

OUR LADIES OF THE FLOWERS

Some words about 'Lotus', a series of photographs made by Max Pinckers and Quinten De Bruyn

This text was written for the Lotus dummy book, self-published by Max Pinckers & Quinten De Bruyn in 2011.

PRELUDE

I would like to share the feelings, thoughts, stories and images that were evoked by my encounter with a series of photographs made by Max Pinckers and Quinten De Bruyn, but I don't know where to start or how to go about it. Very often we hear the truism that when we are confronted with powerful images, words fail. But rarely do we see images that corroborate this statement... Meeting these photographs was like a shock to me. I was seduced and enchanted by their intricate and exquisite lighting, framing, composition, choice of subject matter and intelligent approach (the strange mixture of realism and dreamlike settings), but I was abhorred by the things they showed. Apparently, art can still shake me.

OPERA

The power of these photographs doesn't derive solely from the subject matter or the formal characteristics, but from the way these aspects relate to each other. For instance, most of these photographs show an open, receding horizon. This reminds us of a theater or opera setting, in which two or three layers on the foreground can be set against an almost abstract, but determined background. This impression of opera, theater, movies and even painting is reinforced through other approaches of the composition and through the use of flash lighting, but I'll talk about this later. First I would like to point out how formal elements that refer to the theater can reinforce a realistic or documentary approach. In adding theatrical elements to their approach of a social phenomenon, Pinckers and De Bruyn reveal its intrinsic theatricality. This theatricality is, in fact, its basic reality. We meet people who want to transform their being or their appearance. The wish to appear differently or to transform oneself (through make up, clothing, behavior or surgery) starts from the wish to be perceived in a certain way, i.e. from the wish to create and control an image. It is precisely this wish that becomes visible in these photographs. Nobody

can be totally free from the desire to be observed in a so-called correct way. We all feel the need to adapt our appearance to our disposition, mood, intentions or personality or to the way we prefer to be perceived. We all live in an opera. The only things that vary are the props and the dresses. Our very nature is kitsch.

COMPOSITIONS AND THEATER SETS

A painter once told me that he wanted the onlooker of his paintings to wander around in them. I think this is what happens in these photographs. Due to the intricate lighting and compositions, Pinckers and De Bruyn create images with several layers of depth, or moments of depth, that present themselves as stepping stones for the eye of the beholder. Some photographers prefer to create an image that is parallel to the horizon or the back surface of the photographed object. Other photographers like to deviate slightly from the horizon. In the photographs we see here, perspective is used to create a varying range of folded, harmonica-like spaces. Sometimes the middle of a photograph shows us the corner of a room (but never without at least one possibility of escape on the border), sometimes this effect is reinforced by elements on the foreground (doors, curtains, armchairs etc.), sometimes a corner or another protruding element comes towards us in the middle of the photograph, sometimes two elements that come towards us divide the surface of the photograph into three vertical parts. As a result, the photographs seem to depict a space that is alive, like a forest, but also a space that functions as a theater set or the set of a photo studio. The effect of these compositions is double: they reinforce the impression of an artificially arranged space, but at the same time they enhance a feeling of poor housing and entrapment. In both cases they seem to reveal the mechanics behind the decoration of lobbies, hotel rooms, hospital wards, cabinets of medical doctors, night clubs and, finally, nearly every public and private space: they are sets, theater stages, decorated with useless, meaningless and ugly props, ordering people what to do or not to do. On the other hand, the repetition of similar compositions in

different situations creates new relationships between different photographs and depicted situations, e.g. between the photograph of the man who seems to be the owner of a clinic (with the two armchairs on the foreground), the photograph of the post-operation diapers and the photograph of the grave.

LIGHT

The fascinating, varying space of the photographs is reinforced by a sophisticated use of lighting, which is always varying as well. The most striking recurring elements, I think, are the beautiful and unsettling claire-obscure effects, an unreal glow that makes one think of studio photography and a tender lighting of the skin of the protagonists. Together these elements make us think of the light in movies such as Hitchcock's *All About Harry*, paintings such as Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* and photographs such as the still lives with people by Jeff Wall. Perhaps *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* is the best example. Firstly, its composition is awkward. The lady in the back is too big. Secondly, the painting thanks its eerie quality to the fact that the characters are lit by studio light and not by natural light in a park. Both elements, distorted perspective and artificiality of the light, provide the painting with a collage-like nature that, strangely enough, reinforces the apparent realism: the painting presents itself like a snapshot, but at the same time it seems to reveal the constructed nature of every form of perception and depiction. In *Lotus* the claire-obscure effects not only seem to refer to the paintings of Rembrandt or Caravaggio, they also seem to create a universe filled with secrets and signs, like the baroque universe of the early movies of Peter Greenaway.

