

Soul hunters

“Eyes Wild Open” brings together seventy years of introspective photography

EN At the Botanique, Brussels-born photographer Marie Sordat takes on the role of curator to introduce us to a wonderful family of introspective and nonconformist photographers. Drawn from different periods and regions, they share the same lust for life and subjective attitude to reality, which they use to hold a mirror up to their emotions. — SOPHIE SOUKIAS

Marie Sordat became a photographer upon contact with what she calls “a family of photographers”: Anders Petersen, Michael Ackerman, Antoine d’Agata, Jehsong Baak, etc., otherwise known as the VU generation (derived from the name of the agency) of the 2000s. She felt an instantaneous, visceral affinity with them. The young woman scoured the exhibitions devoted to them, devoured their books, retracing each of their careers and influences, picking apart their stories and their images, educating her own eye in the process. The evidence was too compelling to deny, so she abandoned her career as a film editor to make photography her “life path”.

She made the right choice, because since 2004, the work of the Brussels-based French photographer (represented by Box Galerie) has been the subject of numerous publications and exhibitions worldwide. She captivates the viewer with impressions plucked instinctively from reality to express her personal obsessions. Her stylistic identity is built on the tradition of her key influences, to which she has added an entirely contemporary form of poetry, much like the thriving new generation of which she tells us she became a member “without really being conscious of it.”

It is this family of “wild” photographers – thirty

names or so – that Marie Sordat pays homage to in “Eyes Wild Open”, the exhibition she is curating at the Botanique. “I wanted to bring together the photographers who influenced me, their key influences, and the young photographers who claim to have been inspired by them,” the artist told us. “I became aware that, between them, they represent nearly seventy years of photography.”

Often separated by thousands of kilometres and several decades, these men and women developed a shared language to express their physical and compulsive relationship to reality, which became a distorting mirror for their personal experiences and emotions. “Some images are almost identical. Sometimes they are referencing one another but, in other cases, the photographers didn’t even know of each other at the time that the shot was taken.” This is because “the themes they explore are universal. They deal with life, death, birth, solitude, and love. The images require no explanation; they embody a lust for life and touch us as human beings.”

THE ANCESTORS

It’s no coincidence that it was in the US in the post-war years, the same period that saw the birth of the Beat Generation, that this type of photography took root. Breaking with the

established order, disillusioned by consumerism and the war, asserting their personal and sexual freedom, many young people wanted to tear the masks away and to express their feelings, quite simply. Among them were William Klein and Robert Frank with their street photography. “They were the original proponents of this new approach to photography,” explains Sordat. “Frank transformed the language of documentary photography by asserting that he photographed the world as he saw it, that it was himself he was capturing through his images. Klein was the enfant terrible who broke all the rules, creating a style that was full of life and overflowing in every sense. His work, judged to be anti-American, was very shocking at the time. Whether it was the New Wave of cinema or Pop Art, each art sought to break the rules in order to offer new visions of the world.”

With their undisciplined compositions, the vitality of their gaze, and their profound interest in humanity, Frank and Klein threw decades of photographic tradition to the wind: concerns about objectivity, harmonious and geometric composition, painstakingly framed and meticulous images. The French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson was the first to be caught up in the storm. “The poor guy was hauled over the coals when he himself was

EYES WILD OPEN

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Book: *Eyes Wild Open*,
André Frère Editions, 240 p.



EYEBALL (SETAGAYA KU, TOKYO, 1986-2007) © DAIDO-MORIYAMA, PHOTO FOUNDATION, COLLECTION JEAN KENTA GAUTHIER

Marie Sordat: "William Klein was the enfant terrible who broke all the rules, creating a style that was full of life and overflowing in every sense." Next to one of Klein's pictures (on the right), this page also shows work by Daido Moryama (on the left) and Dolorès Marat (below).



