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Joachim Mogarra Magie de l'art photographique



20
January
—
3
March
2012

OPENING

Thursday 19 January
2012

PROJECT ROOM

Gilles Barbier
"Six short stories of
the Dice Man"

UPCOMING

WINSHLUSS

9 March - 14 April 2012

ART BRUSSELS

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"Inanimate objects, have you a soul that can unite with our soul, and the power to love?"
Alphonse de Lamartine

So where has he got to, Joachim Mogarra, that unpredictable artist, poet of everyday objects, historian who mocks the great classical texts? That sporadic demiurge, child lost in the world of grownups, master magician and gatherer of outlandish images? I left him hanging out with Dante and now, not having been able to talk to him for a few days, I fear he's off down memory lane with Lamartine; the lane not of landscapes held dear, but of wordplay and, dare I say it, roleplay. Never believe him when he suggests you should meet his pack of dogs, because it's certainly no pack and they're not even dogs: just sober china figurines that probably don't even belong to him. On the other hand, stop and think when, after the documentary photographer pose - a latter-day Atget bent on recording the least doorknocker, the most commonplace shop sign, the most elaborate staircase shape - he slips into the garb of the contemporary artist who, in the Becher vein, is out to pin down the nomenclature of the world's top dogs. Here's someone with an unerring grasp of the rules of the game - or, more exactly, of the chapters in the art history books, especially the one on the New Objectivity in 1930s Germany: that exaltation of the real, the quotidian, in all its ordinariness and verity, which the Bechers would later conceptualise in a wedding of strict photographic protocol and seriality.

In the course of a brief emulation of a casting director from one of the classy fashion mags, he got his subjects together one by one, checking out the calibre of their coats and making sure their size was right. He taught them to pose nobly, but with heads cocked endearingly to one side; he scrupulously adjusted the angle of the medals hung around their necks or the shape of the bow on their heads; and then he photographed all these remarkable animals frontally and on the same scale. Next, to boost their proud demeanour and set them apart from mere everyday dogginess, he arrayed them against a neutral backdrop that highlighted their purity and naivety at the same time as it made the whole thing ridiculous. For Mogarra never tells us the truth and only rarely takes a stance, leaving us to our free will and our doubts.

Setting his canine friends to one side for a while, our artist transported his little theatre of the absurd into the pseudo-industrial world of the camera, feigning a patient, step-by-step historical description in a fake advertising catalogue he then gleefully put through the mill via an astute analysis of the evolution of consumer uses and styles in the field. Taking as usual something that really exists - in this case the camera - as his initial postulate, he turns it into a meta-image: as a photography tool invading the entire visual field, the camera is confronted with itself. And like an advertising whiz-kid Mogarra uses paint to retouch the rough of what is doubtless destined to become a highly personal industrial idea.

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Here we are back with the Mogarra who plays on the double meanings of words: a shutter curtain as flowery and as meticulously looked after as the curtain in somebody's spotless kitchen; a Foca Sport model sunk just below water level and renamed Redoutable after the famous French submarine; or weird situations in which he can transform a polaroid camera into a mortadella slicer or, sticking perfectly to scale, a ski-jump for public lice. Then he casually throws in observations that are more profound than they at first seem: on economics, with an African camera made, like so many other everyday objects, out of tin cans; on geopolitics, when he sets about photographing the Lubitel, the famous Soviet camera stamped with a red star or a Swiss Army knife, according to its owner's nationality; and on sociology, with his description of the camera used by people taking the paid holidays that came to France in 1936. While he makes references to History with a capital H, as captured by photojournalists amidst the barbed wire of endless wars, he nonetheless remains aware of the history of the art of photography, explaining it with a contemporary version of the camera

obscura - or maybe of the myth of Plato's cave; and I can't help seeing La Chambre (The View Camera) as similar to Brassai's experiments with night photography using car headlights and his Rolleiflex. Depicted here, stroke by stroke and just as casually, as if in a series of small still lifes of the cabinet of curiosities kind, is the history of an art that has revolutionised our way of seeing.

Then suddenly the historian is transformed into a skilled practitioner, offering a large-scale display of all the products our gluttony and bad eating habits drive us to consume to excess. But here our artist-practitioner wants to open our eyes to these killer calories: blown up against a neutral ground the better to focus on its perniciousness, each item is off-handedly presented as an antidote to our unconsidered appetites. The sophistication of the images is in total contrast with the dark humour of the content. But maybe Joachim's already off somewhere else, performing other magic tricks.

Agnès de Gouvion Saint-Cyr
(Translation: John Tittensor)

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