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FOLEYgallery



BART MICHIELS
THE COURSE OF HISTORY: THE MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE

He knew that the essence of war is violence, and that moderation in war is imbecility.

THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULY, "ESSAY ON LORD NUGENT'S MEMORIALS OF HAMPDEN", 1831



BART MICHIELS: THE MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE

By 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.

THE CHERRY TREE'S BRANCHES BY PAUL CELAN

In this poem Paul Celan, the German-Jewish poet and survivor of Auschwitz, joins the violence of war with the radiance of the natural landscape. Bart Michiels, in his series *The Course of History*, makes use of the same conundrum by photographing the stark natural beauty now found in former war-torn landscapes. The sites that he photographs were the worst killing fields in Europe. His photographs of the Garigliano River, Monte Lungo and Monte Cassino, Hill 593 are locations of the six-month struggle in 1943-44 to break the Gustav Line in the mountains of central Italy. Four battles were waged before the Allies were able to advance to Rome, leaving more than 350,000 men dead or wounded. Only the bloodbaths of Verdun, The Somme and the worst fighting on the Eastern Front compared with Monte Cassino.

"The Mediterranean Theatre," the latest installment of *The Course of History*, surveys the rivers, seas and mountains of the Mediterranean, the sites in Greece, Italy, Spain and Turkey that witnessed the most decisive battles for domination of the western world. Michiels concentrates on climatic and topographical conditions in order to draw references to the former devastating events. Related to his approach, the military term 'friction' refers to unexpected interference with military plans that includes bad weather and rough terrain, but also the general uncertainty created by war. The photograph *Monte Lungo 1943, Mattina* contains the story of the 'fog of war,' through an actual fog that enveloped a strategic mountaintop that is said to have demobilized Italian soldiers who lost their way during an attack. The seascape photograph *Lepanto 1571, Mare Sanguinoso* bears the news in gleaming blood-red lines of a sea battle that lasted only four hours yet spent the lives of 30,000 men and caused the destruction of the entire Turkish fleet. *Lepanto*



was a critical battle between Islam and Christianity that announced the end of Turkish domination in the Mediterranean.

A native of Belgium living in New York City for the past decade, Michiels' European identity has been shaped by landscapes of war, the remnants and ruins that still mark the countryside where he grew up. It is the photographer himself who is the primary interlocutor, researching through his photographs how the European wars have shaped the histories of the west. Hardly ever is war pictured in actual places distinguished by its own unique topography, the features which often prove decisive in the outcome of victory or defeat. Traveling to Salamis, Marathon and Thermopylae, Michiels visited the battlefields of the Persian Wars as an impetus for *The Mediterranean Theatre*, following in the long tradition of the first historian Herodotus who visited temples, battlefields, monuments and cities to inform his writing about the Greco-Persian Wars, 490 and 480-479 BC. *The Course of History* is urging a reconsideration of the history of war as it continues to unfold in present times. The images beckon 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 by the future and unable to turn back and examine the carnage as it piles up behind him.

Roger Fenton was the first professional photographer sent to document the outcome of armed conflict during the Crimean War, 1855. Although most of his photographs were concerned with preserving the dignity of battle, one of his photos relates directly to the visual territory of Michiels' *Course of History*. Entitled *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*, the photo of a battle site where six hundred soldiers were ambushed is a portrayal of death without the dead, for all it shows is the wide rutted road studded with rocks and cannonballs curving across the horizon. In a similar framework,

Michiels' photograph *Cannae 216BC, The Death of Paulus* is a desolate field of scattered white rock that serve as markers for the fallen dead, corporal allusions to 50,000 Roman soldiers who were lost there in a single day. These spectral references to the ground are also found in the images of Troy and Thermopylae (*The Death of Leonidas*), the epic battle of the Spartans against Xerxes the Great.

Too often war photographs are driven by the action of combat, which does not provide any breathing room to think about the connection between the past and current conflicts. As objects of contemplation, Michiels' landscapes aim to deepen a sense of reality, a step outside of the barrage of daily news coverage of war. His images are only filled with tall spreading grasses, shimmering of a cascading river and ancient stone enshrouded in mist. These landscapes appear too peaceful, emptied of all references to battle, horrors that have since vacated Europe and migrated to other locations. What remains is history, hovering in a tremulous state of waiting that gently pulls at the cords of memory. In this sense, each photograph serves as a memory device that distills the secrets of the past for our eyes now. These battlefields have returned to natural rhythms to produce a tension between an idealized state and the violence once committed there. From ancient times to the present age, it is still the soldier's body that mediates biological forces through the technology of warfare.

