

This tiny and irrefutable block of black abyss defying my comprehension.¹

Dirk Braeckman's photos – we call them photos for convenience's sake – are tonal vibrations subtly ranging from the pitch blackness of soot to the dazzling whiteness of electric gleams, sunrays or throbbing flashes. From opaque blacks to shrill whites, the light's graininess is neutralized by grey or by the dusky dimming of color, setting the world's details onto a totally matte surface, encompassed in a zone where air barely circulates. Filters sift the surface of the paintings – let's call them paintings rather than photos –, with varying degrees of resistance, filters so soft they almost liquefy one's gaze. From a strictly technical standpoint, these photos are undeniably photographic, and yet they stray from the genre and are deeply tuned to the realm of painting. Dirk Braeckman started out as a painter, at first just using photography so as to document his subject matter. This initial practice would soon turn photography into the catalyst of his painterly eye. Dirk Braeckman's artwork does not produce images, for the images are surfaceless, as opposed to his works where the graininess counts as much as the brushstroke. A painting chiefly tells about the act of gazing. What we see in Dirk Braeckman's works is not the initial shot, but a particular way of gazing at the world, where things are grasped in constant relation to recollection. What is depicted is something that was seen and then partially, and sometimes even totally, forgotten. The photographic action is merely the initial capture which then gets archived, sometimes for years on end, until an image is unearthed, the way one unearths old memories. The image is taken, discarded, and then reused, rediscovered, sometimes reworked, re-shot, reframed or calibrated with different lighting – the way our memories are reshaped when we grope for them, in a wobbly authenticity, veiled by the greyish haze of memory's backwash. In the words of Éric Suchère, there is "évidence possible"², possible clues about what was seen, a set of clues that indicate a faintly plausible reality, its clarity and vividness altered and warped by forgetting, by the dimming of images, by the opalescence of veils, the matte thickness of curtains or the ruffle of parasitic gleams. These clues are deceptive, and by no means evidence in the sense of proof. It is not about witnessing a *snap of life*, the aim is not to produce a *snapshot*, but to tell the story of a gaze, to show how the memory of a place can get so layered that it stops being a memory and turns into a painting in its own right, a sealed-off world retrospectively divulging its instability, its evanescence, its soft luminous hovering in shades of grey beyond memory's grasp. Dirk Braeckman's works are sprawled across the slow erosion of an image which was once seen, recollected, and then splintered into so many fragments that memory forgets itself within the work's self-enclosed body. This is perhaps what is meant by a painting.

1– Grégoire Bouiller, *Le coeur ne cède pas*, Paris, Flammarion, 2022, p. 30.

2– Éric Suchère, "Figures – Espaces – Valeurs", p. 84 of this book.

Looking at the world, photographing the world and looking at photos of the world are three separate actions, and it is worth recalling that a photo is always a framing of a broader context, and enacts a subtraction and piercing of reality. Photography extracts a segment of what is seen, literally expressed in the French term for shot, *prise de vue* (view-taking), and differs from painting which ultimately creates a world out of nothing (blank canvas or other support), a world that is precisely bounded by its edges, with no out-of-frame, with nothing beyond. The starting point for Dirk Braeckman's works is a photo, but the photos become paintings, their edges finely yet firmly bounded by a steel frame, an integral component of the artwork as demonstrated by the slight irregularities, the manual machining or the imperceptibly sanded corners, which imbue the artwork with an organic quality unachievable with a standard frame. These paintings have a skin-like surface and a body-like scope, revealing a painter's gaze. While it is true that these works use photography, it is literally *used*, deteriorated, weakened in its power of witnessing and objectively rendering reality, used to the point of being *abused*, overtaken by its tension towards painting. To cite the film director Albert Serra, "*using* entails an economic exchange, a pact, whereas for abusing there must first be bodies, gazes, exhibitionism."³ How true this is, and in Dirk Braeckman's work one senses that photography's naturally woven pact with reality has been breached. What I'm gazing at involves time's thickness, the surface, the exhibition of bodies haloed by a sensuality verging on eroticism, the surge of intimacy precisely where bodies are no longer present.

