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*Dirk Braeckman: Melanographer*

Steven Humblet

Photographer of the darkening, of the vanishing: this is how one might describe Dirk Braeckman (b. 1958). His photographs have no intention of clearly illuminating the world, but douse it in a kind of twilight. They are hazy, blurred, highly suggestive. They are not here to show us something. They offer no spectacle, no new insight, no revelation. What appears quickly disappears again. These – at least at first – shy images nonetheless have great presence. In any case, the images manifesting themselves on the flawless white walls of Museum M in Louvain are not frail.

The power of these photographs is not gleaned from their size. Although they are not actually small, the format is usually relatively modest – certainly in the generous Museum M galleries. When his images are in fact enlarged to giant proportions, as in the final gallery on the top floor of the museum, Dirk Braeckman has manipulated them in such a way that what strikes us is their delicacy, not their format. He has printed them on light, fragile paper and attached them to the wall without reinforcement, support or framing. The intangibility of these images, which seem connected to nothing else (not even the paper on which they are printed, or the wall on which they are hung) leaves viewers dumbfounded.

We lack, it seems, the right words to describe these photographic images. One might even ask oneself if these are in fact still photographs. Indeed, they are undoubtedly photographs, because they have been produced with photographic techniques and remain recognizable as photographic images (impossible to confuse with photorealistic paintings, for example). They do not disguise their technical origins: they are not ashamed of being just photographs.

They do not function as photographs do, however, or at least they do not do what people have come to expect from photographic images. To begin, these are not transparent windows onto the world, even though they show recognizable places, situations or bodies. We see, amongst other things, a portal, a waiting room, a bedspread, a window, a curtain, a blind wall with a few vague scratches, a corridor, or a nude body, but all refuse to let whatever is there be a decisive presence. What humbly moves forward in the picture is no more than a shadow, a phantom image that we cannot get a grip on.

Could we read these images differently, as mirrors that allow the appearance of something of the inner world of a maker of images, thus as images that visualize a unique vision and relationship to the world? Although there are striking similarities between the different images – Braeckman clearly has a preference for desolate, dark and shabby spaces –, they simply will not pull together into a unified and legible reflection. The viewer never has the feeling that he comes any closer to the photographer, that he is allowed a glimpse into his character, however briefly.

There is something fundamentally wrong with these images. They refuse to communicate. They tell us nothing at all about what they depict and equally little about their maker. Let loose, out on their own, they stubbornly follow their own inimitable trajectory. Eye to eye with them, what we most experience is a shimmering stubbornness. Old, accepted power relationships are turned in on themselves: it is not we who have sovereignty over the images, but the images that hold us captive (they drink us into their blackness).

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In the crisp white galleries of the museum, these images hang like silent, dark spots. Titles and informative data are missing. Nowhere do the images cluster together or engage in interaction with one another. There is no apparent trajectory, no clear system that binds them. Each image retains all possible autonomy. Together, they are nothing more than a loose collection of images. Here too, the photographer – a title that we apply to this maker of images only with great reservation – has broken free from the laws that govern photographic exhibitions. Braeckman refuses to allow his images to work together, refuses to line them up into a series with a complex or multilayered message. They do not function as a powerful visual argument, but as muffled, insular manifestations. They have no agenda of their own. They have no wish to announce anything, have nothing to defend or to protest (just like that naked body folded in on itself, the young woman we descry in one of the images: resting within oneself is enough).

These images are silent, but there is something – a great deal, in fact – brewing beneath the surface. The images are layered, not in the figurative sense of the word, but literally: they have been built up in different layers. Take, for example, the picture with the partially drawn curtain. Behind the curtain, we see a blind wall intended to be removed from view. The interplay between open and closed and the suggestion of unveiling that this implies, in fact results in disappointment. Again and again, there are inevitably those contrary materials that will not move out of the way, that cut off our investigation, our searching gaze (in another image, one of the few in which there is a window, a tulle curtain hangs in front of the glass, so that even here, we are given no opportunity for a clear look through). Time and again, we hit the flat wall of the image.

To achieve this impenetrability, Dirk Braeckman frequently makes use of flash. Again, there is the paradox: that which should open up the space for us is in fact that which closes it off. The ball of light that he causes to explode in the dark turns everything opaque. Just see how the mercilessly hard light of the flash brings forward the background of a painted mountain landscape, burning away the central mountain motif (the portrayal). It is as if an acid were eating away the depiction, until all we have left is its physical support. These violent, iconoclastic images are not about the fleeting world of the representations, but about reality being solidified into matter, about the unfathomable quality of the material (the ding-an-sich) against which we are constantly banging our heads.

Photography is writing with light, or so the etymology of the word suggests. What people sometimes forget is that in photographic emulsions, light originally manifests itself as a blackening (it is for exactly this reason that Raoul Hausmann once christened photography as 'melanography'). The sunlight streaming in is blinding. It erases, destroys. The capturing of light creates darkness (it makes that which should be light dark, and vice versa). It is only when this negative image is subjected to subsequent manipulation that the new inversion of light values takes place, and an image arises, which appears to be a recognizable impression of reality: the positive, the Phoenix rising out of its own ashes. In the case of Braeckman, we see images that seem to have never completed the whole conversion process, as if they had become hung up somewhere along the way. The images continue to waver, balancing on the threshold of appearance. They wrestle (hopelessly?) with the darkness in which they had originally seen the light.

In his work, Dirk Braeckman explores the difficult – if not impossible – transformation of world into image. The fact that he wishes to evoke this confrontation with obstinate reality with the help of a medium specifically intended to conquer, as much as possible, the resistance of objects and bodies, immediately reveals the immense ambition of this creator of images. While photography usually reduces its subject to

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a light, manageable picture that can change its support with no significant loss of meaning, which can circulate on a massive scale and with unanticipated speed, a Dirk Braeckman photograph is a heavy, laboriously hard to decipher, unmanageable and unique 'object' (an anti-photographic image). The frivolous manoeuvrability of the photographic image must here make way for the unwieldy toughness of the material itself: blackness pushes away lightness, slowness takes over from speed, and the disconcerting directness of palpable touch replaces detached, disengaged looking.