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# BART MICHIELS

## An imaginary journey into the mirror of history

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By Federica Soletta

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**Bart Michiels**

*Kursk 1943, Prokhorovka, Hill 226.6, 2008*

42 x 50 inches

Chromogenic Print

Edition of 5

© Bart Michiels. Courtesy Foley Gallery



**Bart Michiels**  
*Austerlitz 1805, Stare Vinohrady*, 2010  
42 x 50 inches  
Chromogenic Print  
Edition of 5  
© Bart Michiels  
Courtesy Bart Michiels



**Bart Michiels**  
*Kursk 1943, Syrtsevo*, 2008  
42 x 50 inches  
Chromogenic Print  
Edition of 5  
© Bart Michiels  
Courtesy Bart Michiels





**Bart Michiels**  
*Hürtgenwald 1944, Wilde Sau*, 2010  
60 x 72 inches  
Chromogenic Print  
Edition of 3  
© Bart Michiels  
Courtesy Bart Michiels



**Bart Michiels**  
*Balaclava 1854, The Valley of Death*, 2008  
42 x 50 inches  
Chromogenic Print  
Edition of 5  
© Bart Michiels  
Courtesy Bart Michiels



**AT THE BEGINNING** of his internationally known essay on photography, *La Chambre Claire*, Roland Barthes expresses amazement for a picture of Napoleon's young brother: *Je vois les yeux qui ont vu l'Empereur!*<sup>1</sup> (3). This is the power that photography carries, according to Barthes: the ability to give the viewer access to another life, not represented in the picture itself, but nonetheless connected to its subject, like an open door. The power of photography, according to the French author, consists in the authentication of the past.

*The Course of History*, recently on view at the Foley Gallery, is a reprocessing of the Barthesian concept. The viewer, stands in front of a representation of an actual place marked by the violence of history. The photography of Bart Michiels, in his third solo exhibition at Foley, invokes the power of the past, showing only its scars. As a European, I am reminded of elements of my personal and collective identity by each of these places. In my mind these landscapes carry within them bloodbaths, murders, and bodies of the dead: the violent signs of war.

However, as we view these photographs, we find an apparent peace and silence. The entirely snow covered landscape of Austerlitz, as it probably looked in December of 1805 when Napoleon won his battle, communicates an extraordinary sense of calm. In front of these cold but quiet landscapes, it is evident that the subject of the picture does not recall its trauma, its legacy of a ferocious episode. On the contrary, the landscape's pain produces a link between the land's name and geography and consequently our relationship with history.

It is for this reason that, as a viewer who would like to appreciate the connection between visual evidence and memory, the choice of the gallery or the artist to not label the pictures puzzles me. The dramatic tension evoked by Michiels' search into his own roots is surely not only in geographic and historical memory or the poignant vision of the landscapes themselves, rather it is in the conflicting and surprising association of the two. Without knowing what places we are looking at or what these images represent, the imprint of the past is impossible to distinguish. This is Michiels' subtle and fine, perverse game.

Michiels' nine large-scale prints are devoted to the Eastern European battlefields of Russia and Germany. He focuses on the terrain, the undisputed protagonist. Just as Barthes saw the eyes of Napoleon in the photograph of his brother, I am looking at the same land that saw, received, and lived the brutality of the war. This show is an imaginary journey into the mirror of history.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I am looking at the eyes that saw the Emperor!

## WORK CITED

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Hill and Wang, New York, 2002.