

Dirk Braeckman

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Text by Louisa Elderton

*The colour of truth is grey.*

– André Gide

*A grey day provides the best light.*

– Leonardo da Vinci

I'm writing this in Berlin, or should I say, from the thick of Berlin's winter. A winter where heavy veils of grey descend from the sky and penetrate you, get under your skin and cloud your eyes. The outside comes in. There's a dense lifelessness to it, somehow, where I feel I'm wading through vapour, through a kind of void in search of something that has gone missing. *In what's missing is where love has gone.*<sup>1</sup> Love or light, sun or lightness. And amidst everything turning monotone, I often ask myself how to lift this unchanging pitch, searching out intonation: looking out for the light.

On the surface of things, contemplating Dirk Braeckman's photographs might not be an obvious antidote for me during this desolate season. For his is a palette of shadowy monochromes, of mysterious fragments that speak to such a veil, and in a sense, to darkness. Yet the density of the visual elements in his photographs is undeniably alluring, with surface texture that lends the works a sumptuousness or even opulence, cutting through any potential for the macabre.

I wrote my first piece for *Artforum* about Braeckman's exhibition at Galerie Thomas Fischer in 2015, observing how there's *a dense, black space here where light is barely perceptible and matte surfaces intermittently reveal pattern and enigmatic form*. I think I was looking at the gelatin silver print *27.1/21.7/016/2014* (2014), which depicts a silk curtain brushing against a velvety padded wall. For an image that sounds like it might keep your eyes gliding in the shallows of repeating shapes and textures, there is actually a deep sensuality to this work. A black space occupies the bottom right-hand corner, which is so dark as to pull your eyes into the depths of its silence, or into your own visceral instincts. I want to enter the image to rub my cheek against the curtain, or press myself into the soft wall, lean my weight into it so that it holds me. This is an enveloping darkness that welcomes you in: you, the billowing winter cloud searching for a surface over which to smother yourself.

Beyond this intuitive reflex to enter the images and touch these textures, the pull is perhaps also, in part, a response to their sheer scale, and because of Braeckman's own rapport to the work. He has said, "I like to have a physical relationship to the image ... in my case, the image itself is a reality."<sup>2</sup> He even built himself a huge darkroom in the 1980s, in which he has spent innumerable hours moving around, experimenting, filling enormous trays with chemicals and sinking sheets of paper into them. I've always thought of the darkroom as its own reality, its own inside; a space removed from everything else, and, thus, it is a psychological realm of intense thinking and being, turning fragmented moments into new realities – windows into the world beyond, told through the prism of the photographer's eye. In this sense, photography is an oxymoron; instants of a certain kind, captured in one place but then changed into entirely new truths amid the red glow of private darkness. In the words of Susan Sontag, it is "a creator of inwardness."<sup>3</sup> Of outside coming in, and inside speaking out.

With his new exhibition at Galerie Thomas Fischer, Braeckman's work fills two separate spaces: mainly images of domestic interiors and portraits are brought together at Potsdamer Straße,

while at Mulackstraße hangs the five-part ultrachrome inkjet print *U.C.-T.C.I.-21* (2021), a landscape of sorts. I say *sorts* because even Braeckman's landscapes are ultimately all surface texture, the might and violence of the sea transformed into abstract mottled pools of grey mist, black silk, and white froth. There's a rhythmic sequence moving from one to the next, a dance of density between tones. It even feels carnal, like the intimate marbling of fat and flesh beneath the skin. And this is the point at which desire seems intrinsic to Braeckman's work, that the waves, or a curtain (*S.N.-U.C.-21*, 2021), or even an object as seemingly banal as a room separator (*C.P.-C.N.-18*, 2018) are deemed equally worthy of our attention, our amour, every bit as captivating as shining hair cascading over a bare shoulder, or stroking the nape of the neck. His images reveal a certain way of looking, a Dionysiac curiosity that shifts the commonplace into small moments of spontaneous wonder, which reminds me to take pleasure in what my friend R. would call the 'little life' – in the world being *enough as it is*, if only you take the time to look at its diminutively lustrous fragments. Perhaps nothing is really missing beyond that misty veil, neither love nor light, if you remember to let the outside be the creator of inwardness, perceiving any void as a fragile space for possibility.

Braeckman's images seek out greater openness, but an openness that comes from being quieter, from slowing down and letting space emerge. He has described his interest in "a kind of charged void, a certain suggestion, paying attention to what isn't present."<sup>4</sup> He asks, "What can an empty space evoke?"<sup>5</sup> Emptiness, in all its terrifying magnitude. Can you sit with such an absence, let yourself be silent, wait and feel what comes up inside when the barrage of stimuli stops? Why is occupying that stillness sometimes so oppressive, so languorous? The void itself could be a bare canvas, or a blank page that we fill with the rough instinctual part of ourselves (of the id), of the past; the parts we find hard to accept, the moments we wish were lost to memory. Braeckman's ghostly imprints seek out such gaps, these lulls, transforming them into haunting luminous presences, the minutiae of life suddenly monumental and imbued with intensity. Indeed, it is partly by *not showing* that such openness is possible – when a face fleetingly turns away from the camera, for instance – for isn't that when pretence falls away? In those private, short seconds when we look in the other direction, when we are not performing, when we are instinctive?

