

Extremely Distant, Yet Incredibly Close

Bieke Depoorter's Travel Photography

142

[K U R T
D E
B O O D T]

Things have moved quickly for photographer Bieke Depoorter (1986). With the photos of her graduation project she won the HP Magnum Expression Award. The design for *Ou Menya* (At my place) was as simple as it was adventurous. Without a clear plan, Depoorter set off on the Trans-Siberian Express, found herself in remote little villages and asked if she could stay the night with a family. Since she did not speak any Russian, communication was conducted via a written note: 'I do not wish to stay in a hotel because I have little money and wish to see how people in Russia live.' The feeling of trust had to be mutual. A lot remained unspoken. The pictures do the talking. Together they tell a story about hospitality in large families who do not have a lot to share. They live together in harsh conditions, occupying a few scant square metres. Together they respond to a primitive, almost animal motive: the search for security. The bitter temperature outside, the damp eating away at the walls and the desolate night landscapes contrast with the warmth exhaled by the inhabitants. *Ou Menya* was not a case of beginner's luck. Several series followed revealing intimate travel impressions during stays in the United States, Egypt, the French seaside resort of Sète, and Istanbul. In 2012 Depoorter became a nominee member of Magnum, progressing to associate member in 2014. She came through the prestigious photography agency's test with verve. What was Magnum so quick to see in her? What does Depoorter show us so consistently? What is it about her photos that leaves such a lasting impression?

Shared intimacy

Bieke Depoorter soon found her own voice, carving out a niche for herself, in a time when it seems nothing escapes the camera's lens. Photography has become a form of hysteria, constant and ubiquitous, as if photos were meant to replace experience itself; as if the selfie were more important than the view; as if the greedy photographers seek to immerse themselves completely in the present, showing what is happening in front of the photo (standing completely in the way, in fact). Depoorter does the opposite: she filters herself out of her images, allowing moments to take place undisturbed as far as possible. She



Untitled, from Ou Menya

reinvents travel and reportage photography as she goes along. The unusual is concealed in the obvious, not in the spectacular or the extreme. Depoorter shows us everyday moments, scenes which would never have been seen or ratified without her, partly because she physically travelled many kilometres from home to a special place with extraordinary inhabitants, but mainly because she succeeds in travelling within people. As a photographer she dares to step into unknown territory. From an open, vulnerable position a rapport can be established. The host families continue to behave normally in her presence, allowing her into the most intimate places, including bed and bath. No, the photographer is not a voyeur. She does not stare through a keyhole; she shares moments of time. The inhabitants are not exhibitionists either. They do not impose their privacy upon us in a shocking way. A good many conditions have to be fulfilled before a photograph can be taken at all, let alone to be able to return home with lasting images. There is no room for faking or overacting: not in the setting, the lighting or the right moment of time, either by the people pictured or the photographer herself. Together all the preconditions create something miraculous, shared intimacy.

After all, it did begin with a white lie. Depoorter was not just some impetuous student on a world trip looking for accommodation. The question is the pretext, the necessary step over the threshold to come closer to the / (At my place) and ultimately to come to a sense of we, allowing authenticity to arise. The note a



Untitled, from I am about to call it a day

friend wrote out in Russian for her does not state the truth and nothing but the truth. The final goal of her request for hospitality is not about finding a cheap place to sleep on a tourist trip, but about 'taking' (photos) and 'showing'. On closer inspection Bieke invites not only herself inside, but us too, the viewers who see her selected prints after her return home. We stand with her in the moment, looking over her shoulder into those cramped rooms. We see what Depoorter shows us: pieces of habitat she brought back with her. Perhaps it is we, the onlookers, who most resemble voyeurs.

I have to confess, I like seeing inside people's homes. On an evening walk I struggle to stop myself from taking a peek at their lives if they leave their curtains open, a light glowing invitingly at the window. But not for long. I would not go so far as to stand and stare. So I'm very grateful to Depoorter for going in on my behalf and giving me permission to look on shamelessly with her for as long as I want. At the same time her photos make me mildly uncomfortable. They raise all sorts of questions. Should I be seeing all this? How visible is intimacy? What makes a house a home? How globalised has this world become? And would I do that, give a photographer a bed for the night and expose my family life to her in the process? Would nervous Belgian and Dutch citizens, albeit with a higher average standard of living and a good deal more space, show such hospitality? In the end – besides craftsmanship and a practised eye – it comes down to human qualities, mutual trust, good intentions and empathy.