Manet's painting *Olympia* shocked the nineteenth century public (among other reasons) because the complexion of the depicted lady was considered to be too pale. This paleness was due to Manet's attempt to register the way natural light tends to make our faces paler. In the photographs in front of us the opposite seems to happen. Faces and bodies seem to be caressed by light with respect for the individual. However, at the same time this light refers to the fake world of glossy magazines, which seems to lure these individuals into harming themselves. In the nineteenth century artists came closer to every day life through the introduction of so-called

vulgar aspects of reality. In *Lotus*, the artists seem to approach the core of reality through the introduction of artificial elements.

AMBIGUITY

Probably one of the most attractive aspects of art (and one of its reasons of being) is its capacity to give shape to ambiguity, i.e. to a world in which several possibilities seem to be able to co-exist. In this way art reflects our basic experience, which tells us that reality is richer than accounted for by words, categories or taxonomies. Obviously, our sexuality is basically polymorph. It becomes structured by fear and habit, not by nature. It shares this polymorph nature with the work of art, which tends to escape us, to hint at things without naming them or to give them erroneous names or unexpected shapes to mislead the onlooker or the reader. Something of this nature happens in these photographs. The photographers try to get as close as possible to the people whose lives they try to document, but at the same time they enrich this life with an esthetic quality (a dint of glamour) that seems to be the purpose of this life. Sometimes the quality of the photographs reminds us of calendars, fashion photography or centerfolds, but this very quality also extends itself to the dark parts in the photographs, which evoke an atmosphere of doom or nightmarish nocturnal absence of form or meaning. We also find ambiguity with regard to the improvisational quality of the photographs. Which part has been prepared and which one is due to accident?

PROVOKING ACCIDENTS

Sometimes the photographs contain elements that seem to suggest a rapidity or improvisational quality, e.g. somebody who strokes a cat, the flying pigeons in the park or the ladyboy who seems to wipe her eyes. This peculiar quality adds a supplementary layer of ambiguity. Is the photograph staged? And if so, why? Of course, unpredictable or uncontrollable elements make a photograph come alive, but in this particular case the unpredictable elements are a means to approach real life despite the diligent set preparation, lighting and framing. If everything would be controlled, the photographs wouldn't be ambiguous: they would only depict a staged reality. Through working slowly and diligently, the photographers create a situation in which unexpected things can take place: birds can fly, a cat can pass or a person can pluck something from

his or her eyelashes. The most powerful photograph in this respect is the one in which a partly lit sex tourist enters the dark but tender world of a perfectly framed portrait. Another photograph shows us a nocturnal setting. On the left we see a tripod that casts light on the background (the palm trees and the white wall), turning the scene into a theatrical setting, while an invisible spotlight lights the face of a person who actually happened to pass by. In the interview at the end of this text the photographers tell me: "The setting is controlled, but we try to capture the spontaneity of a special moment." In this way, they obtain a playful tension, comparable to the special quality of the movies by John Cassavetes, who rehearsed intensively with his actors until their movements were exactly known to the cameramen, who were then invited to move freely around and shoot whatever they liked to shoot. As a result, the cameras move in an incredible free way and make the most extraordinary movements, while often capturing special acting moments because the cameramen exactly knew when these would take place.

MASKS

Actors wear masks to impersonate characters, but also to hide themselves. People wear masks to hide and to show things they dare not show without hiding. In the Attic drama I believe the actors wear masks because the individual does not exist yet. It's the first attempt to think of someone as separate from the group. If this is true, we do not witness the downfall of heroes, as it is generally believed, but the birth of the individual. In *Lotus* we meet people who desperately want to shape themselves. They want to become visible. They want to exist.

