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Dreaming with eyes open

She photographs fireflies, makes portraits and seascapes. On the elusive in the work of Katrien Vermeire, on show in Brussels.

By Jan Braet

The fireflies in the Sonian Forest fly around at random with their yellow-green lights glowing constantly. Things were different with the swarms that Vermeire came across in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee. During June nights, they emitted, synchronously and with short intervals, between six and seven strong, yellow light signals. This is how the males of the species *photinus carolinus* carry out their reproduction ritual, during which the females, invisible almost the whole time, flash their lights once or twice, as biologist Jonathan Copeland had explained to her. Katrien Vermeire (b. 1979 in Ostend) recorded the dance in her photo series 'Godspeed'.

A *blue ghost* firefly sometimes also appeared before her camera, flying more slowly than the *photinus carolinus*. Scientists divide the fireflies according to their movement patterns instead of on the basis of the yellow, red or blue light that they give off. In fact these are beetles, although they are also called glow-worms. They are subject to the phenomenon of bioluminescence, the ability of their abdomen to let the pigment *luciferin* get oxidized by the enzyme *luciferase*, a chemical reaction that generates light. During the first three nights, Vermeire used a trusted analogue camera, but unsuccessfully. Driving for hours to a laboratory and waiting for the development were not even rewarded with a single usable picture. So she turned to a new digital camera with a particularly high light-sensitivity (it captures the light with an electronic sensor chip instead of recording it on a roll of light-sensitive film).

When analogue photos emerge from the lab, much of the work is actually over. But with digital shots it is only beginning: on the computer screen, each photo can still undergo 1001 changes. That creates a comfortable feeling of control over the picture, although one that is not without danger. Won't there be too big a distance to what was actually perceived? In any case, digital manipulation eliminates disturbing 'noise' – blue and red dots that stem from the

technical limitations of an ordinary camera.

Although she may owe it to digital photography that she was able to record the dance of the fireflies, Vermeire doesn't swear by it unconditionally. (Because photographing during 'Godspeed' required such long exposure times, it even reminded her a lot of the analogue methodology.) Perhaps only experts will notice that her series of seascapes is made entirely with analogue equipment. 'On Selecting Vibrations' shows the sky and the water of the North Sea from the coast of Ostend, of the Sea of Okhotsk near Shiretoko, and of Lake Michigan, Chicago. Subtle differences in colour, light vibrations and structure give each location a distinct climate.

It began with an art-integration project of the Flemish Government Architect during the renovation of the buildings of the Agency for Maritime and Coastal Services (MDK) in Ostend. Vermeire went out up to 15 times in the oldest pilot boat, the 'Zeearend', a buoy tender which lies relatively low in the water and was regularly motionless for half an hour – circumstances which she made use of when making the photographs. Vermeire says about 'On Selecting Vibrations': 'I had the feeling that every second was different, and that is perceptible in so many aspects of the picture: the clouds, the structure of the waves – sometimes velvety and sometimes almost iron.' On her photos of Shiretoko, taken during a single excursion by boat, the sky and the brilliant light-blue waves flow into one another, blurring the horizon. It was an incredible experience, seeing the light and the structure of the waves change before her eyes.

Synchronicity

In Chicago she set up her camera on the shores of Lake Michigan and chose for a long exposure time so that she could see the effect of time on the waves: a diaphanous blanket with a subtle texture. When she had finished, she saw that an almost identical series of photos of Lake Michigan hung in US President Barack Obama's White House. They were taken by Catherine Opie, who had divided them up by season. Katrien Vermeire, who herself does not make the distinction between seasons at sea because she doesn't see it, was struck by the synchronicity: someone else makes a similar kind of photograph on the same spot and uses an almost identical format – a vertical format, like a portrait, while landscapes are normally taken horizontally. She says that for her it was an obvious, almost logical choice. Because,

she says, as with portraits, she likes to approach things in a simple manner.

The need for control that had made her turn to the digital camera in 'Godspeed' was still completely lacking with 'On Selecting Vibrations'. She had built up a relation of trust with a technician from a Brussels lab that handled her analogue photographs. 'Ultimately I'm so happy when I go to see that man, when he prints my seascapes; when we then are both fully satisfied, and I have the feeling that colour is not due to any manipulation but to something that was there already and that he simply brings out.'

Katrien Vermeire made a name for herself in the art world with monumental portraits. Of young women who stand in bright daylight and look at you uninhibitedly and frontally (only Patricia turns her back to the camera). Any form of posing, whether spontaneous or imposed, is foreign to them. They lack a specific condition – adolescents, women who have just given birth with their infant – which characterizes the models of her famous colleague Rineke Dijkstra. Neither do they have the sharpness in the smallest details that make the photos of Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth so exciting. Katrien Vermeire prefers to let a calm indeterminacy reign, as though her models were dreaming with their eyes open, and to incite dreaming.

'I rarely take photographs of people that I know well', she says. What they look like when she first sees them is what matters to her. The photographs are attempts to reconstruct that moment. Just as when, on the way to a funeral, she came across Pauline, a young girl with a dog on a shiny leash (on the photo, the dog vanished almost entirely). Three years ago she approached someone but then lost her details. Recently she approached someone on a train again, without realizing that it was the same person whose number she had lost. When the person drew her attention to this fact, she was really surprised. And happy.

Quote:

No posing, no super-sharp details. Vermeire prefers to let a calm indeterminacy reign.

Captions:

- PAULINE & TIMO, 2003

The first meeting is the most important.

- GODSPEED #5, 2010

Six synchronous light signals.

- NORTH SEA #11, 2009

'I had the feeling that every second was different.'