

non-linear storyline. Numerous versions of the tale are created and in essence, a cyclical and endless story.

Aitken's "interiors" is a contemporary meditation on the passage of time and narrative. Surrealistic images provide hauntingly beautiful scenarios, which converge suddenly and then disappear. The artist comments on "interiors" in the Henry Art Gallery press materials by saying, "it is about the idea of chaos and order, harmony and disharmony. It looks at how moments in time come together and then separate. It is a composition in the musical sense, like a piece of cacophonous music in which rare moments collide to create larger meanings. It is a piece about time."<sup>2</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Aitken, Doug. Excerpts from "Passengers" In Doug Aitken A-Z Book (*Fractals*). Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag Publishers, 2003.

2. Aitken, Doug. Media Release. "Doug Aitken: interiors" (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, 2005), p. 2.

## WAITING IN SILENCE BART MICHIELS: THE COURSE OF HISTORY

FOLEY GALLERY  
NEW YORK, NY  
FEBRUARY 10 - APRIL 2, 2005

SARAH STANLEY

*In the Cherry Tree's Branches a crunching of iron shoes.  
Summer foams up for you out of helmets. The blackish cuckoo  
with diamond spurs draws his image on to the gates of the sky.*

—from "The Cherry Tree's Branches" by Paul Celan

In this poem Paul Celan, the German-Jewish poet and survivor of Auschwitz, infuses the violence of war with the glories of the natural landscape. Bart Michiels, in his series of photographs entitled "Course of History" recently exhibited at the Foley Gallery in New York City, also makes use of this visual conundrum by photographing the stark natural beauty now found in former war-torn landscapes. The sites that he photographs were the worst killing fields of Europe. The photograph *Monte Cassino 1944, Monastery Hill* (2004), for example, depicts the site of a desperate six-month struggle to break the Gustav Line in the mountains of central Italy that left more than 350,000 men dead or wounded. Only the bloodbaths of Verdun and

Passchendaele and the worst fighting on the Eastern Front compared to Monte Cassino. *Omaha Beach 1944, Easy Red* (2003) refers to D-Day, June 6, 1944, the largest and most complex invasion in the history of warfare during which more than 3000 American men were killed or wounded along a three-mile strip of beach. Michiels' historical landscapes make use of the same remembered spaces as Joel Sternfeld's "On This Site: Landscape In Memoriam," photographs of ordinary places that have been emptied of their historical subject, such as the parking lot at Kent State or the roadside where Rodney King was beaten. Like Sternfeld, Michiels also uses accompanying text to fill in the details of the former event: "The dead, looking as young and strong as ever in their brand-new uniforms and web equipment, began to form an irregular dark line at the waves' edge."

What distinguishes Michiels' landscapes is the refinement of each photograph into a monochromatic image meditative in its stillness, reinforced by a strong horizon line that bisects each photograph. *Anzio, 1944, Yellow Beach* (2004) is a portrait of calm breakwater on the Italian beach on which British and American troops landed, while *Verdun, 1916, Le Mort-Homme* (2001) is a lush misty green, showing only trailer tracks in the grass while the rest of the photo is open sky. The photographs are printed large (28 x 33 inches), transforming them into a kind of memento mori, objects of contemplation that expand a sense of reality in ways that active combat photos could never achieve.

A native of Belgium living in New York City for the past decade, Michiels'



*Passchendaele 1917 Goudberg (original in color) (2005) by Bart Michiels*

European identity has been shaped by landscapes of war, the remnants and ruins that still mark the countryside where he grew up. He relates the existing landscape to the events of battle through allusions to battle's weather conditions or with happenstance traces that reference combat, such as holes dug into the sand at Omaha Beach, or the tractor tracks cleaving through an open field. It is the photographer himself that is the primary interlocutor, researching through his photographs how the European wars have shaped the histories of the western world. The dead can only be contacted through memorials and Michiels constructs a viewing platform onto these perpetual landscapes of war.

