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Interview with Katharine Cooper

Photographer Katharine Cooper was named winner of the Prix de Photographie Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière-Académie des Beaux-Arts (hereafter referred to as the Prix Marc Ladreit) in 2012. Until 24 November, she is to exhibit her photographs of the “whites” of South Africa at the Fine Arts Academy: a timeless body of work which depicts a society full of contradiction. AMA met with the young South African photographer who, since winning the photography award, is becoming known on the contemporary art scene.

Were you surprised to be named winner of the Prix Marc Ladreit?

It is true that I paid particular attention to my dossier for the prize, presenting the very precious silver prints on paper, and I knew that that would have an impact. The Academy did not want the digital versions on DVD – everything had to be presented on paper. Compared to other photographers who do everything digitally, I knew that my images would stand out. I don't work in digital format, only in silver prints. That said, we did not know who was judging the work, but I had my fingers tightly crossed!

You have since spoken to members of the jury, do you know what particularly attracted them to your project?

Yes, simply the quality of the prints was one of the aspects, as well as the subject, which is somewhat unusual. They wanted to take a risk by choosing something which is quite taboo and controversial.

Why is it taboo?

I wanted to address the subject of poor white people in South Africa. When we talk about poverty, we expect to talk about black people; we are not used to dealing with the difficulties of white people. It is a bit like switching around history – perhaps a form of justice too.

Do you think there really is a taboo surrounding this subject?

Yes. The taboo fell thanks to the way in which I approached things, because I did not limit myself to poor white people, but I extended my work to all white people, regardless of their social status. This was made possible as part of the prize, because there was a question about how the project could be developed further.

So last year you submitted a project focused on poor white people, and upon winning the prize, you returned to South Africa in order to reify it. What made you decide to develop your project?

I realised, after some thought, that as I wanted to call the project “White Africans”, it would not have made sense if I had limited the subject area to disadvantaged white people. The project would have to show all sides of this society – otherwise it would have seemed as if I was saying that all the white people in South Africa are poor. I wanted to show the reality.

How long did it take you to complete the project?

It has been maturing since 2010, but I actually turned the ideas into artworks over a period of four months.

And it wasn't difficult to meet people? Did you get a good reception?

That part was very easy. I explained what the project was about, adding that there was to be an exhibition at the end, and it went well among the poor, middle classes, and rich people alike. They were all taken by the name “White Africans” – some found it quite funny, because it made it seem as if they were a new

African tribe. They could really identify with this project, and in the end it proved very interesting for them.

How do you see white African people today, especially considering you have an understanding of South African people?

It is impossible for me to be objective; I myself am South African and I still have family over there. Today I would say that my spiritual family is in France, because it is here that I studied and developed a kinship with other artists. When I was in South Africa, I was too young to have experienced this sort of kinship. Thanks to this trip, my spiritual family has grown. The other benefit has been therapeutic in nature, because when you are exiled – many South Africans went to Australia, Great Britain, the United States etc. – there is this certain sense of nostalgia, this deep love of your native country – a desire to live there despite being unable to do so. It is really hard to live there: there is no social security, no pension, no medical assistance. Those wanting to start a family often do not want to bring up their children within South Africa, and even less so in Zimbabwe: it is too violent, too dangerous, too hard. You feel exiled, and when you go back, you really want to stay. Before, I didn't know where I belonged, and now I do. I am part of something. That feeling has lifted a weight, brought me peace.

Do you feel stronger?

Yes, and serene. An anxiety has been removed, and anxiety saps strength! Without physically feeling more powerful, I feel as if I have reached a level of wisdom. I feel as though I can move forward more easily, without asking as many questions.

Do you think it is possible to perceive this nostalgic outlook in your photos, in the same way that you see your country? You use black and white, a technique which is often linked to this feeling.

No, I don't think that they are nostalgic, even though I was told that the pictures looked as if they had been taken in the 1950's. They certainly could have come from a different era, but there isn't any nostalgia.

That is the impression that I got, the idea that your photographs are timeless. It is impossible to date them.

Jean-Claude Carrière thought the same thing and writes about it in the catalogue text. He spoke of the characters from a Steinbeck novel, we do not know where we are, but certain clues appear which allow us to place ourself within a time. That is exactly what you feel over there: everything is very modern, whilst at the same time rooted in the customs of another era. There are a lot of contradictions, on the part of the whites as well as the blacks. Black magic is still prevalent, but at the same time it was in Cape Town that the first open heart surgery was performed, by a South African doctor. Technology and superstition. It is also a country of great freedom, you can live and dress how you want, without being considered eccentric. Children are well-educated, but are allowed freedom of imagination, they are allowed to be themselves. I hope to bring up my own children there.

Many of the portraits are very carefully framed. You present many people to us, and we are really brought into the meeting. We are not a part of the actual story at all, but are certainly in the vicinity. Was it your intention to present people in this way? People that you knew?

Yes, I cannot produce a photograph without some sort of connection, however brief, with the person that I am photographing. The people in Coronation Park, for example, were squatters, and I lived with them for a week in order to really immerse myself. I cannot create an image out of nothing: getting to know them is important, as is the character of the person, how they interact with one another, and that is only possible once they are at ease. It is at that moment that something happens. I love it when I miss something, when the subjects react and bring me a little closer to their lives. In this way a sort of magic is created. The portraits are taken from forward facing positions, which is very important for me.

