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Katrien de Blauwer, Photographer without a Camera

January 24, 2016

When we speak of scale in art, the connotation is often that the works are larger than life. With the work of artist Katrien de Blauwer, scale runs in the opposite direction. The modest size of her work draws in the viewer, but her pieces never reveal the secrets they seem to hold within. She describes herself as a “photographer without a camera”, documenting the personal history of otherwise forgotten photography and ephemera. Over the past few years she has garnered a loyal following online, where she shares her small studies without explanation, comment or expectation. Her portfolio is a prolific study in the possibility of images that may have been forever lost if they had not caught de Blauwer’s eye. We caught up with the artist in Antwerp to speak about her work and process.

Hometown: I was born and raised in Ronse (or Renaix in French), a sleepy town in the region of East Flanders in Belgium, situated at what is called the language border which divides Belgium in the Flemish and Walloon part.

Current Location: I’m currently located in Antwerp, a large provincial town in the northern part of Belgium.

How do you take your coffee? I only drink coffee in the morning, mostly two cups of medium sized espresso with a drop of bio coffee milk.

Do you have any Sunday rituals? Not really, it’s the only day I eat bread in the morning, instead of cereals, and at noon we go to the Sunday market to buy bio vegetables. For the rest, I try to keep my daily working rhythm.



Can you elaborate a bit on your background? What is it that led you to the work you do today?

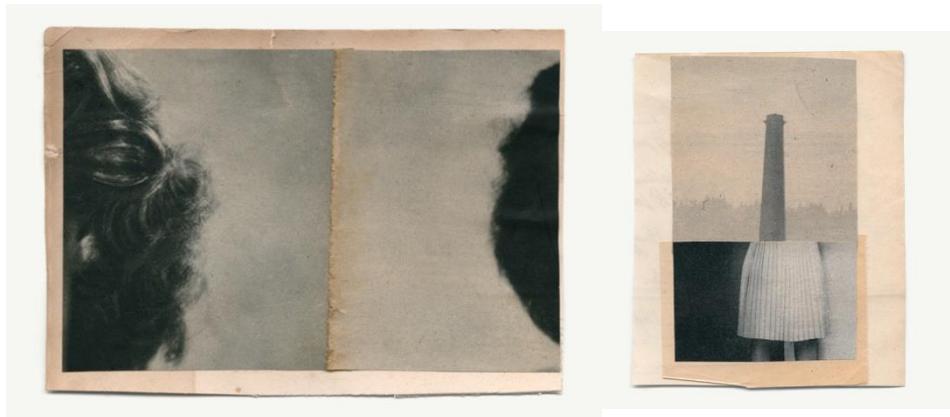
It has been a very long process that took more than 20 years. At first I studied a few years fashion academy in Antwerp, but I quickly realized that wasn’t really my thing. I spent most of the time making these so called mood books made from pieces of magazines, In a

certain way it was a start of what I'm doing today.

After I stopped attending the fashion academy, I began making postcard sized collages, but it was only a few years ago that I started showing them in public. I posted a few works on Facebook, and then it started rolling.

Where do you source your images from? Is there a type or era of imagery that you are particularly interested in?

My sources are mainly magazines, I would say from 1930 until 1960 and mostly black and white. I'm always searching for material I've never used or seen before.



What is your working process like? I am especially interested in your single cuts – is the work spontaneous? Considered?

I work very spontaneous. First I roughly cut out a selection of images and backgrounds, then I start creating in what is usually a few hours session. I always try to work out of my unconscious. By this way of working I come to unexpected results. Sometimes someone points out something I had overlooked at first: a line that fits perfectly, a figure that is connected in two images or an unusual association.

The single cuts also started this way. I came to this technique almost unaware. It was afterwards when I looked at the results of a days work, I suddenly realized, this work is made with one picture, not two. One picture deconstructed in to two pieces in a way they form a new image. This was something I never did before.

After I noticed this I started working with these technique, that's when the name for this series also came into my mind. It's like with a lot of what I'm doing, it starts very spontaneous and gets more considered afterwards. I investigate a theme or technique, go deeper into it, pushing it to the limits until something different comes out.

You describe your work as emotional – even without explanation they feel very personal. Do you have misgivings about sharing your work?

To be honest, Yes I do, although I'm getting used to it now, I always keep a private box with works I don't want to show or sell.



Can you tell us a bit about your recent publication, *I Do Not Want to Go Silently into the Night*, and your relationship with the work of Michelangelo Antonioni?

This publication which is already sold out now, was a very intense collaboration between Giuliana Prucca from Avarie Publishing and myself.

It all started when I was a weekend in Paris and got a mail from Giuliana (who was also in Paris) with the question of publishing a book. The next day we spent the whole afternoon in a Paris bistro making plans together. A few weeks later she came to Antwerp to look at my work. One month later I was back in Paris, and so on...

It was Giuliana who came up with the idea of using text fragments and an unused script from Antonioni, she also investigated the relationship between our work.

It's true that my works call to mind the technique of photomontage or film editing, and there's often a kind of void, an off-screen event, an emptiness, a separation, like we see in the films from Antonioni.

If you want a more in-depth analysis I can always advise you to read the large press release of the book on the website of Avarie publishing.

The way your pieces are assembled often feels like a series of scenes or film stills, is the intention to suggest a narrative?

Not really, I think my work is very personal and open for interpretation. Although I admit that the title of some series can lead to suggestions.

The presence of eyes, and looking, is felt but rarely seen in your work. Can you comment on this?

I guess that's the paradox of my work, it comes from my inner world and asks questions about my personal life, body, sexuality... but at the same time it's also very anonymous by using images from magazines. I almost act as a neutral person between my story and somebody else's. I did not make all these images, but I'm giving them a new meaning. I take stories from others in my personal world and by cutting away faces my personal story becomes everybody's story and universal.



You've recently been commissioned to provide editorial illustrations for the *New York Times* among others – does your process for working on commission differ from your personal work?

It depends, sometimes I can use an existing work, then it's like going through my archives and choosing the right work that connects with the article.

On other occasions, I have to work with delivered materials (like old pictures), which can be quite hard, because I don't really choose the pictures myself, but still need to adapt part of them in my world. It's a different

process, also technically. As I normally work completely analog, this becomes more a digital process with scanning and editing.

Then there's the deadline you have to respect, which gives it a stress factor, because you cannot follow your own rhythm.

Are there particular artists that you look to for inspiration?

It may sound odd, but I don't really look to the work of other artists a lot. I don't go to exhibitions often, mainly because I'm always busy with my own work. It's like they say:

Life is short, art is long. I get the most inspiration from hard working.

If I'm inspired by other artists, it's more their personality that inspires me and gives me strength to continue. For example, I'm a big fan of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, a Belgian dancer and choreographer. Her work looks at first simple, minimal, but it's very complex and has many layers.

There are some artists I feel related to, like Louise Bourgeois, Tracey Emin or Marina Abramović. I don't see them as examples for me, but all women who work and use

autobiographical experiences or traumas from the past in their work. Hence, I do feel a kinship.

The statement of Marina Abramović's explains it very beautiful: "Difficult childhood problems, families, All Those Things, somehow Become a treasure, Become some kind or source of inspiration for later on."