The photographer does not judge with her camera. Life does not pose for her (not too obtrusively, in any case). We feel welcome.

So much for the conditions. In *Ou Menya*, Depoorter inadvertently created a blueprint for her still young, developing oeuvre. The prize-winning project forms a benchmark. A sense of series dominates the Russian photos, which work best in each other's company. On their own, in all their raw vitality, they look somehow unfinished. It's hard to choose one favourite photo. I prefer the entirety, the interplay. In the book Depoorter allows the photos to run on over one or two complete pages. The page composition frames and gives rhythm between portrait format (one page) and landscape (two pages). Some images show part of an empty room, unmanipulated scenes from life presented as if the world is a stage. In others Depoorter really climbs into the skin of the inhabitants who fill the frame. There is no room left to take a distance. Life cannot simply be arranged within a rectangle. Out of sight, outside the book, life continues.

Only twice does she have inhabitants expressly strike a pose. A teenage girl in a see-through white nighty stands somewhat awkwardly in the corner of the room. She stands before us in her underwear, looks straight into the lens and does not smile. She crosses her largely uncovered legs. Her feet are turned in. The attitude she assumes creates distance and makes her in my eyes even more vulnerable. She looks a touch off balance. Behind her the green and yellow wallpaper with sunflower motif and a poster of a kitsch natural landscape maintains a cheerful mood. A sofa with sheets in disarray indicates that bedroom and living room overlap, as in many of the homes visited. On the next page Depoorter zooms in on the corner of the room (without the girl). Details leap out even more: the light switch, the tear in the wallpaper, the item of clothing pressed into the closed doorway. Depoorter needs such resting points. Soon our eyes are again overwhelmed by overfilled rooms.

The other posed photo is also one of a diptych. Again we see girls in their underwear, this time the colourful, innocently childish kind. Two ballerinas proudly show Bieke what they can do, raising one leg straight up in the air (one the left, the other the right). The sisters hold one another in balance. They have practised it for hours. On the preceding double page we see the same girls just passing the time. One leafs through a photo album. We do not see her looking; her head is hidden behind an open cabinet door. The other girl watches. Most of the image is taken up with the pistachio-green wallpaper. A one-person trampoline and a hula hoop await action. This is what the inhabitants are generally doing, killing time. Lying on their beds. Smoking cigarettes. Cutting hair. Removing makeup. Dressing and undressing. Going to bed. Waking up.

Into the twilight zone

In between scenes Depoorter takes us outside. It's night or very early morning; the faint natural light makes the photos grainy. We have to look carefully to distinguish objects and bodies. The inhabitants wash outside, in a shed or in the open with a bucket in the snow. It is bitterly cold but the kindly light on wet skin emanates warmth. How do outside and inside interact? This is a question Depoorter asks herself on every trip. Panoramic views offer perspective on

how people live together behind closed doors. In the Trans-Siberian cold of Russia the outdoors bites into the rooms. Clothes, hats and extra blankets lie within reach. Plastic bins and pieces of newspaper catch drips. Heaters top up the warmth. The curtains curl and the linoleum on the floor cracks with damp. The paper not only covers the damp patches and mould but also breaks the closed world open with colourful motifs. On the walls, photos, posters, carpet hangings and growth charts proliferate like promises. Layer on layer, as if the rooms are trying to wrap themselves up too. Then there's the human contact inside. *Ou Menya* reveals little room for physical intimacy. The generations live practically on top of one another. People sleep wherever there is a free surface. Privacy is a utopia or a daily battle. The only embrace is that of a young woman at the breakfast table trembling as she wraps her arms around herself.

Bieke Depoorter shivers too. She merges into family life. The lack of distance determines her point of view. It would be hard for her to remain an outsider in these familial and spatial circumstances. Once we see her taking the photo in a mirror. In the various rooms the same burgundy and blue sleeping bag also crops up, rolled out on the floor or a chair. The visitor merges into the image, ultimately to disappear. What remains is the observation. She must not become too close to the family. She limits herself to one night. Depoorter wants to get to the bottom of transitions: between day and night, light and dark, inside and outside, commotion and peace, clothed and naked, involvement and distance. It is in the interfaces and twilight zones that things become tangible, aged, authentic.

