

NEW YORK PHOTO REVIEW



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Bart Michiels
The Course of History: Götterdämmerung



Bart Michiels, "Passchendaele 1917, Ravebeek, 2005"

For ten years Bart Michiels, originally from Belgium but now residing in New York, has been undertaking an ambitious project photographing sites of important battles from European history. Covering almost 2500 years (from the Peloponnesian War of the 5th century BC to the more recent Second World War), the final installment of the work, pregnantly and poignantly entitled "The Course of History: Götterdämmerung", is now on display at Foley Gallery. If you're not an opera fan and don't get the significance of this unpronounceable Germanic word (don't ignore the umlauts) check out Wagner's opera by the same name and you'll get the significance of the choice --- rest assured, he's not flattering us.

The nine large color photos on display feature five sites: Austerlitz of the Napoleonic Wars, The Crimean Peninsula from the war of that name, and three location of WWII (Stalingrad, Kursk and Hürtengewald). The photos are minimalist landscapes of fields, forests, and, in one case, a river; there are no urban scenes, no buildings or other man-made structures. A few of the sites are burned over, though the traces of fire are not damage from these wars, but a consequence of the agricultural practice of burning off the brush on fields meant to lie fallow. While in reality it is fallacious to associate the charred ground with these long-past wars, in fact these ashes are a powerful metaphor for the wrenching consequences of these, and all other, wars.

The battle sites depicted here have been furnished with commemorative monuments. Michiels could just as easily have based his project on photographs of these structures, but clearly he did not want a "ready-made" solution to his quest; rather he intended the earth itself should cry out the terrible events that transpired here. And in the act of listening we must formulate our own thoughts and feelings about the incalculable waste of material resources, but above all of human life, that these images represent-- for millions died here.



Bart Michiels "Stalingrad 1942, Mamaev Kurgan V" 2008

Several of these photographs are eerily beautiful. For example, the photo at Austerlitz shows stubble in a plowed field visible through a light dusting of snow while the ground gradually vanishes into the mist at the horizon. Not much effort is needed for us to visualize columns of troops marching into oblivion in this scene. But others are stark and unattractive: the charred earth and a few pieces of rubble in a photo made at the site of Stalingrad have no traditional visual appeal for the viewer.

But to dismiss any of these photos as not meeting our criteria for "pretty pictures" is a morally repugnant position. To do so is implicitly to deem our visual pleasure more important than the lives of the millions who perished on these grounds.

Mr. Michiels is to be commended. This is an important project, beautifully executed, meriting our attention and consideration. One can only hope, probably in vain, that we will heed the lessons to be had here.

R. Wayne Parsons

Respond to this review:
response@nyphotoreview.com

BART MICIELS
*The Course of History:
Götterdämmerung*

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Thursday, October 28 to
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Hours: Tues - Sat, 12 to 6