

Something must have happened: a police car parked next to the road, a woman, her head unnaturally twisted, lying stretched out on the ground, several people, some in uniform. **The situation is obvious:** a crime, the woman has been murdered, it's the sort of thing that happens in the wastelands of outlying urban areas. **We've seen those pictures before:** Inspector Derrick and his assistant are going to arrive any minute, screeching to a halt in their gray limousine. On the ground they come across just the right piece of evidence they need to solve the case.

A fleeting glance is enough to take in the scene and cubbyhole it. A fleeting glance is enough to elicit images from the subconscious, construct a story out of them, and thus start up the process that underlies the workings of human perception: a bit of limited information, a few fragments, and we instantly produce a self-contained scenario that blends in with our knowledge, memories and expectations. Perception is a construction process that goes far beyond the stimulation of the senses.

Istvan Balogh's pictures frustrate that fleeting glance. His works are imbued with a suggestive imagery that viewers cannot escape and *Allegory*, as the large-format photograph is titled, demonstrates how stubbornly this effect demands a second and a third look. The desire to recognize and flesh out the meaning of what the picture shows is basically satisfied but in a manner that is disturbingly obvious.

Ruffled by this paradox, the viewer is forced to give the picture still more focused attention. The officials, grouped in conspicuous harmony, are busy with a variety of investigations. The realization that the five people are each conducting their investigations with one of the five senses suddenly lends meaning to the work's title. The focal point is the corpse; it is lying stage center, the spot where the gaze automatically gravitates. Contrary to expectations, there is no interaction between the officials on the case; there is no indication of drama or hectic activity. The viewer comes to the inevitable conclusion: *It wasn't that obvious after all.*

One of the elementary conditions of photography as a medium that generates pictures is the historical claim to reality, based on the assumption that the photographed picture represents a slice of existing reality. Analog photography—which is the medium Istvan Balogh used to produce the works under discussion—is unlike other visual arts inasmuch as it can only represent. The potential of digital technology would, of course, permit creating pictures in the phenomenological code of photography without a referent, without any existing reality, but Balogh makes traditional, conventional use of the camera. He does not technically alter or alienate the pictures; the realities he (re)presents do not come from the computer. Light waves that go through the lens create the picture. The representation has a source; the photograph corresponds to a real referent. But: Istvan Balogh's reality is artificial through and through; it is entirely staged.

Balogh begins with a precise visual idea, which he then executes down to the finest detail until he has everything under control. He composes and arranges with the greatest of care, selects his location, places his extras, determines facial expressions and gestures, puts every property in the right position—and only then does he press the shutter release. The resulting photographs thus show scenes staged specifically for the camera despite the first-glance impression that the camera has merely happened upon them.

This method applies to two large groups of works. The first cycle of 14 works, completed in 1991, is titled *Cadre de Vie (No Golden Legends)*. Point of departure for the imagery was a medieval collection of saints' lives, the famous *Legenda Aurea*. Meticulously staged compositions liberate the lives and martyrdom of the saints from their historical confines and open them up to a broad range of associations.

Balogh worked on the second cycle, to which *Allegory* belongs, over a period of several years.

It comprises 20 pictures, whose heteronomous artificiality generates the kind of atmosphere that captivates viewers without drawing them in as participants. Balogh has borrowed the title of this series, *The Iron Age*, from Ovid's description in *Metamorphoses* of the age in human development that is opposed to the Golden Age in paradise. While the artist's title refers to a creation myth that goes back almost two thousand years, the photographed scenes are rooted in the present day and in contemporary experience. These pictures are about everyday life, but not about banality; they touch an existential nerve.

The large-format photographs are of a technical perfection that shows every detail and every contour. Nothing is hidden, nothing blurred. But instead of leading to revelation, this crystal clear presentation unmasks the limits of human vision, thereby reinforcing the fictional character of every picture and the impossibility of complete knowledge and assimilation. By questioning that which is seeable, Balogh permits us to "see" that which can only be guessed at.

Istvan Balogh often works with art historical references that he integrates as subtle allusions into his complex imagery. In several of these works, a rigorous composition recalls the formal stringency of classical painting and contributes to the deceptively unambiguous aura of the scenes. The particularity, the singularity of Balogh's representations always hints at overarching and timeless universals. The pictures are distinct from the things to which their existence is indebted; their suggestively constructed and deconstructed realities go far beyond the individuality of the representation.

The stringent staging that characterizes the work in both of the above-described series is not shared by *In the Meantime*, a series of photographs produced over the past two years. In some of these pictures, Balogh waives all active control; in others, his influence is minor and barely distinguishable as such. These pictures are particularly challenging as they remain in a state of suspension, with greater emphasis placed on their visual content while still retaining a certain emblematic significance as well. On looking at these photographs, we do not know whether we have come a moment too soon or a moment too late. The works in this series must quite literally be read as "signs of the times."

Every photograph is, by definition, witness to a singular event, inscribed on the film as the shadow of a moment by means of a light ray that has pierced the lens. The resulting document records a point in time that is irrevocable; the photograph becomes a form of coagulated time. The fact that time is inscribed in every photographic representation was conspicuous in the early days of the medium 150 years ago. The first photographers were forced to concentrate on immobile situations because it took hours for the light to burn itself into the photographic plate. Anything that moved could not leave any traces behind. The drastic reduction of exposure time has not changed the "immutable" fact that the photographed image is a record of time.

The *In the Meantime* series does not, however, draw our attention to a specific, singular moment but rather to approximate "befores" and "afters," to a fragile domain of basic openness. For instance, on seeing a ladder standing deserted at the roadside for no apparent reason, the viewer cannot help thinking about what might have happened in the past or will happen in the future. But in the frozen present, the functionality of the ladder is undermined; the picture offers only a fragment cut out of a narrative continuum, whose meaning remains inaccessible.

In the Meantime: A man is crossing the street with cars parked along both sides; two people are hurrying by on the left side of the street, and a Fiat, with a child in the passenger seat rolling down the window, is just turning the corner. Balogh's pictures do not capture moments in which a particular act is quintessentially compressed or in which something decisive occurs. They seek neither the romantic poetry of the moment nor the magic of the irrevocable instant. The viewer recognizes these photographs as events in time that epitomize the present. They are latent pictures.

Istvan Balogh's works question reality and the way we deal with it. His pictures prove nothing. The distinction is fundamental: To the left in *Allegory*, an officer is shooting the position of the corpse, the scattered contents of the handbag and other clues. These photographs, whose credibility is indebted primarily to their automatic genesis, are filed away, later to make a substantial contribution to the reconstruction of a past reality as documents produced in evidence. Such pictures are intended to provide evidence of a reality. Istvan Balogh's pictures confirm the misgivings.

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