Land of the free and broken lives

Does Bieke Depoorter show us 'how people in Russia live', as she said in her note that she wished to find out? Not primarily. It becomes clearer when we place the later series alongside it. After Russia, Depoorter picked Europe's other brother, America, 'land of the free'. In the United States, instead of taking the train, Depoorter hitchhiked to her indeterminate destination. *I am about to call it a day*, the series is called. Before people go to bed they turn in on themselves in preparation for sleep. The gaze moves inwards. Activity ceases. Here, on the other side of the Atlantic, there is more space for physical contact than in the Trans-Siberian series. The difference between living and sleeping space is more clearly delineated. Depoorter goes to bed with her subject. A grey couple lie cuddling playfully on the bed under a wall crowded with pieces of worldly wisdom. *There's no place like home*. Despite the cuddling, a stronger sense of despair and loneliness permeates the American series. Materially the families are better off. A bored girl sits blowing bubbles with gum in a room strewn with toys. Another difference, here Depoorter is not communicating with body language alone. The English exchanged between photographer and subject slips a narrative element into the photos. For variety, between the family scenes Depoorter pictures not only landscapes (printed on lighter paper in the book) but sometimes also pieces of text, like a title card in a silent film. Particularly hard-hitting are the farewell letter of a father leaving his wife and child for more than three years and the diary page titled 'My Useless Existence': 'To fail as a person, friend, wife, and finally mother is truly the best definition of a use-

less existence.' The page is dated 2 July 1997. The woman wanted to share this page from her past with the visitor. Depoorter offers insights into broken lives. In America she gets to hear life stories. The photos are also more individualistic, less grainy (with flash and artificial light), more strongly framed and more independent of one another. Some resemble stills from a David Lynch film. In a forest a woman takes a night bath in a rectangular hole in a layer of concrete, bathing in artificial light. This can't be real. A director could not have set the scene better for this ostentatiously solitary moment of joy. Another photo looks like a specimen of sociological research from a Louis Theroux documentary: a family goes out in the car at night to stare at rich people's Christmas lights. So many artificial lights to dream away on, the Stars and Stripes waving over 'the land of the free and the home of the brave'. America, land of contrasts, inequality and unparalleled possibilities.

Untitled, from I am about to call it a day





Untitled, from In Between

Naked survival

In 2011 – the year of the uprising on Tahrir Square – Depoorter started the series *In Between*. On her website she marks the series as 'in progress'. The light in Cairo is warmer than in Russia. The chiaroscuro stands out as if in a painting. A symmetrically framed, backlit breakfast scene resembles an Orientalist painting by Ingres. A sublime moment in which everything falls into place. In Cairo Depoorter encounters still other living conditions: a different religion, a different relationship between man and woman, a life closer to the ground and houses where indoors and outdoors overlap. Particularly disarming is the photo in which a little girl sits in her bed roaring with laughter as a pigeon flutters around the room. Happiness is losing oneself in the moment. Luck is being present and pressing the button at the right moment. In the meantime a revolution is raging in the streets.

Depoorter does just as well close to home. The series she took in 2011 at the house of Roger Raveel in Machelen-aan-de-Leie is movingly beautiful: the painter ardently embracing his wife, at the coffee table, painting on a step, waving us off from behind a window reflecting the landscape he so often painted. Depoorter captures the intimate environment from which Raveel observed human activity and recorded it in colour on the white canvas. Raveel died in early 2013. Suddenly we speak of him in the past tense. His death seems hard to reconcile with these lively scenes. On the other side of the window we wave back at him.

Depoorter shows us how people live, how they come together to form communities and how they attempt to make the best of things in their own individual ways. The similarities between the series are more prominent than the differences. The individual and intimate touch on something universal. Above all this oeuvre in the making shows us naked survival: clothing, feeding, protecting, warming oneself and making life more pleasant, passing the time. In unguarded moments life comes down to shared space, losing oneself in the moment, light illuminating skin, becoming visible, existing. With her photos Bieke Depoorter kisses people from different continents goodnight. In the morning she says goodbye and goes on her way to share new evening adventures, extremely foreign yet incredibly close. ■

Untitled, from In Between