A.D.F.-S.B.1-03 – 2003 The paper of this book is inadequate, no paper or medium can aptly convey the surface of this or any other of Dirk Braeckman's paintings. Its body (its scale) and its skin (its texture) remain inaccessible. The image is photographic in name only. Its eerie physical presence likens it to a painting or drawing made with intensely jet black charcoal. The curtain and its reflection on the tabletop in what seems like a hotel room evoke Vilhelm Hammershøi's astounding paintings, as if their somewhat faded hues were subtly filtered through grainy blacks and greys. Dirk Braeckman's photographs are bodies and these bodies divulge the rare quality of their skin. It is a skin of nakedness and erotic half-shadows, a skin whose ashy texture imbues the images with a sensuality conveyed by tiny details embedded in powdery shades of grey. Eroticism has seeped through the pores of this image-derma: the cross-window evaporates into the whiteness of veils, the curtain and its oblique motifs are entangled like hair, the faint reflection merging with the table edge and barely revealing the fabric's underside in a ripple of light cloth. However, we wish to point out that the image is not the oeuvre, and one's eye has to graze the photo's soft surface in order to gauge the mood of this lust-tinged scene.

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3– Albert Serra, "Tranquille anarchiste", interview with Fabrice Lauterjung, artpress n°503, October 2022, p. 33.

The surfaces of Dirk Braeckman's paintings are shaped by the compactness of a drape, by the evanescence of a translucent veil, by teeming motifs scattered across a frayed carpet, spanning the morning light slicing through a parted curtain, ambiguous gleams, hovering glimmers, wintry sun-ripples upon beds where enigmatic sensuality suffuses an ethereal hotel room. The works show things precisely as they were seen, those things we never quite look at in this way, those things that in spite of ourselves unexpectedly wind their way into our memory to weave the strange pattern of ghostly imprints that will linger on. The works show things as Dirk Braeckman saw them, things we'd never see – not like this. These things transform places – walls and doors, curtains and beds, alcoves in corridors and halls, sea-misted bays, windows that block out the world – into still-life fragments of reality, evoking the way in which our dreams and memories crystallize on seemingly trivial details fraught with feelings, memories and sensations. Framed and sifted through greyscale filters, these places have become anonymous non-places, patches of *somewhere* refracted by the echoes and clues that sometimes signal the photographer's presence. It is significant that several works result from re-shot photos (his own photos, found photos, or from posters and other types of documents) – and that their surface has been partially erased by the flash-triggered blind spot. The initial image is blinded by the sudden appearance of the photographer, whose sheer presence *abuses* the image, *abuses* photography, spawns a surface and infuses it with duration, tilting the photo towards a painting-in-becoming.

B.O.-D.U.-00 – 2000

A row of rooms, similar to those found in 17th-century Dutch paintings, such as the renowned work – for its lack of human presence – Samuel van Hoogstraten's *View of an Interior* (ca. 1655-1662), held at the Louvre museum. In a similar vein, *B.O.-D.U.-00* offers a discreet glimpse of a broom leaning against a wall, suggesting a domestic scene inhabited by those who are absent. *Remaining absent*, a contradiction at the core of Dirk Braeckman's works: being bound to a place, taking part in its duration despite no longer being there; or to the contrary, being markedly absent from a place and its timespan despite being present (as conveyed by the present/absent women in his works). Nobody in Samuel van Hoogstraten's works other than the painter, nobody in *B.O.-D.U.-00* other than the photographer, whose presence is hinted at by the flash-diffraction from foreground to background on the walls and doors. However, there is no brightness to the light brutally throbbing on the surface of things, for the matte print of the image has muted its dazzle. The sudden flash has entered a time warp, the white light has coalesced like a memory's slow unfurling. The light wanders from room to room, banging against the doorway, hushed in the curtains' thick velvet folds, tracing its chalky hues on the opposite wall, instilling the bland subject matter with surface and vibration, splintering the photographer's presence into an utter instability of things, into a *remaining absence*.

