

Scrap, shame and glowing insects

Jens H. Petersen – an introduction

From the earliest times photography has been loved and hated for one ability: being such a compliant tool. Scientists of the 19th century were quick to learn photographic techniques by pointing their cameras towards the moon, the pyramids, the “wild” and the insane, thus improving their reputations in astronomy, archaeology, anthropology and medicine. Artists were also inspired and swapped miniature painting for portrait photography or the easel for the panoramic camera. For some, photography gave way to new insights: the camera not only reproduced the obvious but also objects invisible to the naked eye.

This knowledge is common to many modern photographers. That it is decidedly so for *Jens H. Petersen*, is explained by the fact that he is educated as a biologist and, as such, has knowledge about an underworld of hidden life swarming beneath our feet, drifting on water or floating in the air. Life, which previously could only be seen through the microscope, can be captured and frozen today through macro- and microphotography.

This professional point of view is an essential part of Jens H. Petersen’s work and one of the reasons why you will search unsuccessfully for human beings in his universe: no portraits or bodily physical presence. Nonetheless, man is present, the traces are captured—not only registered and documented, but also read to a degree that almost hurts. In “Scrap”—which forms the first part of the tetralogy with the sustainable name “Balances”—we are in full human scale, one-to-one. We visit a ship breaking yard, and, through JHP’s objectives, are held in medium shot positions, dissecting the hulls as they disintegrate from functional shape to scrap and materials for recycling. We follow the wound edges where

the welding flame has eaten its way through the iron body to open a view to the blue sky through similar holes at the rear side of the ship. In general, the photographer has filled the shadows with flash light to minimise the illusion of depth, creating flatness as an abstract composition on a canvas. The fragments of "Scrap" become form, thus generating an extra dimension of balance: a piece of wasted technology and a creative potential at one and the same time—decay and growth in mutual dependency.

The theme is re-used in "Open Door", the second part of "Balances". The title refers to a place, which is both location and impetus of the series: an abandoned pumping station turning its empty window frames towards the lush landscape of fields, flowers and broom shrubs, which contrast with the ash pale building seemingly decaying into dust. The method is the same as in "Scrap": the flash is fired towards the nearby walls, which appear in a celestial paleness of light blue, lilac and whitish yellow, reflecting the same level of light as the outdoor landscape. The homogeneity in luminance is matched by a large depth of field, showing the indoor planks and ragged Rockwool mats with the same clarity as the outdoor stems and stones. Once again this points to the Balances-theme and stresses that nature outside may soon invade the nature inside.

With part three, "Dusk", we are moving outside to close-ups of grasses, herbs and shrubs. The angle of view is low which make the frail silhouettes arise gracefully towards the evening sky. But where silhouettes would normally draw dark contours, the stems, spikes and leaves are here stretching in ghostlike whiteness towards the sky and the blue hour. That JHP has released the flash again is obvious. However, the selection of vegetation and place is highlighting the activity of man: through digging for chalk, everything has been covered by fine white dust that has

transformed the well-known weeds into beings from the fringes of a fairy tale, to silver filigree, frost-works and bone-white growths—there are plenty of associations which, in the name of “Balance”, may easily give dusk its eschatological value and suggest that we, in our human inventiveness, become gardeners in a self-contrived garden of death.

In the concluding section, “Night Life”, darkness has fallen. We are along with the photographer, absorbed in the night, not in impenetrable, threatening darkness but in a shadowy blue universe of skylight, reflections, water-plants and drifting, floating insects. The flash is active, though not dominating. On the contrary, the respectful pictures show that we are on the insect’s terms in a weed-filled ecosystem of a freshwater pond. They have antennae, sting and hairy wings and normally we would crush them with a rolled paper. But here, in their own palace of moisture, they represent millennia of forgotten meaning and beauty—and the photographer, splashing in the surface with his Nikon, is like a late relative of the first amphibians. Thus, surprising but devoid of sentimentality, the “Balances” suite draws to a close with the promising hint that the great Eros may still keep man’s blind conquest in check.

With Jens H. Petersen’s latest series, “Life in a Negative Space” from 2010, we move from colour photography into a black and white world of apparently pure science: rows of preparations—amoebae, bacterial cultures, cancer cells . . . or where are we? Is JHP sending greetings to the photographic masters of the former century, photographers who made close studies of nature’s wonders like German Blossfeldt with his plants? Or Aenne Biermann with her minerals? Neither nor . . . As so often before in the history of the medium, it is the potential of illusion which is at play. The photographer is cheating - it *looks like*, but *is not*. The basis of this

visually varied series of small, scaly and spiky creatures is of course the hidden world revealed to the scientist through the microscope. But even here colleagues must give up, for this is pure fiction. Write *Fiction* and put *Science* ahead and you have the sources of inspiration the photographer himself points towards: science fiction writers like American Ursula Le Guin and Austrian Herbert W. Franke who both bring science into philosophy and philosophy into art. While contemplating the amorphous, asymmetrical patterns and creative play of light in these photographs, we follow the photographer into a future world rarely depicted in Danish photography. This alone is worth the travel. But even in the uninitiated viewer it stirs some sort of unease: what are we actually seeing? And what can be done, not only with Photoshop but also at the cellular level? That itch in the conscience is, I think, the seriousness inside the photographer's game . . .

That Jens H. Petersen as a photographer is not easy to place in a simple formula is seen in the series that concludes his presentation: "Shame" (2010). On top of a flickering, serial landscape of Middle Eastern mountain chains and graves with Arabic writing and with added signs in strong colours: coral red V's, green O's and black crosses on different parts of the triptych. The pictures work as a messenger to a small, peace-loving nation, which can today tick off 30 red V's to count the fallen soldiers, while the number of black crosses grows and the crowd of green muzzles become incalculable. You might wonder whether the vitalist Jens H. Petersen, who refers to "Shame" as "a work in progress" puts his hopes on the opposite . . .

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