DISPOSABLE CAMERAS

Pinckers and De Bruyn believe that so-called documentary photographers generally seem to search for esthetic approaches which are not adapted to the subject matter and are very often based upon tricks and clichés that always produce the desired effect. In this series of photographs they have tried to comment this approach by making explicitly manipulative, esthetic images, but also by distributing disposable cameras to the people they have followed. No directions were given, the only demand was that the films be used entirely. Thus they obtained photographically 'incorrect' images (unsharp, disturbed by fingers, too dark,

oblique etc.) constituting a more honest depiction of the everyday life and predilections of the ladyboys. "Their own photographs have a rare transparency," Pinckers told me, "they are less pretentious and contain nonesthetic, but poetic elements that show a surprising and invigorating power when they are presented in a photographic publication (the series of landscapes, the photographed photographs, the reflected flashlight eating away a face in a mirror and so on)." In this book, these photographs are printed on the yellow pages. During the exhibitions they are projected.

MASS TOURISM

The photographs of *Lotus* were made in Thai cities such as Chiang Mai, Bangkok, Lamphun, Petchabun, Koh Samet and Pattaya. This last city is a typical destination for sex tourists, some of which have sex with so-called ladyboys. This book opens with a photograph that shows us a basic set of objects tourists receive upon arrival in certain hotels: a pack of "large size" condoms, a city guide, a bottle of Thai whisky and a copy of the New Testament. This photograph sets the tone of the series. It shows us a sordid reality, camouflaged or rationalized by a minimal, orderly setting. A pink curtain, bearing a repelling stain, suggests a theater and an aspiration to glamour or luxury. The askew composition of the photograph shatters the lie of the lined up objects. Apparently the map of Pattaya was moved. Now it breaks the white border of the table, which seems to function as a frame or a passe-partout. The curtain casts a dark shadow that leads us to the actual focus point of the photograph: the nocturnal life in the city.

Mass tourism! Who benefits from it? Always the same people, who have a talent to get rich during a foreign occupation. The original cultures and landscapes are destroyed, because nobody is really interested in them. Generally, people are only interested in eating, drinking, fucking and blabbering about expensive cars and sports. They finance their lives with money that is generated by other people's work and misery, by selling junk nobody needs or by inventing eternally renewed bureaucratic humbug. When they go abroad, they bring their blatantly uninteresting interests with them and try to have them satisfied. In an attempt to look like rock stars, movie actors or fashion models they put sunglasses on their foreheads and hang out at bars, where they hope

to meet someone to have sex with. If this doesn't work, they pay for it. The local population is poor and will become more and more poor. Some people get rich. Nobody protects the environment. The animals die. The trees are cut. The only thing that survives is vulgarity.

META PHOTOGRAPHS

How to report about this, if one would wish to do so? Two years ago, during a public debate moderated by myself, the photographer Martin Parr defended his decision of photographing food markets and hamburgers all over the world by saying that this was the only way he could share his regret about the general loss of cultural diversity. Recently, he made several series of photographs about mass tourism. In these photographs we see people pretending to support the tower of Pisa or imitating a lama at Machu Pichu. These photographs include a snapshot of a bus decorated with a painted mountain landscape, a picturesque wall painting in a sordid interior etc. By introducing these elements, Parr makes meta-photographs: tiny essays about the construction and the meaning of images.

In the photographs by Pinckers and De Bruyn this meta-level is introduced by similar strategies (the presence of a tripod, the presence of a painting next to a constructed breast, people participating in the photographic act or people making photographs of others) but also through the use of set decoration, sophisticated framing and artificial lighting. Furthermore, several photographs in this series shed some light on their construction. In one photograph we see flying water or wet people, in another we meet people with buckets who seem to have acted as assistants of the photographers by throwing the water. In one photograph we see a living room decorated as a set, in another photograph we meet our protagonists behind a real stage. In one photograph we see somebody making a picture of a person wearing a bikini, in another photograph we see a close up of the same person, revealing her damaged skin.

Finally, I would like to say something about the numerous instances in these photographs where we see people touching each other. Also due to these elements, the general feeling generated by these photographs is a feeling of tenderness. Never do we feel a judgmental attitude. The photographers make us think of investigators with

an open mind, revealing aspects of our reality we wouldn't know without their attempts to register them. One of the main ideas that underlie this adventure seems to be the awareness that reality cannot be documented without artificial means or without constructing an image. This awareness shows itself in the decision to document the lives of ladyboys, who try to construct a new image of themselves, but also in the surfacing of all the people who help each other get dressed, who take care of each other's make-up etc. When Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo* dresses Judy, he mirrors Hitchcock himself, as a movie director, but also every boy who wants to find a girl resembling somebody he knew in his childhood.