Works like *I.R.-A.M.-20* (2021)<sup>6</sup> and *S.N.-U.N.-21* (2021) suggest such instances of vulnerability: a woman's back presented to the camera becoming a smooth, speckled plane of grey as she lies still on an unmade bed; limbs gently folding in upon themselves, the soft curvature of hips and thighs coiled in protective repose; flashes of silence, where motionlessness become an active state that reveals a new layer. The same resonance is also achieved in *U.S.-R.B.-20* (2021), in which a polished piece of stone with its dimples of black and brown are seemingly every bit as porous, fragile, and exposed as that naked back. Or let's take another example, *T.H.-R.P.-23* (2023), in which the glowing red surface of an oil painting by Watteau is captured up close, clouds and mountains becoming an abstracted plane that is worn, cracked, and wanton, a constellation of ever-changing matter, rather than a fixed entity. Each is a surface for reflection: on time, on the elements that go unnoticed, on your perceptual shifts when everything is slowed down and refined. Only then can new textures reveal themselves to touch and feel and enter.

Latency in relation to time plays a crucial role in Braeckman's practice. After taking pictures, the negatives often lie around for months, or even years before they find new life in the darkroom. By then, the artist's emotions or memories from the moment have disappeared and he is simply faced with an image – composed and cropped at the time it was taken, the frame already defined. Looking back at Braeckman's oeuvre, most of the experimentation of renewal took place in the darkroom, with the artist harnessing different light sources to over- or under-expose a print, using brushes, dust, and different chemicals to disturb or control the developing process. Today, he still uses analogue photography, but the process also culminates with digital printing.<sup>7</sup> These technological factors define the richness of his grey tones, which in turn drives the intrigue that draws you into the image – that push and pull between concealment and intimacy. Braeckman even emphasises how "the dark tones seem to conceal things, yet at the same

time they are inviting, they let in the light.”<sup>8</sup> For Braeckman, surely, the colour of truth is grey.

Sometimes when I write about art, I imagine what it might be like to infiltrate the body of the artist, inhabiting their limbs, thinking with their brain, looking out at the world through their eyes, trying to find their truth. Bridging the gap between how I experience the work, its mood and effect, versus the artist’s lived experience of actually making it, and the effort of attention involved on both sides – that meeting point. Isn’t that part of the wonder of art? That even on our darkest grey days, we might see a new source of light, feel how we could come at the world differently? Experience it afresh, despite the void and the veil of vapour? To remember that ours is only one perspective, and that everybody out there is having their own moment, their own lived knowledge of darkness and light. To see an image that let’s you into yourself, but also, into another; distilled with desire, though ever fragile.

*Louisa Elderton is a British writer and editor based in Berlin, and the managing editor of ICI Berlin Press.*

1. *In What’s Missing Is Where Love Has Gone* was the title of an exhibition by the British filmmaker Christopher Petit that I curated for the Berlin-based project space Decad in 2017. Christopher had heard the phrase on a talk show while watching daytime television in the UK, which he described as being a particularly bleak pastime at that moment. I’ve always found the phrase startlingly evocative, suggesting that mournfulness experienced during periods of depression – its own kind of black hole into which all goodness disappears.
2. *Dirk Braeckman*, exh. cat. Belgian Pavilion, 57th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia 2017 (London: Koenig Books, 2017), p. 8.
3. Edward Hirsch, ‘Susan Sontag, The Art of Fiction interview No. 143’, *The Paris Review*, Issue 137 (Winter 1995).
4. *Braeckman* 2017, p. 8.
5. Ibid.
6. This work does not appear in the final hang at Galerie Thomas Fischer.
7. In an interview with Brian Sholis, Braeckman has discussed the impact of getting older on his working practice, as he is no longer able to spend hours in the darkroom: “These days I make small prints, then scan them with a repro camera – I essentially photograph them using a red darkroom light and a long exposure time. I sometimes even rephotograph them while they’re still in the developer, still in the baths.” See ‘Brian Sholis in Conversation with Dirk Braeckman’, in *Dirk Braeckman: Lustre./*, exh. cat. GRIMM (Amsterdam and New York: GRIMM, 2022), p. 7.
8. *Braeckman* 2017, p. 9.

Dirk Braeckman (born in 1958) lives in Ghent. He studied photography at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Ghent. Solo exhibitions have been held at Le Bal, Paris, De Appel Arts Center, Amsterdam, S.M.A.K., Ghent, La Biennale di Venezia, 57th International Art Exhibition, Venice, BOZAR Center for Fine Arts, Brussels, Museum M, Leuven, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, and currently at Frac Auvergne (until 14 May).

The exhibition is being held at two locations – on Mulackstraße 14 and on Potsdamer Straße 98.

The exhibition is part of EMOP – European Month of Photography and is a collaboration with Andreas Murkudis.

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