

THE LION'S SHARE

Inès Lion - Photography and words

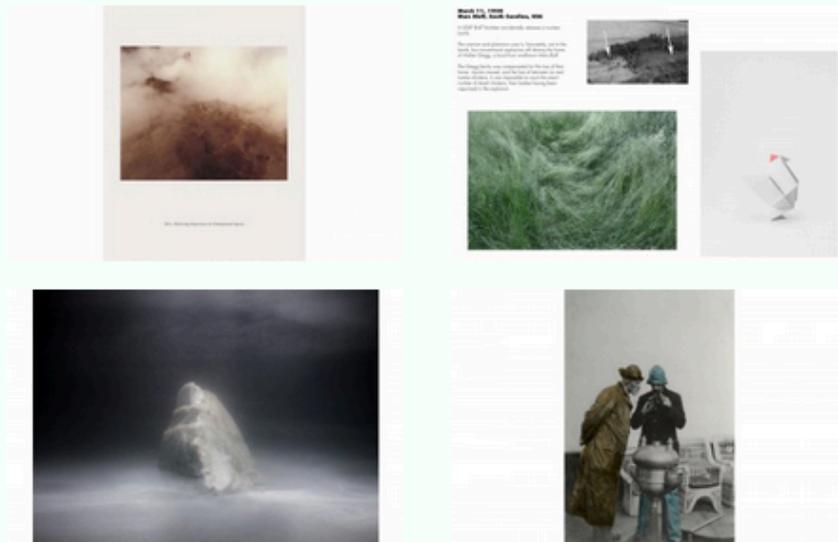
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EVIDENCE

mars 30, 2015 · by Inès Lion · in Picture and words



Imagine a kind of Rencontres d'Arles but without the Roman ruins, the searing heat and the café terraces. Situated in the heart of England, Derby is a relatively small city where Format Festival set up its quarters ten years ago. Like in Arles, it is easy to wander from an exhibition space to another while discovering the city, its architecture and its museums.

The theme of this year's festival, Evidence, alludes to the origins of photography, its function of recording reality. Despite for the most part having totally different approaches, all the artists shown here question the status of the photograph as proof. The selection being particularly abundant, I will focus on some of my favourite works.

The Pearson building, the first exhibition space that I visited, is a pretty derelict place, stuck between past utility and future developments. Its walls, where you can distinguish various coats of paint, act as a background for the photographs.

On the ground floor, my eyes were caught for a long moment by Marianne Bjørnmyr's Shadows/Echoes which combines both texts and photographs. This work is the fruit of a two year trip around Iceland during which the artist took an interest in the rather widely held belief of the existence of elves and fairies. Apparently, 53% of Icelandic people believe in them. Framed like the photos around them, the texts enable the spectator to enter this magical universe. Thanks to the dialog between her and a so-called Jónsdóttir Ragnhildúr, we learn that these little beings live under rocks, that they like humans to consult them before building roads or that they often appear at dawn or dusk. This conversation, with a form that evokes documentary, influences the spectator in his/her understanding of the photographs whose authors include Ragnhildúr, Icelandic photography pioneer Magnus Olfasson and the artist herself. Stereoscopic views, plays of light and nebulous landscapes operate as proofs, while unveiling the enigmatic aspect of reality.

It is another aspect of reality that we discover on the floor above with David Fathi's work. Under the title Anecdotal, the French artist offers a non-scientific study of the nuclear age. The series consists of various little stories or anecdotes about the nuclear weapon and tests conducted by different countries. The short texts are accompanied by images that mix film extracts, satellite imagery, often adjusted archives and photographs taken by David Fathi. Despite their diversity, these images share a singular unity and take us in a both absurd and frightening reality that recalls the atmosphere of Stanley Kubrick's Dr Strangelove. With the

cold aesthetic of its photographs, David Fathi manages to evoke the imagery of the nuclear age and questions humans' paradoxical fascination for the dreadful beauty of this weapon of mass destruction.

After the weary corridors of the Pearson Building, the modernity of the Quad gallery was a bit of a contrast! It is here, and amongst many others, that Cristina De Middel's work is exhibited. I already knew this photographer from her series *The Afronauts*, a sort of poetic saga of the first and uncompleted Zambian space mission, which has been having a lot of success in the UK. At Format, she is showing a series called *Jan Mayen*, the name of a volcanic island located to the east of Greenland. Already discovered three centuries ago, this island was chosen by a group of European pseudoscientists to be the subject of a new expedition. Once arrived, they were compelled to turn back because their boat was too big to land. Their cinematographer convinced them to re-enact the disembarkment that never happened on a Icelandic beach. This is more or less how this completely extraordinary story is told by De Middel in her accompanying text. On the wall, black and white, sometimes colorized photographs illustrate this reconstituted adventure, with a great number of walking scenes in a steep landscape, pictures of explorer's tools and wild animals. In front of this teeming selection, the spectator doesn't know what to think as the line between the archival pictures and Cristina De Middel's own photographs is so imperceptible. This illusionistic exercise is mastered so well that I still don't know if this wall really included photographs from 1911. In the same vein as Joan Fontcuberta and with a very playful approach, Cristina De Middel incites us to always interrogate what we see.

St Werburgh church was the last destination of this busy day and I really enjoyed Phil Toledano's series *When I was six*. At six years old, Phil Toledano lost his sister Claudia. She was nine. From the period following this drama, the artist only remembers a fascination for space and planets. An interest quite common from a little boy of this age but for Toledano, this seems to underline a desire of being somewhere else. After the death of his parents, he discovered a box in which his mother had kept a variety of objects that used to belong to Claudia: a strand of blond hair, a photo, a fan, a little baby checked dress. These belongings are photographed on a dark background, lit up by rays that seem to come from the window of a room during a winter afternoon. Other photographs, that convey the impression of interstellar landscapes, surround the still lives. A text, white on black, written in the first person, tells the disappearance, the mourning of the parents, his own mourning. Text and

images are in perfect harmony. If there is evidence here, this is no doubt the overwhelming one of the passing of time.