CANDY STORE, NEW YORK CITY © WILLIAM KLEIN, 1955 / COURTESY POLKA-GALERIE



EXIT, LES OISEAUX DE NEW YORK, 1999 © DOLORÈS MARAT / COURTESY GALERIE FRANÇOISE BESSON

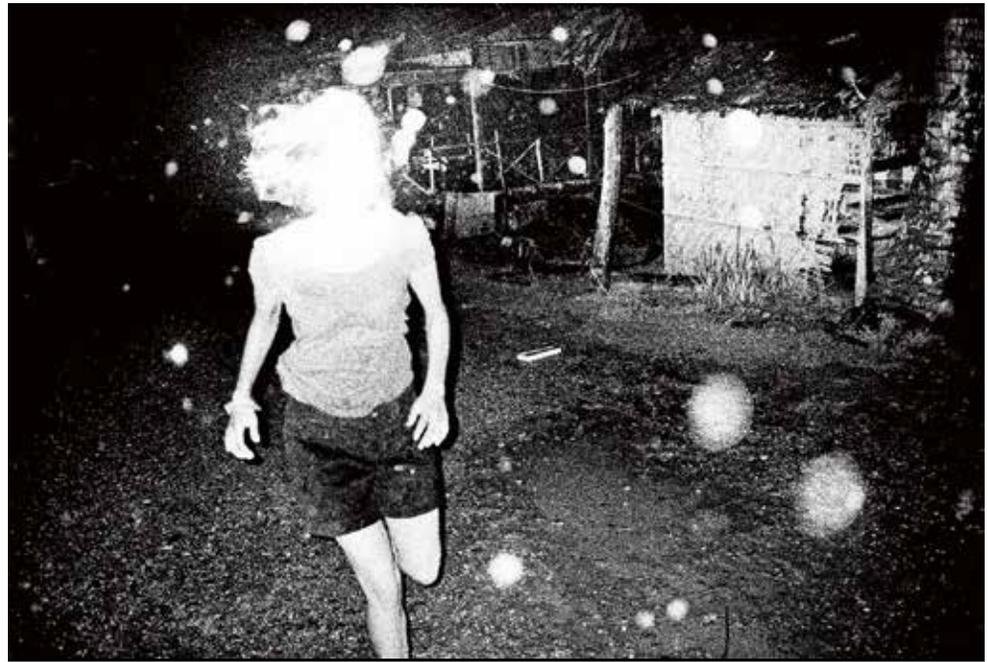


© ANTOINE D'AGATA / COURTESY GALERIE LES-FILLES DU CALVAIRE



CLOSE DISTANCE, 2002 © ANDERS PETERSEN / COURTESY OF JEAN KENTA GAUTHIER GALLERY

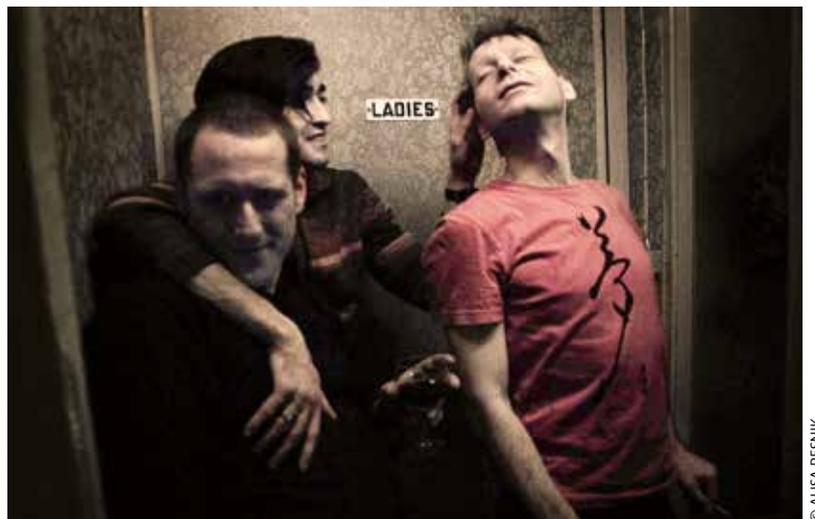
Antoine d'Agata's grainy and dynamic images depict hallucinatory dreams, somewhere between erotic fantasies and nightmares. Next to one of his pictures (top left), this page shows work by Anders Petersen (top right), Alisa Resnik (in the middle), Sohrab Hura (bottom right), and Klavdij Sluban (bottom left).



LIFE IS ELSEWHERE, 2011 © SOHRAB HURA / MAGNUM PHOTOS, EXPERIMENTER



© KLAVDIJ SLUBAN



© ALISA RESNIK

actually a nonconformist and full of life. But, to his own disadvantage, he cemented a definition of 'good photography' that became the ultimate example not to follow."

The Japanese counterpart to this subversive gaze emerged in 1968 with the creation of the avant-garde magazine *Provoked*. Inspired by Klein, the photographers behind the manifesto declared that they wanted to break the boundaries of photography. In post-Hiroshima Japan, rocked by violent student riots, in which the idea of a "beautiful image" was no longer conceivable, photographers like Daido Moriyama and Takuma Nakahira used the medium to express their rage against the US and its consumerist way of life. "We can't imagine what it was like to be 20-30 years old at that time; everything had been destroyed," says Marie Sordat. The resulting black and white images are imbued with a dark, almost crazy energy. They depict the world as brutal - with great strokes of shaky movement, thick grains, blurs, and contrasts. Right in the eyes. "In these photographs, the latent violence is palpable."

MARGINAL GAZE

The new generation of breakaway photographers is also exploring the margins of society. Not at a clinical distance like social reporting, but genuinely from within. The belatedly recognised Swedish photographer Christer Strömholm provides a poetic and vibrant view of the transgender community of Place Blanche in Paris in the 1960s. The Dutch photographer Ed van der Elsken becomes one with his subjects, the marginal characters he meets in the course of his many journeys, whose pride and spirit he captures. "It is very much alternative photography," explains Sordat. "These highly socially-committed photographers demonstrate a desire to be on the margins. The story goes that Van der Elsken arrived in Paris with no money and slept on a bench."

