

Battlefields without blood

A disturbing election result sent Bart Michiels on a journey to photograph what we can no longer see



How do we look at a historical site when its past has essentially disappeared? Can we use our imagination to capture that past? And what does it mean for our future?

Those questions were on the minds of the photographers featured in the Antwerp Photo Museum's challenging exhibition *Imaging History*, which shows – or just hides – the often horrible incidents of a bygone time. Because you often don't know what you are looking at until you read the titles, your perspective of the photos changes constantly.

Characteristic of this approach is the work of Bart Michiels, a

Flemish photographer who has spent half his life in New York. During the last decade, he visited European battlefields for the series *The Course of History* – an attempt to encourage viewers to remember and think about the consequences of war, about life and death and about our short memories.

Look at his work titled "Passchendaele 1917, Tyne Cot 2005". It's just an image of a muddy field, but knowing its past makes it so much more. "The clay stands for fertility and death," explains Michiels. "This is very fertile land. You can grow a lot on it. But even until today, the bones of the dead are still under there. There's no life without a shadow of death."

The mud also recalls the trenches of the First World War; the large format print makes it even more confronting.

Michiels' grandparents lived in the Westhoek region; his mother went to school in Ypres, and he spent his youth not so far from these "fields of honour". But it was only when he left that he felt a deeper meaning from those battlefield sites of home. "Living on the other side of the ocean gave me another perspective."

The weight of war

The election of George W Bush in 2001 in particular triggered a kind of identity crisis for the 47-year-old photographer. "All of a sudden I felt European again," he says. "It was clear the US government was giving up on multilateralism. For us Belgians, 'no more war' is no idle slogan. Certainly not after the Second World War. It meant we would cooperate with other countries to protect us from future conflicts. It looked like history was about to repeat itself, and we forgot about our history. But I couldn't explain this to my fellow Americans. It's just another mentality."

Michiels' reaction to this awkward feeling was extreme. He boarded a plane, then rented a car and drove to the most important European battlefield sites: Passchendaele, Waterloo, Poitiers, Lepanto, Marathon, Gallipoli, Stalingrad. He slept on the battlegrounds or in his car in order to work at dawn, when the light was at its best.

To select the sites, there were only two criteria: The battles must have had a decisive influence on European history or the human loss was extremely high. "Death had to be present," he explains. "But not on the images themselves. That would be too explicit. Sometimes the absence of atrocity is stronger than the presence."

Take the green grass fields Michiels shot in Verdun in north-eastern France. It's an unsettlingly serene image of a cruel fact. Could the lines in the field have been caused by armoured cars?

Sometimes it's the topography of the landscape that strikes Michiels, sometimes the surface texture or the sky. "My images of battlefields became harsher with time. The later pictures I took in Kursk, Russia, have darker tones and shades, sometimes black. I really felt the weight of that location."

What distinguishes the work of Michiels from other photographers in *Imaging History* is that it's less documentary, tending

even towards the abstract at times. "I don't have a photo journalist background, like, for instance, Simon Norfolk, who confronts us with more direct scenes of war."

Inspired by the photos John Burke took during the second Anglo-Afghan War more than 130 years ago, he travelled to Afghanistan to illustrate the impact of war on the Afghan people. The parallels between present warfare and 19th-century imperialism are indisputable. "Basically, we come to the same conclusion," says Michiels. "We move on from one war to another. We're not learning anything."

A world in a grain of sand

The work of Michiels, Norfolk and others was brought together by Flemish photographers Bruno Vandermeulen and Danny Veys. Their commission to take photos of the archaeological site of Sagalassos in south-western Turkey was fundamental to this exhibition, which they curated. Their non-conformist approach of interpreting the excavation instead of documenting it was new to the field.

As curators they went looking for colleagues with the same attitude towards photography. The site of Sagalassos reminds Michiels of the Greek battlefields. "For me those rocks and stones symbolised both the victims and the antiquity. I don't have to see a ruin; a field says enough."

The Last Measure series by American photographer Sally Mann, who displays dark images of the battlefields of the American Civil War, could evoke the same feelings as those of Michiels' European war sites, but the method and the impact are both very different. Mann applied the long-forgotten wet collodion process, a photographic technology that was used in the middle of the 19th century by Alexander Gardner, the most prominent photographer of the Civil War. This delicate technique with all its defects and imperfections makes the images look fragile and untamed, serving as a metaphor for the massacres.

Is war necessary to avoid something bigger? Michiels already asked this question as a student in the 1980s, when nuclear weapons were placed in Belgium under loud protest. "At that point, I started thinking about the relationship between Europe and America, and I never stopped."

Michiels plans to publish a book of his battlefield photos, and the 100-year commemoration of the First World War that begins in 2014 could offer him a chance to finally show his Passchendaele photos in a solo show. "It really is a history lesson delivered in a narrative and poetic manner," he says. "That's one of the meanings of *The Course of History*. Photography does not need to be 'educational'. But every new generation should at least gain some knowledge about the past."

Until 3 June

Imaging History

Photo Museum, Waalsekaai 47, Antwerp

www.fotomuseum.be

Tom Peeters

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