Omaha Beach 1944, Easy Green — 2003

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Photography Bart Michiels.

At first glance Bart Michiels' images seem to simply portray wide, luminous landscapes and natural details. But as soon as we read their titles, our perception of them changes and we instinctively start looking for clues, traces which could tell us more about the sad stories of those places. For *The Course of History*, Michiels – a Belgian photographer based in NY – searches the most infamous and bloody European battlefields to photograph them as they are now, after decades, sometimes centuries have passed. Fields, hills, shorelines where time seems to have erased all evidence of the past, and with them part of our memory. By exploiting the evocative power of words and places these pictures invite us to reflect upon the sense and consequences of war.

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Waterloo 1815, The Fall of The Imperial Guard — 2001

— *Please tell us about* The Course of History*'s background.* A few years back I started thinking about how the wars from the past have shaped the world today. I was reading a lot about the two world wars and about the rise of Western power in the world. What was this thing we do, this thing we seem to repeat always? War. Is it inherently part of human existence, a necessary evil, inevitable of a natural process, that will never go away? I had also lived for a good time in the USA, a time long enough to start questioning if I could consider myself still European or if I was becoming more American? What was the European experience that differs from the American? I think it was the long history of wars that Europe went through that shaped European identity. After the experience of two world wars, in one generation Europe became – lessons learned – a more multilateral society (EU), the one I grew up in, as a way to avoid conflict. So, naturally, I became uneasy about a new unilateral approach by the US government at the onstart of the new millenium. This uneasyness turned into a longing to reconnect with my European identity and these battlefields were the expression of this identity and heritage. I was born in the fertile clay ground of Flanders in the area where one of the most deadly battles of the First World war was fought : Passchendaele.

— *What are the reasons behind the choice of the battlefields? Historical, aesthetical, political?* The choice I made was twofold: landmark battles that changed the course of the war (and the world). Those like Omaha Beach on D-Day, Waterloo, Poiters come to mind. They were turning points in history. Being impressed by the shear numbers of death and wounded and of all the carnage inflicted, I also chose battles that had enormous loss of lives, like Cannae (50.000 death in one day), Verdun, Passchendaele and The Somme (35.000 death and wounded in one day).

— *I have noticed that in* The Course of History *you are using mainly two ways of framing. Either horizons or looking at the ground.* Some of the first battlegrounds I photographed were in Northern France and Belgium, places of rolling hillsides with straight or slightly bowing horizons, which made it very fitting for me to approach the landscape and strip it down, taking things out of it. Framing is as much about what you don't allow in the picture as what you do allow in it. Placing the horizon in the middle puts (hoovers, floats?) the viewer equally between earth and sky, evoking my own experience at these places, that are in a way "sacred'. This notion of holy ground is even more expressed in the photographs without horizons. I tilted the camera down, as in a bowing gesture and contemplating manner, and as one would do when remembering the death and carnage that took place there. Passchendaele 1917, Tyne Cot, 2005, evokes the well known images of the war torn landscape during this battle where numerous soldiers drowned in a sea of mud.

— *What strikes about these images is the absence of traces of the events that lead you there. Only after reading the title the pictures take on a different atmosphere and meaning. I fell that this subtle referencing and interplay is the strength of the project.* Yes, from the starting point, I never wanted to have anything to do with remnants of the battle or even cemeteries and memorials. In a way, this project is not really about battlefields, but more about the repetitive character of war and how our memory of place and history is being challenged.

Termopili 480 A.C., The Death of Leonidas — 2006

What happens to a place when it is stripped of the very subject it is infamous for? I challenge the viewer to "reread" a landscape or a place, with the title of the image being the first sign that there is something odd here. So, I needed to bring something back into the image that wasn't there anymore or that I chose not to include. I was looking for characteresticts or symbolic traces in the landscape that would evoke what I knew about the battle. Tractor tracks in a field refer to the tracks of tanks that rolled over the very same hills. The clouds around Monastery Hill (Monte Cassino) evoke the smoke from the bombing barrage on the monastery. The red hue in the waters of Lepanto, is the blood of the many killed in this sea battle. The title "Mare Sanguinoso" comes from a description by historian Gianpiertro Contarini who said the waters around Lepanto were "tutto il mare sanguinoso", a blood filled sea.
— *Many pictures seem to suggest a human presence. In Waterloo it looks like something or someone just left the scene leaving a print in the grass.* The flattend grass is another example of reference to the battle itself. Having read about the battle and researched maps, I knew I was in a spot where most of Napoleon's Imperial Guard troops fell which coincidentally sealed Napoleon's defeat. So, this picture ebodies the two criteria I used to choose a battlefield: decisive moments and loss of life. I always see human presence in the land as humans are just another part of nature. It is then understandable that there would be a suggestion of that presence in my work. For me nature has always a dual character. Nature is beautful and evil at the same time. War is the loss of innocence of men (and thus nature).
— *By triggering our memory, mostly our lack of it,* The Course of History *makes us think about war and its consequences more than unequivocal war reportages. This gives a hint on our overexposure to explicit media images and on how little space they leave to thought.* Nowadays, we are confronted with perpetual imagery of war zones and violence and only when this stops does it seem to trigger our attention and memory, instead of the continued barrage of media images. This series is an attempt to stop us for a moment in that process •