With these artists, black and white is often in opposition to the colour seen in magazines devoted to news and images. "Since the arrival of colour film, we think of colour as being more representative of reality, while black and white is associated with something more poetic and artistic," explains Sordat. "But photographers like Dolorès Marat, who work in colour, have flipped this notion of reality to produce soft and dreamlike photographs. Colour can be just as emotive as black and white."

Between 1967 and 1970, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, the Swedish photographer Anders Petersen captured daily life in the downmarket Lehmitz bar in Hamburg, where the waiters and other creatures of the night took him under their wing. Much more than a piece of photo reportage, his grainy and contrasted black-and-white images

portray a borderline world that is both strange and poetic. Nearly forty years later, Berlin-based Russian Alisa Resnik photographs the nocturnal fauna of the bar where she works as a barmaid, this time in colour and in an intimate and almost cinematographic style.

SHOWING THE INTIMATE

This group of photographers is not afraid to bare all, body or spirit - quite the contrary. "Photographers like Robert Doisneau, now seen as a classic, had a body of work that was tied to the press and to family photographs. It would never have occurred to him to exhibit a photo report with a shot of his naked wife in the middle. These photographers do it. For me, the key to this change is to be found in the last page of Robert Frank's book *The Americans*. He photographed his wife and children in the car, as if to say: 'I was there and so was my family. From now on, anyone can claim that this type of photo has real value in a series'. The young Turkish photographer Yusuf Sevinçli is doing the same thing today. He mixes shots of strangers taken in the street with images of himself kissing the woman he loves." She adds, "Most of these photographers work in silver halide, including the new generation. We devote part of the exhibition to the treatment of negatives and paper and to alternative processes and formats."

In a frontal style with contrasted blacks and whites, in which the textures (skin, wallpaper, crumbling walls, etc.) have as much to say as the subjects being photographed, the Danish photographer Jacob Aue Sobol captured his relationship with his girlfriend Sabine and daily life with her family in Greenland over three years at the end of the 1990s. As for the French photographer Antoine d'Agata, he delves into the most violent environments: war zones, the worlds of prostitution and drugs, etc. He blends in with the crowd, consumes and takes pictures as a political act. His grainy and dynamic images depict hallucinatory dreams, somewhere between erotic fantasies and nightmares.

BROKEN FRAGMENTS

Speaking about his book *Life is Elsewhere* (2015) devoted to his schizophrenic mother, the Indian photographer Sohrab Hura said he wanted to connect his own life to the world he observed and thus "document the broken fragments of his life." He drew on reality to

CURATOR MARIE SORDAT:
"These images require no explanation; they embody a lust for life and touch us as human beings"

express a psychic state, with no order or narrative, in the form of disorganised snapshots which become coherent when brought together. This is also the trademark of the French-based Slovenian Klavdij Sluban, who has been active since the 1990s. Armed with literary references, he undertakes long journeys by boat and by train across remote zones like the far north of Siberia and the Black Sea. Much like with the Romantics of the nineteenth century and the poets of the Beat Generation, the untameable nature and solitary beings he encounters in the course of his wanderings come to represent his own turmoil. "These photographs create imaginary geographic terrains in which people and animals represent emotions," says Sordat. "They are intensely human, including those with animal subjects. A poor emaciated dog, a dead owl, some birds taking flight, all serve to express very human sentiments."

In his book *Nordic Noir*, published in 2017, the Belgian photographer Sébastien Van Mallegem draws inspiration from the wild spaces, snowy peaks, and misty lakes of Scandinavia to portray his mental world in a sombre road movie in black and white. "Van Mallegem is definitely the most documentary photographer, because he presents a complete view, with a beginning and an end, of a subject that generally has a social or political dimension," says Sordat. "I chose to end the exhibition on this note because it raises questions about the evolution of this type of photography. What will come next? The exhibition aims to make the public want to know more about these photographers, to go beyond what is shown on its walls." ■

NL Met *Eyes wild open* duiken de Botanique en curator Marie Sordat in de wonderlijke familie fotografen die de voorbije 70 jaar van over de hele wereld intense introspectieve en non-conformistische beelden maakte vanuit een levenslust en een intieme, subjectieve verhouding met de wereld die hen omringde.

FR Dans *Eyes Wild Open*, le Botanique et la curatrice Marie Sordat nous emmènent à la rencontre d'une merveilleuse famille de photographes introspectifs et indisciplinés née il y a septante ans. Ils et elles partagent une même pulsion de vie et un rapport subjectif à la réalité, devenue le miroir de leurs émotions.