DREAMING ABOUT PROGRESS

In some of the photographs made by the ladyboys, we recognize the young photographers. Seeing them at work moves me. Why? The world they evoke in this series of photographs makes me sick. Not the world of glamour or fashion, which is a great way to celebrate our polymorph universe. Not the world of polymorph sexuality, which is another way to celebrate freedom. But the horrendous place where an aspiration to luxury and glamour meets poverty. I know what it is like to be trapped in poverty, be it "decent poverty", as the Dutch writer Gerard Reve coined it. There is no escape from it. If you want to have a family and to create or think at the same time, you have to be rich. You need slaves. The Greeks, the Romans and the white inhabitants of the Americas kept their slaves close at hand. We tend to keep them far away, in countries we only visit during our holidays. Sometimes I manage to forget this, but sometimes I cannot forget it and I tend to despair. Are we allowed to dream about a world where people are less blind and less egocentric? At my age, you discover that progress takes time. Little has changed since I was young. All the old farts that steered things when I was young have been replaced by idiots and cowards of my own age or younger. But when I see these young fellows standing on a bed and directing these magnificent photographs, I believe that one day our dreams will be fulfilled by the young men to come.

INTERVIEW

— *Which camera do you use?*

Pinckers & De Bruyn:

It's called The Workhorse.

It's a Mamiya RB67.

— *Are your photographs digital prints? And if so, are they made starting from digital or analogue photographs? And if your photographs are analogue, do you make slides or negatives? And if they are negatives, do you scan the negatives or do you print them first?*

Pinckers & De Bruyn:

We use middle format negative film. 6 x 7 cm.

We scan the negatives and make digital pigment inkjet prints.

— *Do you use Photoshop?*

Pinckers & De Bruyn:

We use Photoshop, but only for some standard procedures with regard to color and light balance.

— *Why are the photographs framed? And why do they have large white borders?*

Pinckers & De Bruyn:

The white frames try not to interfere with the contents of the photographs, but at the same time they refer to the way documentary photographs are presented generally. We use them because we want to present our photographs within the context of documentary photography. Apart from this, it's a classic form of presentation. The white border is no real passe-partout. It's just unprinted paper. We think the white border and the glass create a kind of bubble or jar around the image, which seems to provide the depicted world with a separate existence.

— *Do you like Jeff Wall's photographs?*

Max Pinckers:

I am very fond of his work. He does the opposite of what we try to do: he tries to recreate scenes he has seen somewhere and tries to make us believe they are real.

— *There's a photograph with a big man entering the image at the left. Is he also an actor?*

Pinckers & De Bruyn:

The girl was collaborating with us, but the guy just happened to pass by. One of these guys, a very big and strong German, yelled

at us: "ONE MORE FLASH IN MY FACE AND IT'S THE LAST PICTURE YOU DO."

— *You create environments in which unpredictable things can take place and then you wait.*

Pinckers & De Bruyn:

Yes, though it's not really waiting, because we are constantly thinking about how we can improve the image by changing the direction of the actors, the composition, the framing, the lighting and the props. The setting is controlled, but we try to capture the spontaneity of a special moment.

— *You consider this series to be a special form of documentary photography.*

Pinckers & De Bruyn:

We try to make documentary photographs, but at the same time we try to challenge this discipline. Generally, documentary photography is associated with snapshots. The photographer enters a place as an objective bystander, he or she pretends to be absent, makes a photograph and leaves. As opposed to this, we try to adopt a subjective viewpoint. We get to know the people, we try to imagine photographs and we create them in collaboration with the people. We are looking for theatrical effects, but we also want to raise doubt whether something is real or fake. In this respect our subject matter is related to our way of working: if you meet a ladyboy, you never know whether he or she is "real or fake".

— *What are your plans in the future?*

Max Pinckers:

Next year I want to go to Bollywood and make a new series, based on the same starting point. We'll see where this leads to.