Paul Bogaers

6.11.15 – 17.1.16

My Life in the Bush of Ghosts

The Bush of Ghosts
of Paul Bogaers

Paul Bogaers' disparate universe lies in a classroom in a former school building, in the middle of a residential area in central Tilburg. It starts in the stairwell and extends all the way from the classroom to the toilet. Here a visual omnivore reigns, a things-junkie, an object fetishist, a bulk consumer of photos. Bogaers is a collector in heart and soul. He loves to surround himself with things that inspire him. His collection is also an essential part of his working process, which requires a large reservoir of objects and photos that he can draw upon spontaneously. 'When I create I try to play instead of thinking. That's why I want my studio to be filled with possibilities.'

Photos of his own but also found photos in the form of postcards and snapshots are neatly arranged in a green filing cabinet. Then there are the books that surround his desk in an orderly manner like soldiers in rank and file. Elsewhere, the studio is more chaotic. On large tables and on metal staging are things that have yet to be given a place in their final artworks: dried hogweed from the field behind the school, skulls of birds and mammals, black-and-white photos of masks, grey egg boxes, spectacles without lenses. In between are Bogaers' tools: brushes of different thicknesses, kept readily to hand in jam pots, various kinds of glue, knives and cardboard. But what catches the eye immediately, or rather the nose, is a smelly, gurgling bucket full of newspaper pulp. Out of that bucket comes the most important raw material for Bogaers' current work.

Papier-mâché

'Five years ago, after my exhibition *Upset Down* at the De Pont museum, I was completely empty. I've always had a love-hate relationship with photography and I no longer knew how to go on. Figuratively speaking I found myself in a space where at one time all kinds of things were waiting to be discovered and where miracles occurred. Now, though, I found I knew that space from beginning to end. At that point you have to find a door behind which lies a new space, as yet entirely unknown. That happened with the discovery of papier-mâché. Suddenly I had a vast number of new possibilities.

'For me papier-mâché is a fantastic material. It sticks to photos and to all kinds of other materials. It also led me to a new domain, that of three-dimensionality. I put strips of thick stacks of newspaper in water, drag them through wallpaper paste and then mould them into shape.'

Extended Photography

Ever since the start of his career in the mid-1980s, Bogaers has sought ways of escaping the most forceful conventions of photography. A number of photographers including Hans Aarsman, Theo Baart and Hans van der Meer were photographing the Dutch landscape in those days in a detached way with a technical camera. Bogaers could not identify with the use of photography as a dry representation of reality, purely to show what it looks like. He wanted to use photography as a tool to call up associations and create new meanings that went further than anything observable in a photograph.

Bogaers came to occupy a completely unique position in Dutch photography, that of an 'outsider' with no equal at home or abroad. Using analogue techniques he tried to avoid the patterns imposed by photography. If you look at the current tendency in contemporary photography, where under the influence of digital photography and Photoshop the flat surface and reality are being abandoned, then this pioneer of the 1980s seems surprisingly relevant. In retrospect he was way ahead of the pack.

'I've continually looked for ways of expanding photography. I've always been envious of painters. Step by step they build a picture. You start with an empty canvas and every brushstroke you make is a step. A photograph is extremely limited in that respect. You press a button and suddenly nothing becomes everything. My solution has always been to use photos not as the end product but as semi-finished articles. In the past I combined different photos, presented them upside down or painted or drew on them. Three-dimensionality was for me a logical next step. It's a step into complete freedom. Combining has been the central theme of my work from the beginning, but from photographic images alone I've now extended it to include three-dimensional objects and materials such as utensils, natural substances and of course papier-mâché.' To describe this he has invented the term 'Extended Photography'.





My Life in the Bush of Ghosts
The exhibition in Foam is named after the famous album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by Brian Eno and David Byrne, an influential 1981 record in the world of dance and pop music. It was the first to use samples of all kinds of collected voices to fill in the lead vocals. As in Bogaers' work, montage and collage are an important starting point. The feverish, possessed, obsessive atmosphere evoked by the music is precisely what Bogaers is after in his exhibition. Eno and Byrne in turn borrowed the title from Nigerian author Amos Tutuola. In his 1954 novel he tells of his endless wanderings through the Bush of Ghosts, which Bogaers says he too visits daily.

'I started working with papier-mâché when I began to get interested in African masks and images. I find them so fascinating for their power of expression, but also for their significance. They have a concrete form but they always represent something immaterial: ancestors, forces, ghosts. African art is always about making visible something that's invisible. That is in my view the essence of the artistic calling. Themes such as love and death are not visible, but they are precisely what artists want to portray.'

Part of the exhibition is a series of 'heads' made of papier-mâché with photos on them of what are recognizable as masks – also made of papier-mâché. The illusion of depth is created by a flat photo, and continued by the shape of the head. The photos of the masks are of the insides of the masks, which lends the work as a whole an extremely disconcerting character. Bogaers likes to play the game of trompe-l'oeil, using two- and three-dimensionality. With *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* he takes the step from suggested three-dimensionality to true three-dimensionality and back again. He thereby definitively crosses the boundary between the photo as a flat surface and the photo as an object, which he explored in all kinds of ways in his earlier work. The photo is now part of a larger object that in turn becomes part of a total installation. Non-photographic objects are part of that world too.

Paul Bogaers calls himself an 'adder'. For him an image is not quickly completed. Perhaps it never will be. 'In the Western tradition you make something and then it's finished. It's hung in a museum or a church and it has to stay that way. With African sculptures it's very different. They're used in rituals and in the process all kinds of things are added: objects, rope, sacrificial blood. The images change continually, and they have to if they're to remain 'alive'. I think that's beautiful, and meaningful. Western art and especially modern art has taken a minimalist path. *Less is more*. But for those African images and also for my work, *more is more*. Every addition, as long as it's the right one, reinforces the power of the image.

'In my current work the element of invocation is far more present than it used to be. Invocation of reality, invocation of the human condition. I think that also explains my fascination for African art; there too an attempt is made to gain a grip on forces and powers that are not visible yet nevertheless define our lives. It's not about visible things alone. The invisible is far larger.'

Text by Kim Knoppers, curator Foam

Paul Bogaers studied at the Academie voor Beeldende Vorming in Tilburg. He previously had solo exhibitions at the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam and De Pont in Tilburg, and group exhibitions at Foam Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam, W139 (Amsterdam), De Beyerd (Breda) and FoMu (Antwerp). He has published several books including the photobook *Upset Down* (2010) and the literary book *Onderlangs* (Down Below, 2007). Paul Bogaers is represented by Galerie Pennings in Eindhoven.



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Side programme: foam.org

— 3 December: Artist Talk by Paul Bogaers with an introduction by curator Kim Knoppers.

— 9 January: studio visit Paul Bogaers in Tilburg

— 13 January: exclusive diner within the exhibition space

— 14 January: studio visit Erik Fens in Amsterdam

Credits images:

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