Did anyone particularly stand out for you?

Yes, a meeting I had with two artists who were the only people to question my aim. Andries Botha, a famous sculptor, was reluctant to be grouped with the "whites", because for him, the reconciliation of people is of utmost importance if the country is to move forward. The other artist, Obie Oberholzer, who is a university professor of photography, as well being as a great South African photographer and very experienced in the education sector, cut me down in the same way that my professors at the photography school in Arles used to be able to. I even cried!

He must have gone quite far then!

Yes, very far. He questioned the fact that I still used silver prints, and thought that it was arrogant, that I wanted to show that I was more artistic than other people. He was deliberately trying to provoke me, it's just he thought I was stronger than I am!

Why do you still use silver prints today?

I am comfortable with this method, which helps me to create the images. Some of my photographer friends get annoyed when people tell them that the reason they can make such beautiful photographs is because they have a great camera. I am not at all against this idea: I have equipment which really gives me something, and it would be different with another camera.

What does it give you?

The way people look at me: it is a Hasselblad 6x6, which is to say a device which is held at the waist whilst looking over the viewfinder. This means you can almost talk to the person and take the photograph at the same time without directly targeting them. This puts people more at ease because they feel less scrutinised. I also like not being able to see the results immediately, it is part of the game, like an accident, the grain, the luck of the draw. Film photography is very complex.

Was it you who took the photographs for the exhibition?

No, they were printed by Choi, a great photographer who has worked with Helmut Newton, among others. It is a phenomenon, he is unique. When he is gone I have no idea who will replace him.

Why is he so exceptional?

He is an artist, he paints with light on paper. You give him a general direction and he understands immediately.

And it is not lost behind the personality of the artist?

It serves the world of the artist. We did the first prints together, he adjusted things according to my expectations, and he kept to exactly what I wanted. I could not follow everything because I had to go back to Arles. He told me that it was a bit like the type of image that Helmut Newton used to ask for, very contrasted with lots of obvious editing. That was really nice to hear.

What has this prize brought to your career?

Everything has changed! Now I exist, it is as simple as that.

Before this you hadn't exhibited your work?

No, and before I didn't even believe in my projects enough to be able to achieve anything. But now I do. I am reborn.

And this is why you are stronger, too.

Yes, it's extraordinary!

Did a gallery approach you?

The Filles du Calvaire gallery did; they were present at the opening of the exhibition and congratulated me, but on 13 November I signed with the Dutch Flatland Gallery during Paris Photo.

How would you define yourself as a photographer?

My father is a photographer. He was originally a journalist, and he studied with these photographers who put me to the test; Oberholzer was his photography professor. The latter is very well-known, partly for his technical mastery; he uses the flash to paint the parts that he wants to clarify. He takes long breaks and walks into the image with a flash, and the way he uses a long pause with such a small aperture is unheard of. My father was his student. He had a dark room at home which is how I learnt. I spent a lot of time freeing myself of his influence.

How would you define your work?

It is a staged version of reality. I ask as little as possible from people, putting them in a loose position. Then I wait until they feel comfortable, and they take ownership of the situation. I bring in certain elements, but it is reality that takes over.

What is it that you aim to tell, point out, highlight?

The beauty of people. When I meet someone, what really interests me is the face.

Is that why you take close-ups?

They are not all close-ups. It is really the beauty of people which interests me. And also what happens between people. There is one photo, for example, of a larger woman next to her friend; it is sunny, and she positions her hand in order to block the sun from his eyes. It was perfect! They had good chemistry, a confidence. They are not particularly beautiful, but they are amazing. The greatest reward for me is when the subject looks beautiful within the image.

Having chosen to focus on the poor people of South Africa, do you feel a need to point out these injustices, to denounce this situation?

I am a true romantic and I have suffered so much from the apartheid policy that I refuse to engage in any sort of politics whatsoever. For me, the social status of people is not important, I am looking for their beauty. I think that that will be more clearly defined at the end of my life, when I can look at the full body of my work, but for now I do things intuitively. Everything that I do is a way of telling my life story.

So it is an autobiography?

Yes, and previously I created a lot of self-portraits, too.

Do you have other projects?

Yes, on surfers! I have been told that the photographs are too beautiful, with attractive guys, and beautiful scenery – a bit clichéd, but I am going to continue because I like them. And I have started surfing! I also have a project based on a family of travellers in Arles, who were photographed and had a book written on them about twelve years ago. I would like to revisit this story.

Are there any photographs that you have produced in colour?

Yes, I have a series of nudes which I really like, which are in colour. I usually work in black and white though. I have works in colour which I made into slides which were shot onto great paper called cibachrome. Roland Dufau is the artist who printed these photos, but this technique will completely disappear in the next year or so. However, my signature work is in black and white.

What is the price range of your photographs?

It is important to note that these are silver prints, in limited edition with three to five printed copies, laminated on aluminium, and unframed (although this can of course be done). They are not from an ink jet, they are works which are almost unique, printed by Choi. Prices (outside the gallery) vary between €600 and €2,000 depending on the format.

Are the photographs from the exhibition available on your site?

Yes, and I have a blog which includes other images.