

Dirk Braeckman

14 November 2015 - 30 January 2016

Dark, brooding images, quiet and restless at the same time. The images of the Belgian photographer Dirk Braeckman are confounding. Their velvety blacks draw us near; their stubborn opaqueness pushes us away. They miss definition, are often hard to probe. Yet they are not mere abstractions. Somewhere, deeply imbedded in the photographic emulsion, something is struggling to make itself available to our scrutinizing gaze. A drawing of a woman's face, a nondescript interior, the vague contours of a mountain peak, are fighting the darkness out of which they were born and which still seems to envelop them as a thick protective cloth.

Before any photograph can reach us, it has travelled through several moments of utter darkness. There is the dark container that holds the as yet unexposed negative, the airtight darkness inside the camera body, and finally the wet darkness of the developing tank. Only a sudden burst of blinding light interrupts this movement from one light-tight container to the next: a short moment where the shutter opens up and fierce sunlight floods the interior of the camera. This explosion of light rages inside the confines of the camera as a firestorm, burning the image on the skin of the film (like a branding iron marks the cattle). A painful awakening. The obscure images of Braeckman seem to long back to this prior moment of pristine darkness from which they were brutally torn away.

The overall darkness that fills these images, turns them into solemn, stately presences. Darkness functions here as a mass that pulls the viewer in an orbit around the image. Indeed, we are circling around the image, desperately looking for a way in. An impenetrable surface keeps us at the border, stressing that there is nothing to see, no lesson to be learned. These images offer no spectacle, no new insight, no revelation. They are no longer a reflection of the world, but objects in the world, taunting us with their elusive presence.

The surface is often stained; one image is even scarred. These stains and scars disturb, not because they question the technical prowess of the photographer, but because they divert our attention away from the subject towards the image itself. They remind us we are looking at 'images', their surface not a transparent window looking out into the world but a dull armour putting itself between us and the world. Is it any wonder that curtains which conceal nothing, dark passageways that lead nowhere and opaque windows are such important subjects in Braeckman's work?

The objects of Braeckman are created in the darkroom. Their grubby exteriors show the traces of his workmanship: the stains of developer and the turbulence of smudges and smears, refer to his manhandling the light sensitive paper. They affirm that the darkroom is a place for messy experiments, not a production hall to deliver mass-produced items. The photographer here is a craftsman, sculpting every image into a unique object.

The darkroom, however, is also a place of control where the photographer is supposed to manipulate the light in order to turn the black negative into a positive, readable image. Once more Light and Darkness confront each other. But instead of drawing out the image, Braeckman pushes it even deeper into the emulsion. In several images he uses a technique called solarisation: by adding more "or rather too much" light during the developing stage, the lighter parts dissolve into ash grey. The darkroom has become literally a place to darken, a place where Light creates Darkness. As such Braeckman confirms the definition Raoul Hausmann once gave of photography as 'melanography': the sublime art of blackening.

Steven Humblet

Dirk Braeckman (born in 1958) lives in Ghent. He studied photography at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Ghent. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at Le Bal, Paris, BOZAR Center for Fine Arts, Brussels, De Appel Arts Center, Amsterdam, S.M.A.K. Ghent and Museum M, Leuven.

Galerie Thomas Fischer

Potsdamer Str. 77-87, Haus H
10785 Berlin +49 30 74 78 03 85
mail@galeriethomasfischer.de

