

**Karel Fonteyne**

Somebody presses a button, a trapdoor opens, light floods the chamber and fixes itself on the light-sensitive emulsion: a photographic image is born. What is recorded in the dark chamber of the camera is the sumptuously visual splendour of the world. Yet, how inferior is this image, how little does it tell us of the photographer's rich sensory experience at the moment it was captured? The work of the Antwerp photographer Karel Fonteyne (1950) aims to redress this shortcoming. His ambition is to regale the viewer with the same sensory experience as the photographer's.

For example in the Body Map Series (2002), the camera goes in closer and closer. In this series the camera hogs the body uncomfortably closely and reduces it to an abstract game of bright planes and black lines. This is a process of mapping the body; the sensuality of the warm, tender flesh is converted into the cool, graphic precision of an – albeit fragmented – map. This reveals a paradox: the closer the camera approaches reality, the less readable the end result is.

Reality mutates if you get too close. The photograph is then no longer a faithful reproduction of the world, but a place where a different and autonomous reality looms into view. Fonteyne constantly seeks out the tipping point, the instant in which the photographic image loses its natural transparency. The moment when looking is no longer sufficient and the eye has to appeal to the imagination to find a way to the tangible body.

The series named 'The Hungarian Sequence' (1988) appears in the first instance no more than just a collection of snapshots, picked at random from the family album perhaps. But they are in fact the photographic recordings of a cinema performance in a fringe theatre in Budapest. They are secondary images, photographs of photographs. We recognise the scenes but the story they belong to is no longer clear. They have become wandering fragments, vague apparitions which evoke deeply hidden reminiscences in the viewer: these spectres on the wall might as well be our own memories.

This photographer loves to play with bodies. He gives beautiful naked women strange attributes, a bass tuba here, a mandolin there; puts numbers on their brows and closed eyes (numerology is never far away), covers their hair with a hairband (making them a member of one tribe) and hides their faces in books, etc. He changes them as if by magic into weird, elusive beings, into bodies without any discernible features. The individual dissolves into a type. Yet exactly how we are to interpret this type remains unresolved: the images remain mysteries, riddles with their adorned bodies stubbornly ambiguous.

In the series 'The Painter' (2002) too, Fonteyne focuses sharply on the body. In this instance it is the body of a painter in full swing. The images offer no clear analysis of the way the painter systematically fills the empty canvas. Instead they analyse the painterly act in a series of physically aggressive postures. The painter appears to be a dancer performing a choreographic score, a mobile entity who is entangled in an impossible duet with his own shadow. Before the painter touches the canvas, there is already that dark, threatening shadow preceding him to occupy the canvas. Or in reverse, every time the

painter retreats or prepares for the next 'attack', his shadow lingers on the canvas. The image the painter leaves in his work is, literally, a shadow of his own physicality. Could the same apply to these photographic images?

Karel Fonteyne puts a lot of hard work into his photographs, not just to make them 'beautiful' or to reinforce their imaginary transparency, but to give them a skin. He is to a great extent a photographer of the darkroom. This is where the most significant acts take place, such as the double exposure in the 'Horses' series. This is where the image is wrought as though by an artisan. By applying the light-sensitive emulsion to the image carrier (canvas or coarse paper), which sometimes causes 'painting defects' where the brush has not deposited a sufficient amount of emulsion so 'unexposed' scratches crisscross the smooth surface, the mechanical, clinical perfection of the photographic registration is replaced by the artisan imperfection of the human hand. We are looking at an image, not a window on reality. All these photographic manipulations have only one aim: to give the images a body, to complement looking with touch.

*Steven Humblet*