Susan Sontag's primary concern regarding witnessing the pain of others in war photography (as noted in her 2002 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*) is the futility of looking without the ability to help. Michiels' photographs release viewers from this crisis of conscience, urging us instead to consider the history of war as it continues to unfold in present times. The whole host of ineptitude, mania and constricted political objectives that has made war the norm rather than the exception is the real subject of the "Course of History." The exhibit beckons us to question the inevitability of war and where it is leading us. The human costs of war and the associated amnesia resemble Walter Benjamin's angel of history, propelled forward, unable to turn back and examine the carnage as it piles up behind her.

In Michiels' work the soldier's own written accounts fill in the reality of active combat. Accompanying *The Hindenburg Line 1918*, *The Knoll* (2003), Private Di Lucca, 42<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Division is quoted, "At dawn we got the order to go over the top. They come out of their trenches; we come out of our trenches. We met one another, faced one another like a bunch of animals." By actively giving names to the soldiers who fought in the battle, the anonymity usually associated with the fallen dead is reversed.

Roger Fenton was the first professional photographer sent to document the outcome of armed conflict during the Crimean War in 1855. Although most of his photographs were concerned with preserving the dignity of

battle, one photograph relates directly to the visual territory of Michiels' "Course of History" series. Fenton's *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855), shows a battle site where 600 soldiers were ambushed. Sontag refers to Fenton's image as "a portrait of absence, of death without the dead,"<sup>1</sup> noting that it was the only photograph he took that did not need to be staged for all it shows is the wide rutted road studded with rocks and cannonballs curving across a barren plain.

Michiels also offers us the void, landscapes filled with tall grasses, tiny white wildflowers or a recent snow in a wide-open countryside. The horrors that appear to have vacated Europe and migrated to other locations are reflected in the wide-open landscapes of the "Course of History." These landscapes appear too peaceful, emptied as they are of all references to battle, yet this stillness is a kind of waiting, waiting in silence for recognition. The battlefields long since returned to working farms

covered with the deep greens of fertile summers and golden harvests produce a tension between the ideal of perfection found in these vistas and the violence once committed there. Picturing the abiding state of nature reveals the gulf that will always remain between the earth's ecology and the ecology of war. The mechanisms of war—the machines that rip, tear, maim and murder—will always remain in direct opposition to all that sustains life on earth.

*He sleeps through the battle and summer, it is for him that the cherry bleeds...*

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SARAH STANLEY is the founder and director of Kleinblue Productions, a company that organizes conceptual photography projects with internationally exhibited photographers.

NOTE

1. Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2003, p. 50.

## "ANTHONY, COME TO DINNER" ANTHONY BURDIN

CCA WATTIS INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA  
APRIL 7 - MAY 14, 2005

EMILY KUENSTLER

Anthony Burdin's latest exhibition, at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, was not a show of discrete video works, but a four-room installation that used video in both TV monitor and wall sizes, and allowed the audio and visual to carry different messages, constituting interventions specific to the space itself. The warren of the Logan Galleries was transformed by Burdin's consistent treatment into a single whole. Arguably, he created a single, multi-roomed environmental piece. Caverns, organic in origin, appeared to have replaced the Wattis' contemporary "white box" facility. They were sparsely dressed with ambient lighting, props and two-dimensional artwork. Video occupied prosceniums large and small throughout, shrinking to a tiny monitor splashing on a full 30 x 20-foot wall, providing captivating scenes-within-scenes.

Burdin's video art is like 1960s Environment Art with Kenneth Anger's id. Its ambiguous self-consciousness (in the feel of Bruce Nauman) masquerades as art brut. (Reportedly, Burdin has lived in a 1973 Chevy Nova for most of the last 10 years.) Burdin creates a narrative resembling the bare essentials of a horror film, which is accompanied by rhythmic, whimpering sound and a high-level of chiaroscuro. He seamlessly uses the first-person handheld video camera, having nicely exploited its potential as personal companion. The use of remixes of popular music is intrinsic to his medium, as if he's fully deconstructed his attraction to 1970s culture, and is authentically living it out anew. The show is one of the freshest things I've seen recently because the work doesn't point at '70s culture or co-opt it for a superficial style boost, but exists in