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ANNELIES DE MEY

Annelies de Mey (born in 1959, lives and works in Ghent, Belgium) photographs everyday life places. She is represented by the Jan d'Haese Gallery in Ghent, where she recently presented a solo exhibition entitled "Transpositions". She also participated in an exhibition on Belgian Photographers in the Museum of Photography in Antwerp (2005). De Mey is one of the few contemporary photographers who use the elegant palladium technique. She renders our daily reality in a sensibly staged world. Her photos impress us with their theatrical tension and the pictorial characteristics which she renders with the sensitive print quality.

Her work is held in the permanent collection of the Musée de la Photographie in Charleroi.

By Saskia Ooms

Saskia Ooms : How was your series "Transpositions" conceived?

Annelies de Mey : It all started with a series of portraits of trees. I wanted to bring inside what is outside. I wanted to photograph the trees as if the prints had been taken in a studio. An assistant accompanied me and she helped me set up a screen behind the trees, but there was a lot of wind and it was very difficult to achieve. I wanted to block the outdoors. Finally, we removed the screen and I started to use the background, the landscape. In the first series I wanted to obtain a plain background. After shooting, I made the prints and at first I wanted to cut out the background, but then I became aware that I quite liked the result and I decided to print the background as well. That's how I came up with the idea for the series "Transpositions".

S. O.: Your images have a certain pictorial quality. Is it a reference to painting or to the history of photography?

A. de M.: I use the old print technique: the palladium prints. I do them all myself. It is tedious work, but I want it to be perfect. It's not a conscious reference to the history of photography or to pictorialism, but I didn't like the texture of the plastic paper that everyone used at the time when I started with photography. I really wanted to render the different tones, which was not possible with the plastic paper. I went looking for other possibilities. My aim was to concentrate on the surface of the paper. There's a certain sensibility in the palladium technique. Maybe in the near future we will be able to achieve the same effects with a computer.

S. O.: How do you choose the places you photograph? Are you looking for anything in particular or is it the place itself which has to inspire you?

A. de M.: If the images speak to me, then it fits like a puzzle. If everything falls into place, then I know I can take the picture. I work really intensely and I walk around a lot. I can be walking for days before I find a place to photograph and even then, I do not always take the picture. I have been working on these series for more than ten years.

I really have to be inspired by the spot. Sometimes I think I have to photograph a certain location but it doesn't always work, then I go to the same spot another day or time. Sometimes I return to the place even if the image has already been taken. When I discover the right place, I don't change anything in the scenery.

The sense of time and space is also an important aspect of my work, because the place changes as soon as it has been photographed. The places are often deserted. I find them by accident. I always avoid monumental places with a strong symbolic or politically charged meaning.

S. O.: Can you explain your interest for the theatrical tension in your photos?

A. de M.: Before I made the series of portraits of trees, I was working on a series of portraits. I was very strongly influenced by Diana Arbus, whose work I admire a lot. These portraits were already very theatrical and scenic. For "Transpositions" I try to capture the environment. The spatial elements in these photos are important. The images are often very closed compositions.

Sometimes I try to avoid these closed backgrounds, for instance in the image Untitled (The parking space). Of course somehow, it doesn't seem to fit in this series. It's less claustrophobic in a way. The circle in the snowy landscape is also quite different from the other photos.

S. O.: Can you name some artworks/artists you esteem highly?

A. de M.: I like the work of Craigie Horsfield. He currently has a big exhibition in the Jeu de Paume in Paris (from January, 31st until April, 30th 2006). I admire the books of Dirk Braekman and the book "Unfinished Dissertation » by Boris Mikhailov, Luc Tuymans's paintings and the film on the last years of the life of composer Ludwig van Beethoven by Anna Torfs. I was always very fascinated by the portraits of Georgia O'Keeffe by Stieglitz to name an example from the history of photography.

One of the first photographic images which interested me was the one of the assassination of John F. Kennedy by Lee Harvey Oswald. This image has been reproduced everywhere and I wanted to see it over and over again.

S. O.: Can you comment on your last exhibition at the Campo Santo Kapel in Ghent (April, 17th – May, 1 2005), more specifically on your experiments with the different ways of presenting your work?

A. de M.: I think it's always very fascinating to see different images of artists, whether it's in a book, on the wall or in a slide show. I thought it was necessary to show these pictures in a closed room. I built a black tunnel in which the visitor could enter and look at my pictures in a slide show format. There was a certain time limit between the images. Afterwards many people told me that this presentation offered a different effect, that it accentuated the three-dimensional character of the images, since the viewer is totally immersed in the slide-show. Secondly the viewer is more isolated and the tunnel offers a more individualized experience. Thanks to the tunnel the viewer will experience my series more as a whole, as an ensemble. I prefer to employ the tunnel, whenever I can. Nowadays it's very hard to attract people to come and see an exhibition, especially since the internet already offers us so many images. I wanted to play with this idea of showing things in a different way.

S. O.: Your pictures have a certain dramatic aspect, some of them – such as the neon lamp – are a bit scary. They are very cinematographic to me. The photograph with the neon lamp or with the tables reminds me of the atmosphere of the film noir.

A. de M.: Someone told me that after seeing my exhibition he couldn't get my images out of his mind, some of them even frightened him. It's true that there's a strong tension or a strange atmosphere in them even if they represent every day life subjects. I need to have this balance with an esthetically beautiful image and this strange-alienating, maybe even disturbing, atmosphere.

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Annelies de Mey
Transpositions 1994–2006 (January, 14–February, 25 2006)
Jan d'Haese Gallery
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Belgium
www.jandhaese.be

Annelies de Mey
Campo Santo Gent (April, 6–May, 1st 2005)
Ghent

Belgian Photographers Exhibition 1840–2005, Antwerp, Fotomuseum
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www.fotomuseum.be

Exhibition Annelies de Mey for the Maria Stuarda opera
Opera Gent
Schouwburgstraat 3
3000 Ghent
Belgium
from April, 11 until April, 19 2006.