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Thames & Hudson

# CARL DE KEYZER

Born in Belgium in 1958, Carl De Keyzer started his career as a freelance photographer in 1982, while supporting himself as a photography instructor at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent. At the same time, his interest in the work of other photographers led him to co-found and co-direct the XYZ-Photography Gallery. A Magnum nominee in 1990, he became a full member in 1994.

De Keyzer, who has exhibited his work regularly in European galleries, is the recipient of a large number of awards including the Book Award from the Arles Festival, the W. Eugene Smith Award (1990) and the Kodak Award (1992).

De Keyzer likes to tackle large-scale projects and general themes. A basic premise in much of his work is that, in overpopulated communities everywhere, disaster has already struck and infrastructures are on the verge of collapse. His style is not dependent on isolated images; instead, he prefers an accumulation of images which interact with text (often taken from his own travel diaries). In a series of large tableaux, he has covered India, the collapse of the Soviet Union and – more recently – modern-day power and politics.

Whatever Carl photographs, it nearly always drags me back to Belgium. Not simply because we both were born on the same side of a particular speck of land, but also because of the ironic tone he uses, the delight in rubbing the viewer's nose in 'bad taste' ... It is as if somewhere in Mongolia or in Krasnoyarsk there is a mirror reflecting a flowerpot, a painting or even a haircut that you could find in Jabbeke or in Ellezelles. When you're not Belgian you perceive the irony in Carl's pictures, but you can't really explain it. When you are Belgian you can't explain it either, but you *know* what you're looking at, and you recognize a self-deprecating sarcasm on top of that.

There are a few privileges to being Belgian. Even if the country is stinking rich, and even though we participate, Belgium still doesn't represent a lot on a geopolitical level these days. When it's hard to be taken seriously, it is safer for the individual to develop self-mockery instead of becoming arrogant. But mind you: self-mockery and irony are a serious business. Take a look beyond the surface and you'll find razor-sharp dissections of what's out there.

This could be the golden rule when meeting a Belgian: look beyond the surface ... Some have ways of hiding things. Carl's pictures look cool. But it's got to be boiling inside.

Another privilege is that it feels as though we're not members of a real country any more, but of an interesting concept instead: a place where the only things that keep us together are a few die-hard politicians, a rotten climate and our culture. Culture is what we are left with after all the armies who have trampled our rich soil over the centuries are gone. Culture makes you belong to the world beyond your country. Culture needs people who keep it fluid, who question it, who use mirrors. Culture needs ambassadors.

For me, a Belgian living in Phnom Penh, it's still possible to spot the appeal of a particular bedspread in Mongolia: isn't that the sign that Carl's pictures are both specific and universal?

**John Vink**



A national holiday parade, Krasnoyarsk. Siberia, Russia, 2001



... Camp 6, Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Russia, 2001



The first service in the new Orthodox church at Camp 15,  
Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Russia, 2001



Visitors looking at paintings made at Camp 27, Krasnoyarsk.  
Moscow, Russia, 2001



The prison hospital at Camp 37, Sosnovobosk. Siberia, Russia, 2001





Gobi, Mongolia, 2006