and fraught with misreading.”³

S. O.: Can you comment on the pictures of Paschendaele? Why are these series so important to you?

B. M.: Passchendaele, Verdun and The Somme was where the worst and most horrific of all battles of WW1 were fought. Passchendaele is the closest one to where I grew up and where my grandparents were from (witnesses of both world wars).

It is obvious then that this one embodies the idea of “returning to the roots” the most.

Again, we can speak of a dichotomy here : the fertile clay ground where I was born was also the scene where so many lives were taken. (unexploded shells and the bones of the fallen soldiers are still turning up in the land after 90 years).

The image of Passchendaele, Tyne Cot#1, recalls the images of the battlefield taken during the war. The land was deprived of all vegetation, becoming a sea of mud and blood pitted with shell craters containing fetid water and drowning many soldiers.

S. O.: You're a Belgian photographer who lives in New York, in your statement you declare that the difference between the two continents is the experience of war in one's own land. But after September 11 do you feel you can still say that the Americans haven't experienced war on their soil?

B. M.: They did experience a war on their soil : The Civil War.

What I meant was that the same generations on both continents experienced the two world wars differently because it was fought not only in Europe, but also not on American soil. After the 2nd WW, Europe experimented with a new idea to keep the peace, the US saw the rise of its military industrial complex dictating foreign policies to come.

The European experience of world war is one of invasion, occupation, terror, chaos, genocide, destruction and collapse of industries, hunger, refugees, atrocities, all effecting civilians immediately.

None of those terrible effects of war have been experienced by American civilians inside American territory since the Civil War.

In that sense, hurricane Katrina gave Americans a better taste of war than 9/11.

² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, Picador, 2003, p. 114.

³ *On This Site, Landscape in Memoriam*. Photographs by Joel Sternfeld, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, 1996.

9/11 was an act of terrorism, albeit a spectacular one, just like the world has witnessed over and over again. It wasn't also the first one on American soil (Oklahoma City, the first WTC bombing, and to be liberal about the definition of terrorism because I think this is terrorism too : the lynching of black people all the way up till the civil rights movement of the 1960's).

In comparison, 9/11 was more like Sarajevo, June 28, 1914. An event that, when badly/emotionally responding to it, could escalate into war. (Come to think of it, the twentieth century in Europe started with a Serbian crisis and ended with one.)

Again, all this can explain the different views between most US citizens and most Europeans on the Palestine/Israeli problem.

As I write this, the news on the radio tells me that the EU will continue support for the newly elected Hamas in Palestine despite the American reaction of disapproval of it.

S. O.: Your work reminds me of some contemporary photographers like Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright, do you feel close to their work? Which photographers have influenced you or which contemporary photographers do you regard highly?

B. M.: Simon's Norfolk's background is photojournalism which he developed into a documenting style later. His work is still closely connected to recent wars, conflicts and genocide, showing us direct proof of the remnants and the devastation of war (ruins, stockpiles of bombs and weapons). It's when the landscape is without trace of conflict or genocide that his work (the images (Crny Vrh) from his Bleed series) comes closer to The Course of History.

Simon wants to understand tomorrow by understanding today. I want to understand today by looking back at history , but we are both exploring the notion that evil brutality is inherent in man's nature, necessary for a greater good.

I think my photographs are closer to Joel Sternfeld's On this Site and Jem Southam's (Rockfalls Rivermouths Ponds) than to Simon's Norfolk's images when you talk about work that has influenced me. Simon Norfolk has not influenced me in fact.

Also, photographers like Richard Misrach, Stephen Shore, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Robert Adams and William Eggleston have all inspired me in the last 15 or so years with Walker Evans on top of that list.

S. O.: Are you working on new series now? What are you future projects?

B. M.: I will continue photographing more for The Course Of History and I am working on a project about New York City.

And there is always something new brewing in my head!

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A slide show of "The Course of History" will be presented at Tempio di Adriano (Piazza di Pietra) in the Film Festival in Rome (April/May 2006).
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