

Patrick Willocq: A New Photographic Challenge

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From Hong Kong, site of his first life spent in the business world through 2011, up to his artist residency at the Château de Saint-Martory (headquarters of the Foundation Art 500) in 2017, Patrick Willocq invites us on a truly original and exemplary journey, marked by images that have become unmissable. His story of his work in progress, which he has chosen to give the symbolic title of 'My story is the story of a hope', is the staging in strikingly truthful tableaux of the exemplary integration of migrants and inhabitants of this typically French village near Toulouse. It is a natural extension of his photographic rebirth among the Walés starting in 2012, at the end of the reaches of his memory toward the ochre earth of his youth in the Congo. For Patrick is not the sort to glorify his origins.

His images as a newcomer in the world of photography always highlight with humour, poetry, and sensitivity the originality of a way of life definitively borrowed from the Bantu and the Pygmies. He lived in the midst of the Ekonda people, who became his second family and the nurturing mother of his photographic creativity. Fundamentally, Patrick Willocq – unapologetically self-taught– pursues with determination, steadfastness, and passion a photographic ambition that emphasises and honours the natural humility of his character. Since 2013, he has been entirely devoted to the cause of the Walé women, as well as to the rituals of this true Congo, the natural theatre of all his photographic creation. There is something of a Gauguin in him, the part that 'wanted to flee to reach art' on the island of Hiva Oa in the Marquesas. Indeed, on the road from Bikoro to Bokonda, Patrick is, like Gauguin in the face of the famous Vahinés, 'struck by the beauty, the simplicity, and the everyday dignity', and this he says, 'in spite of a turbulent history and all the daily difficulties, which the Congolese face.'

One could also say that Patrick Willocq, in spite of himself, is the spiritual son of Claude Lévi-Strauss, of Jean Rouch, mixed with Robert Jaulin, who could have been his role models to help him see and to make us perceive this authentic Africa. Each image is a witness. Patrick

Willocq has shed his Western culture to respect African values, far from any ravaging exoticness – the Trojan horse of a devastating capitalism at the time of galloping globalisation as defined by Martin Parr.

As for the form, no photograph by Patrick Willocq results from caricature. On the contrary, the ritual scenes of an Ekonda culture torn between past and future, the images conceptualised by Patrick are, to our eyes, filled with the wonder of a double present: that of a ‘colourful, joyful Africa’, which he adores, and the discovery of a new photographic expression in full bloom. Since 2012, this approach demonstrates an exceptional vitality without recourse to the least help from Photoshop, in order to better magnify the real. Everything is genuine, up to the total ‘respect’ of the villagers, who are accomplices and actors.

As a committed photographer, Patrick Willocq is always faithful to his humanist convictions. To remain true to this title, which is a deep-rooted part of him, he again faces a double urgency concretised on the banks of the Garonne near Toulouse. The first is certainly the most heartfelt for the man who cannot bear indifference, and can bear even less the hate that can be born in the face of these odysseys of wandering that wash up on the coast of our European fortress. These are the stories of men and women, fathers and mothers, brothers of boldness, who having nothing more to lose, who embark with their children on these Noah’s Arks – subjected to the harsh winds of an unforgiving sea, as well as to the greedy violence of merciless smugglers and profiteers. The village of Saint-Martory has become the refuge that inspired Patrick Willocq. The second urgency, which equally preoccupies Patrick Willocq, is to enrich contemporary photography in need. It is also inherent in his sense of light to ‘illuminate’ and draw our attention to the darkness of our lost humanity.

A true expert in the art of metamorphosing the real into significant tableaux, Patrick Willocq manages to evade the banality of the flood of images that generates indifference and pathetic lassitude. In this southwest village, far from the din of current events, it is our sweet France that offers a prestigious natural theatre to better decipher history in the making in nearby shores, on Turkish, Greek, and Italian borders, plagued by every humanitarian tragedy. As a prelude to the reconstitution of the ‘decisive moments’ crushed in the flood of

information from a continuous stream of barely viewed images, the conceptualisation and the reconstitution of key news scenes – as seen by Patrick Willocq – is the subliminal invitation to finally stop media time with its cruel lack of vigilance.

The Gauguin of photography, whom we have already seen in his work with the Pygmies in the Congo, has given way to a Bruegel of the image who bids us to follow this invitation: ‘Look to see.’ Look closely at the palette of all his images, which, like the dream of our consciences – finally – (re)awakened when faced with the actuality of our exploding world, making us participate – as the Flemish painter would say – in the ‘peasant wedding of solidarity’. To better renew documentary photography by restoring to it the more artistic virtue of an aesthetic feeling that makes us citizens of the world, in a more interdependent sharing, between each and every one.

‘My photographic practice’, Patrick Willocq points out, ‘is a hybrid between musicology, ethnology, sociology, performance, installation, and photography. I think I have also found my own particular means of narration. In all my stagings, I’ve chosen to send messages that pass through a participatory theatricality.’ Echoing him is Papy le Pietec, a local who appears in the credits of ‘My story is the story of a hope’: ‘I will remember the willingness of the actors to reveal their thoughts on a problem like that of migrants, that of the organisers and artists (us and the migrants) who have brought these things to light. A project in common that shows we live in a world where human respect makes us ordinary men and women, but with a huge amount of fraternity. You remain artistically associated with the village forever.’

Noble artisan and artist with white skin, but with the black soul – if Patrick Willocq is now being recognised throughout the world, it is not because he was already the *bomo bialé*, ‘the brother of the *Walés*’, according to the Ekonda people. It is because the photographer himself possesses a sharp sense of ‘conceptual ART’ – humble and ambitious at the same time – for giving each of his images a universal dimension, the bridge that Isaac Newton hoped for between all men, rather than walls separating our fragile planet. As a very creative author who practices an aesthetic never devoid of ethics.

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