

Entr'acte: On photography and acting (2004)

Katrien Vermeire

The fascination for opera captured in photography

After 14 years of Flemish Opera, the institution was in need of a new visual language. During this decade and a half, the emphasis had shifted in terms of production-aesthetics and the programme. The visualization of the offer was radically questioned and adapted. Lodewijk Joye, our graphic designer, tackled the job within a season and a half – in consultation with the communications and dramaturgy departments. The new visual approach for the announcement of opera productions was the final piece of the rejuvenation operation. Up to and including last season (2002-2003), we had, with sometimes rather less convincing results, chosen existing photographic visuals that at times compromised between what we found powerful dramaturgically and what colleagues in the communications department found right from a promotional perspective. We rarely came across pictures which satisfied everyone. We decided to change course completely and to determine the rules of the game ourselves. We went in search of a young photographer who, in collaboration with our communications and dramaturgy departments, would make original pictures of high quality. Our reference points for the selection were: good photography; young talent; photos that somehow related to opera/drama/music/theatre or ran counter to them; pictures that could stand out in the overabundance of posters in today's streetscape. From a graphic perspective too they had to be interesting because they would be used on different supports (posters, the cover of the programme booklet, and the calendar). We soon realized that with the work of Katrien Vermeire we had hit the proverbial bull's-eye. Extremely powerful portraits, which always left pure realism behind. An intriguing relation between character, which clearly appears in the foreground, and the surroundings (nature or urbanism). Sometimes a surprising result because of the use of artificial lighting. Appeasing, classically inspired pictures that always contain something mysterious, fascinating. You always ask yourself questions about the portrayed. A body of work which we could get to work with. A plus point was also the fact that Katrien Vermeire was familiar with commissions. The briefings and the gradual search for the definitive picture soon indicated that we hadn't chosen an obvious and easy work method. Each time, Katrien Vermeire had to master a completely new world and create an accurate image for it. Again and again she managed to evoke the right atmosphere and tension

in an original and powerful picture. A picture that both directly holds the viewer in its grip and is also intriguing. A picture that does not let go. The ingredients seem quite simple, but with Vermeire become a refined mix that never reveals itself completely. The picture for 'Luisa Miller' shows us a young girl that is not so much concerned about what she looks like but instead about what is happening within her emotionally. She wears a pristine white sweater and stands prominently in the foreground. The tension between the character and her environment is evoked by the diagonal road leading towards the unknown and by the threatening overcast sky above her head. The environment is in the background but is compellingly present in terms of content. The dramatic tension lies both in the portrayal of the character and in the shown environment and in the friction between both. This is accentuated further by the use of the flashgun. The character thus stands in an ambiguous relation to her environment: she stands inside and outside the landscape. She is a part of it but also an outsider. Precisely what Luisa is in Verdi's opera. For the image of 'Hänsel und Gretel', Vermeire plays on our fascination for the unknown. The two children themselves don't show their cards. We only see their naked backs. We don't know what they feel, think or see. We can only guess and that is what makes the picture so exciting. We look with them into the dark, mysterious wood. Together with the children we step, fascinated, into the strange and the unknown. The figure in the 'Kata Kabanova' picture also stands with her back to the viewer. She looks over an endless expanse of water. The atmosphere is grey and devoid of perspective. The water appears calm but there is clearly a sense of animosity lurking. The drama is buried – under the expanse of water and under Kata's raincoat – and can break out at any moment. A low, weak sun generates a frail, indeterminate light. The man of the 'Il Pirata' portrait, on the other hand, looks us resolutely in the eye. He wears a dark, unbuttoned sweater. His long hair blows freely in the wind. In brief, a romantic hero who recklessly demands his lover and prefers to die than to flee. But first he takes his revenge with his head held high. The setting is a light-blue sky. Unlimited space for outsize feelings. The picture for 'Arabella' is the first to have been taken indoors. It concerns a bourgeois theme where money and class play an important role. It is an intimate portrait of a fascinating, self-conscious lady. She does not let herself be seduced by second-rate admirers but waits deliberately for Mister Right. The glass of water, which plays an important role in the libretto, is an enigmatic symbol, like those found in Jan Van Eyck's paintings.

What makes these pictures so powerful as posters for an opera production? Each picture focuses exactly on the content and its message. Both the biotope in which the story unfolds

and the protagonist are shown with scrupulous precision. The fascination for opera recurs in the force of attraction that emanates from Katrien Vermeire's photographs.

Anne-Mie Lobbestael

Katrien Vermeire – Lodewijk Joye

Flemish Opera season 2003-2004

Katrien Vermeire was commissioned by the Flemish Opera to make production pictures for 'Luisa Miller', 'Hänsel und Gretel', 'Kata Kabanova', 'Il Pirata', 'Arabella', 'Jeanne d'arc au Bûcher' and 'Satyricon'.

Lodewijk Joye was the graphic designer of the posters and the programme books.