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

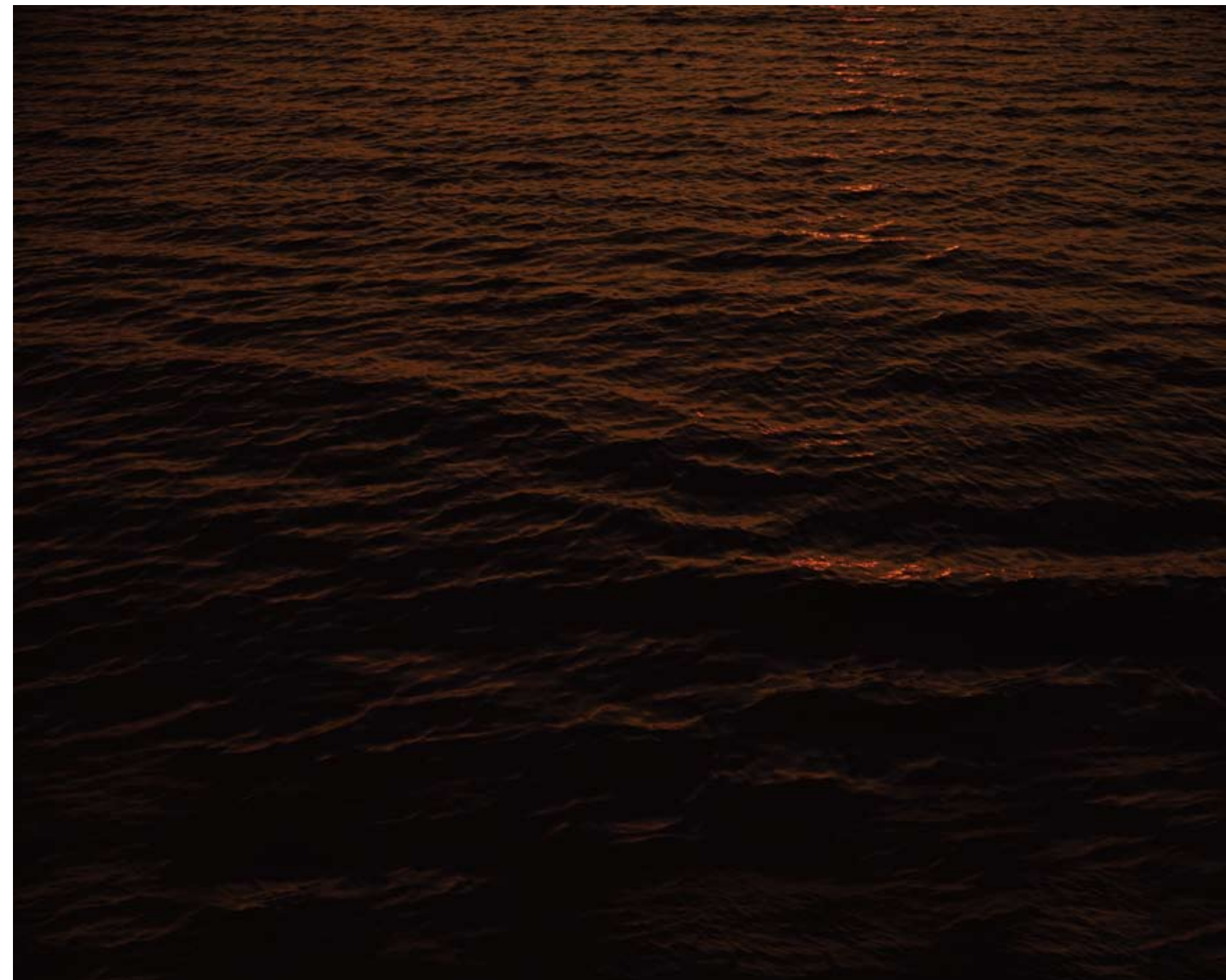




The bridge was about a foot under water most of the way, and stacked with bodies from upstream. A lot of men drowned with all their equipment still on. I looked at some, that is when I noticed most died with that look of surprise on their face, like “What happened?” and “Why me to die this way?”

BILL HARTUNG, PRIVATE (1945)





Cold are the stones
That build the walls of Troy,
Cold are the bones
Of the dead Greek boy
Who for some vague thought
Of honor fell,
Nor why he fought
Could clearly tell

PATRICK DICKINSON, C. 1946





The hulls of our ships rolled over, and it was no longer possible to glimpse the sea, strewn as it was with the wrecks of warships and the debris of what had been men. The shores and the reefs were full of our dead, and every ship that had once been part of the fleet now tried to row its way to safety through flight. But just as if our men were tunny-fish or some sort of netted catch, the enemy kept pounding them and hacking them with broken oars and the flotsam from wrecked ships. And so shrieks together with sobbing echoed over the open sea until the face of black night at last covered the scene.