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Each of Dirk Braeckman's paintings is an unsettling nod of assent to a place's ineluctable disintegration into a different space. The place is the sole event of these paintings, and simultaneously a non-event which slowly crumbles. Dirk Braeckman's places aren't real places and yet they're very real, existing without quite existing. They vibrate with nostalgia and faded beauty, igniting an oscillation into an illusory becoming while remaining frozen in an absence of duration. Their ambiguity recalls Stéphane Mallarmé's free-verse poem "Rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu"⁴ (*Nothing will have taken place but the place*) with its double negative, its unsettling future perfect tense and its range of potential interpretations: nothing has taken place, nothing will take place, only the place takes place, the place is nothing... The flow of time has frozen over and crystallized in the place. The places and times merge into a zone of indiscernibility where nothing is named, other than by a few mysterious letters that give the works their titles (with just a few exceptions), where nothing sheds light on the artist's personal chronology – for the date doesn't refer to the year the photo was made but to when the painting was completed. Following the initial shot, the image lies buried for days, months or years, until it's extracted from the archives where it had been carefully inventoried so as to be developed, the way one develops a memory that has been refashioned to fit the context, assembling disjointed fragments to reconfigure an image, and one will never know whether this image corresponds to a real memory. Dirk Braeckman's images, in their primitive state, are pictorial embryos awaiting activation.

Dirk Braeckman is a painter who uses the photographic medium as a tool, without resorting to elaborate technology: a simple camera rather than a field camera, no staging but instead a scrutiny of reality's commonplace details. He photographs what he sees, which is what we don't see although we might if we could measure the invisible weight of things upon our future memories. The images that ensue from his paintings reveal the dregs of a world subtly streaming through reality's poetic crevices. His works capture beauty by focusing on the silent listless details coiled at the edges of memory. We've all experienced this: what we retain from things that matter to us is sometimes not the things or events in themselves, but rather their trivial fringes, their feeble grammar sparked off solely by punctuation, a semicolon which, in a sort of sublimation, emits a word's melancholy breath or lights up a sentence in the middle of a text. Dirk Braeckman's paintings are indeed punctuation marks of reality, intonations aimed at shifting the perception of things. While this primarily means *taking* a photo, it mainly involves *rendering* what was seen via a fine-tuned syntax poised between the photographic image's sublimation and the initial image's devaluation towards its pictorial becoming. The images wander, thicken and somewhat flounder in their grainy devaluation with no aim, reason or stability in sight; they become filaments of moments, sensations and collisions of personal memories, now spun into possible memories for each viewer of his artwork, and thus become paintings.

4– Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, (1897), Paris, Gallimard, 1914, n.p.

Dear deer – 2019 Did you get – As I lie – As soon as – Once we – As I recall
– Yesterday we – Vague memories – I remember – I hope – Send my – Some recent
– I heard – Enjoyed – How long – I read – When we walked – Haven't – No wonder
– Constant – When shall – It's been.

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The names of the twenty or so works comprising the series *Dear deer* offer a pointillist glimpse of an intimacy which had previously been encrypted by the code names typically used for titles. They form a cluster of syntax-fragments that merely give an illusory description in how they're pieced together. These titles form the poetic cartilage of a secret gap-filled text, implying the impossible match between meaning and reality. They give voice to a stammering with fragile seams, conveying the inability of words to capture what has been seen and experienced. Rather than unleashing meaning, the words prompt a densification of what is depicted, and bring about a depersonalization. In other words, the clipped language and recurrent use of "I" paradoxically yield impossible clues (*evidence*): the author *remains absent* and at the same time, his absence remains, fraught, palpable in his ghostly presence deep within the works. The series title *Dear deer* alludes to a personal factor (the period of time when the artist moved from the city to the countryside setting of his youth) as well as to stuttering and to language's futile attempt at describing anything.

Dear deer brings to mind the title of Michael Palmer's poem *Dearest Reader* and its "photograph of nothing but" ("successive halls, flowered carpets and doors/or the photograph of nothing but pigeons /and grackles by the shadow of a fountain⁵"). At the end of the day, it is a photograph of *nothing but*: nothing but eaves, fringes at the edge of vision, the ungraspable duration grasped in a painting, the immeasurable distance between beings, nostalgia, lingering absence... *Dear deer*: artificial flowers cropping out of the wallpaper, flecks on a wall, the opaque black screen of a fake vernacular painting, the crumpled image of a naked body that might have been real or dreamed up, a landscape that feels familiar but doesn't exist.

a seeming road here, endless
rain pearling light
chamber after chamber
of dust-weighted air
the project of seeing things
so to speak, or things seen⁶

5– Michael Palmer, "Dearest Reader", in *The Lion Bridge (Selected Poems 1972-1995)*, New York, New Directions, 1998, p. 97.

6– Michael Palmer, "The Project of Linear Inquiry", *Notes for Echo Lake* (1981), in *Codes Appearing Poems 1979-1988*, New York, New Directions, 2001, p. 54.