Battlefield

At first sight, Paul D’Haese’s photographs look as if they are welcoming us to Absurdia. In fact, they show somewhere full of goodness knows what, with houses with blind walls and poorly fitting garage doors, and traffic lights lost in the middle of nowhere. However, if you take a closer look, the places, which appear to be such a hotchpotch, owe nothing to chance.

On the edge of major settlements, with their networks of narrow streets, they all miss out on one thing – albeit not far away – the delights of the market and thus the usual way a local area is laid out. So, they are not the fruit of a lack of logic, but the consequence of the clear, assumed choice of benefit at the expense of any moral value. They are not the result of irrationality, but clear disinterest in the economic world and the political world whose job it is to regulate it.

Although the diverse places which we see in this book may appear completely alien to us, that is merely because the way they are laid out is inconsistent with the dominant aesthetic codes. Or, more specifically, the architectural and town planning language of those who dominate. That of planned layout – residential, commercial, and industrial areas – which favours benefit from financial interests within the territory. That of a rationality of motorways and allotments, the modern varnish of which, in contrast, makes the surroundings that make it tick seem like they are a world away.

So, that which describes the hollow in these uncertain areas – wasteland, backyards, empty car parks, and closed up windows – it is the ideal world pictured by advertisers and proposed as a model to a population which will never be able to access it. That which tells, through euphemisms, how this dull décor came about, the flashy decorum of consumerism, the seducing bait of trade.

And places us in this residue of arrogant modernity, with townsfolk, more or less needy, around us, doing odd jobs and patching up. Taken on the fringes of a world with codes they do not have, its reins even less so; they reassure one another. Of course, they do not bring out the creative genius of Postman Cheval or the debrided imagination of Douanier Rousseau, but with equally touching naivety, they plug the gaps opened up by entrepreneurs of all kinds in what they consider their living space. So we see these breeze blocks, these walls and this fencing, we get these hedges, these gates and these grilles, so mocked by well-off Bobos.

So what we see in all of these photographs taken with remarkable clarity is not *bric-à-brac*, but rather the symbolic violence of the market in the territory and the pragmatism of the people who live there, since their properties will never have had the imposing presence of country houses in magazines and their garages will never be lofts.

This opposition between the dream life of catalogues and the real life of people, symbolised here by reproduction of a prototype with a hole in it, seems to be something, generic, which prevails amongst ideological deciders and people who must "make do" with the decisions. This is of course why, even though everyone is asking who the heir will be, Paul D'Haese's work should not be interpreted as a way-out rehash of romantic landscapes of ruin, but rather as an original, very straight way of expressing the territory's social imperatives. It should not be interpreted as the nostalgia of nature unchanged by human activity, but as the discovery of a culture which does not hold the promises of the imagination which it portrays.

Accordingly, all these patched up areas which he shows us are not "unhistorical" non-places without the life of the over-modernity described by Marc Augé, but indeed the perfectly normal battlefield of our existence during the era of post-modernity. An environment which we do not even perceive, insofar as internalised aesthetic norms exclude from visible reality anything which does not resemble them.

More specifically, all of Paul D'Haese's talent focusses on revealing it to us through pictures whose high quality gives us an insight into a multitude of phenomena which a camera cannot capture. In fact, although he has made the non-style, claimed by the documentary tradition since Walker Evans, his own, his originality lies in having added the non-subject. Thus, following in the footsteps of this style, which is not to have one, his subject is not what his photographs show, but what else they show. A way of going from the uninspiring description of consequences to the list of their causes. A photographic must, certainly.

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