AESCHYLUS, THE PERSIANS (419-29)





BART MICHIELS

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2008 : Foley Gallery, The Course of History : The Mediterrean Theatre
 2006 : LOTT Gallery, NYC. The Course of History
 Gallery 51, Antwerp, Belgium. The Course of History
 2005 : Foley Gallery, NYC, The Course of History
 1997 : AGNES Gallery, Birmingham, AL
 1996 : Fielding Wright Art Center, Delta State University, Cleveland, MS

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2007 : Passchendaele, Belgium . In Flanders Fields
 2006 : From Sea to Shining Sea, Lobby 450 Lexington Ave. NYC
 Territories/Territoirs, Mains d'Oeuvres, Saint Ouen.
 FotoGrafia Festival, Roma
 2004 : Art+Commerce 2004 Festival of Emerging Photographers
 2003 : BelgiaNomads, Gallery 51, Antwerp, Belgium
 2002 : Constellation Selects, Center for Photography at Woodstock
 1997 : Solo, El Museo De La Ciudad, Madrid
 1996 : The Santa Fe Picture Gallery, Santa Fe
 1994 : 'In America Now', Ward Nasse Gallery, New York City

AWARDS/PRIZES

The Project Competition, First Place (The Santa Fe Workshops), Fall 1995
 The Art & Commerce 2004 Festival of Emerging Photographers
 The Santa Fe Prize for Photography 2006 - finalist

COLLECTIONS

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas
 Fotomuseum, Antwerp, Belgium
 Le Musée de la Photographie, Charleroi, Belgium
 The Palmer Museum of Art, State College, Pennsylvania
 The Tennessee Valley Authority, Knoxville, Tennessee
 Bank Of America
 Nelson-atkins Museum Of Art, Missouri

PUBLICATIONS/REVIEWS

"Met Heimwee Zie Ik Het Aan". (1988)
 A catalogue of 25 portraits published in Belgium about the inhabitants
 of a small Flemish town. Foreword by Herman Van Der Bracht.
 American Photo (July/August 1995)
 by Sue Alexander. One photograph published.

Pasatiempo, The New Mexican, Santa Fe (June 14-20, 1996)
 by Gussie Fauntleroy. Four photographs published.
 The Project Network, published by Santa Fe Center for Visual Arts (May 1996)
 by Nancy Foley. One photograph published.
 The Bolivar Commercial (Cleveland, MS, Sept. 26, 1996)
 Wright Art Center Exhibition. One photograph published.
 Popular Photography (October 1996) One photograph published.
 Het Nieuwsblad (Belgium, Jan 12, 1997)
 by Jan Vernieuwe. Interview. Three photographs published.
 Arts Round Up (Birmingham, Feb. 1997)
 by Jane Longshore. One photograph published.
 Arts & Leisure, The Birmingham News (Feb. 1997)
 by James R. Nelson. Review of exhibition at Agnes Gallery.
 Weekend Knack (April 2003)
 Review of BelgiaNomads show. One photograph published.
 De Morgen (April 2003) Review of BelgiaNomads show.
 Addict (April 2003) Review of BelgiaNomads show. One photograph published.
 Free Eye (May 2003) Review of BelgiaNomads show.
 View Camera. The Journal Of Large Format Photography (Nov/Dec. 2003)
 Southern Trilogy and the Journey of Bart Michiels. Six images published.
 The New York Times, Sunday, February 27, 2005 The Guide by Choire Sicha.
 The Village Voice March 22, 2005 Voice Choices by Vince Aletti.
 The New York Sun, March 3, 2005 The Calendar. Two photographs published.
 Genis Açi (Turkey) Nr40 by Su N Madenci. One photograph published.
 Afterimage Vol.33, N°1, Waiting in Silence by Sarah Stanley. One photograph published.
 EDIT #3 : Territoires (www.edit-revue.com) Interview with Saskia ooms. March 2006
 (H)ART, May 11, 2006. Review. One photograph published.
 FOCUS, May 2006. Interview. One photograph published.
 Novecento. Catalogue for the Festival Internazionale Di Roma. One photograph published.
 Attitude Special Nov 2006. Interview with Koen Vertessen. 9 photographs published.
 FotoMuseum Magazinge Feb 2007 (FotoMuseum Antwerp). Text by Pieter Van Bogaert. 8
 photographs published.
 RODEO Magazine (Milan) July/August 2007. Il Corso Della Storia. Interview by Selva Barni.
 6 photographs published.

EDUCATION

Hoger Instituut voor Beeldende Kunsten St. Lukas, Brussels, 1986



Thermopylae 480 BC,
The Phocian Wall



The Ebro 1938,
Hill 481



Gallipoli 1915,
Suvla Bay



Monte Lungo 1943,
Notte



Thermopylae 480 BC,
Kolonos Hill



Cannae 216 BC,
The Death of Paulus



Monte Cassino 1944,
Garigliano 2



Monte Cassino 1994,
Garigliano 1



Lepanto 1571,
Mare Sanguinoso



Troy 13th Century BC,
The Death of Achilles



Marathon 490BC,
Charadra



Monte Cassino 1944,
Hill 593



Salamis 480 BC,
Cynosura



Thermopylae 480 BC,
The Death of Leonidas



Monte Lungo 1943,
Mattina

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Bart Michiels

All works are chromogenic prints

This publication accompanies an exhibition of new photographs
 by Bart Michiels at Foley Gallery, January 10 - February 16, 2008

Essay © 2008

Sarah Stanley

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