

Press Review
Artforum, Jeffrey Kastner, September 2023

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS NEW YORK

Dirk Braeckman

GRIMM | New York

By Jeffrey Kastner



Dirk Braeckman, *U.C.-T.C.I.-21*, 2021, five ink-jet prints, each 70 7/8 × 47 1/4".

Among the many rewarding provocations in the oeuvre of the late, lamented English cultural theorist Mark Fisher was his retooling of Jacques Derrida's punningly allusive notion of "hauntology"—a historical spectrality that hovers around ideas and institutions, unsettling them with a sense of the lost futures they unavoidably represent—as a way to think about his first and arguably greatest love, music. "The [musical] artists that came to be labelled hauntological," Fisher wrote in an essay published in 2014, "were suffused with an overwhelming melancholy; and they were preoccupied with the way in which technology materialised memory. . . . This fixation on materialised memory led to what is perhaps the principal sonic signature of hauntology: the use of crackle, the surface noise made by vinyl. Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint; it won't allow us to fall into the illusion of presence."

Virtuosic in their murk and indistinction, Dirk Braeckman's large-scale images are cloaked in a kind of visual version of this crackle, strategically occulted in ways that similarly suggest a melancholic world out of phase with itself. A Ghent-based photographer who represented Belgium at the 2017 Venice Biennale—and whose debut here marked his first solo New York show in more than a decade—Braeckman creates his sumptuously tenebrous compositions by mixing and matching negatives from his archive and subjecting them to various unconventional darkroom processes, building complex, mostly grisaille fields in which spatiotemporal distortions rule the day. The resulting works are intimately engaged with questions at the intersection of technology and memory, the marriage of their revenant pictorial fragments conjuring scenarios whose internal logics are haunted by radical indeterminacy.

The exhibition featured thirteen works, giving viewers a feel for Braeckman's favored subject matter and the techniques of manipulation he uses to achieve his seductive shadowy results. If the most elaborate piece on view—the five-photo polyptych *U.C.-T.C.I.-21*, 2021 (all the photo works were titled in this coded manner)—capitalized on the somewhat familiarly enigmatic atmospheric effects of sky, sea, and land commingling along an unidentified shoreline, other individual images offered stranger conjunctions. In *L.U.-A.L.-21*, 2021, for example, a bleary gray city grid seems to be in the process of being annihilated by a slumping translucent blob, while in the nearly fully abstract *F.W.-S.V.-21*, 2021, almost nothing recognizable remains visible beneath a galactic spray of blue and white crowding in on the underlying black-and-white chimera from the right side. Figures sometimes appear, ghosted into near illegibility—as in *R.N.-W.S.-21*, 2021, the main subject of which may or may not be a nude female whose head is obscured by a nimbus made of radial scratchings at the image's top edge. But it's often the simplest and most unassuming settings (interior, domestic) that create the eeriest scenarios: the leaning panels and swag curtains-*cum*-funereal bunting in the oddly sutured compositional space of *T.S.-O.S.-18 #1*, 2018, or, perhaps most dramatically, in *27.1 / 21.7 / 045 / 2014*, a sedate middle-class living room made deeply strange by Braeckman's introduction of an ominous swirl of glare that recalls nothing so much as the luminary effects and ectoplasmic apparitions manifested in spiritualist photography.

Braeckman has frequently cited the foundational influence on his own work of *Evidence* (1992), Lucy Sante's classic collection of annotated early-twentieth-century New York City crime-scene photos, and in particular their expressions of what the artist has identified as “a crucial latency . . . a kind of charged void, a certain suggestion, paying attention to what isn't present.” For writers such as Fisher and Sante, and for artists such as Braeckman, careful attendance to that latency, and to those suggestive voids, opens up richly productive space for scrying the darkness.