

Suspense

The threshold is first of all a physical space, albeit intangible and fluctuating, a position and a place for the body, the interface between a given reality (photography excels at “offering” that reality) and the whole set of possibilities that reality inevitably runs up against. For the threshold also has something to do with time. We know how difficult it is to define the present, not only define but even more so experience it. If we confine ourselves to its strict occurrence, the present either does not exist, or is reduced to its performative dimension: the time of saying it or the time of doing it. But let’s not be too rigid, let’s grant the present a little space, a place for the mind, for the heart, who knows? Indeed, the threshold is also a mental, emotional and spiritual instance. It is a space then that one might divide between the region of the present that is linked to the past (memory, recollection, reminiscence, a large part of thought), and the region that opens onto the future, possibilities and, inevitably, uncertainty. That instant in between is the temporal expression of the threshold. It is on that threefold experience, i.e., spatial, temporal and mental, that the greater share of Istvan Balogh’s photographic tableaux are based and constructed.

Marking out the border area has long been at home, even if only virtually, within the frame of the image, inside the picture. In the series *Cadre de vie*, Anton (Saint Anthony) wavers between the space of temptation and the protection of confinement, between the reality of the flesh and the imprecision of dreams. Franz (Saint Francis) similarly vacillates between the rigor of time (that homeless person’s bit of cardboard on the lower left of the image) and the unfathomable nature of the reverie that is already escaping beyond the frame. Likewise the different images of *The Iron Age* are partly resolved (if that’s possible) as much in the very composition of the tableau, i.e., the arrangement of its constituent parts, as in the enigma that each of those elements conveys. *Work in Progress* is more akin to the snapshot (which, in its way, refers to the threshold through the suspension of time characterizing it) and yet, in unexpected complexity, adolescence (“on the threshold of...”) and its scraping against the architectural framework, the inside/outside dialectic, and the various instances of these shifting limits play out there. Later, with the series *Out-and-out*, in which the models photographed were asked to depict what “ecstasy” meant to them, the photographic tableaux seem to open onto what lies outside the frame. Balogh takes from the English expression what the doubling of “out” suggests to the non-English-speaking ear, i.e., the idea of a reiterated exteriority. Outside, in that each figure is photographed outdoors, but “outside” as well because ecstasy projects the individual beyond him- or herself. In French, to be *hors de soi* means to be beside oneself with anger, to no longer control oneself. From no longer controlling oneself to no longer being in possession of

oneself, there is but one step and it is that step that is posed on the threshold. It is a romantic threshold when Marguerite Duras entitled her most beautiful novel *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (published in English as *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*), in that to say to those we feel affection for, “*Je suis ravi de vous connaître*” (figuratively, “pleased to meet you” but word for word “I am ravished to know you”) means that we find ourselves “swept away.” Thus, we ought to associate the idea of the threshold with that of rapture, ravishment, being carried off (and often the figures that Balogh poses look like abductors who have themselves been... carried off). For the earlier works as for this latest series, *Thresholds and Gaps*, in which the threshold is also understood as an interval, the one we’ve tried to describe above, this intermediary time and place are founded on tension and suspense.¹

If in the earlier works uncertainty seems to surround the future and the destination of the figures’ gaze and gestures, those faces and the bodies left hanging there, the viewer felt they were nevertheless tightly secured prior to the moment depicted, well grounded in a series of mostly pictorial references to art history. Balogh’s photographs have always asserted, even now, their painterly status in that their composition and use of posed models, the extreme care that is lavished on the details, the format, everything points to painting as form and the heritage of museums. Because of frequent reference to the great categories of painting and its genres (allegory, memento mori, history painting, mythology, etc.), it was possible to assert that deep down Balogh was a painter. A painter who, like many artists of the past fifty years, practiced painting without tubes and brushes. So it is probably to set himself apart from an assimilation with painting—an assimilation that is facile and a bit superficial when all is said and done—that in the series that interests us here, Balogh has been careful to set aside the temptation to make references and quotations in order to concentrate on the strict economy of the images he designs and constructs. For his art is indeed about images, images of uncertainty that possess a strangely luminous impenetrability.

Balogh presents *Thresholds and Gaps* as a mixed collection created over nearly eight years, the latter point explaining the series’ heterogeneity. I don’t believe in this supposed dissimilarity. On the contrary, it seems to me we are confronted here by a series of twenty-one images that is certainly open yet very coherent, and in which we can make out numerous themes and motifs that have served to identify the artist until now and in which a certain inflexion is peeking through, a kind of “assessment, past and future,” for a body of work that has matured and is now eager to tackle new challenges. If until now each of Balogh’s photographs seemed carefully planned down to the slightest details, its realization in most cases being understood as the

execution of a program that left no place for chance and the unforeseen, *Thresholds and Gaps* is something else altogether. And yet there subsists that inimitable style that makes each scene, each character, absolute suspense, that is, a suspension, and each gaze a world in and of itself, usually turned inwards or outwards towards a paradoxically introspective exterior.

Several pieces here, just a few actually, contain if not a narrative then at least the inklings of a scenario whose meaning is never fully asserted. That man suddenly emerging from a leafy path, for instance, who is carrying a pair of jerry cans while looking behind him toward what might be a fire. A pyromaniac? Or that other fellow with a double identity as a well-dressed young executive who is transformed into a young rebel brandishing a slingshot, a ghetto David facing life's different environments. The second diptych (although contained in a single print) features a masked man commanding a passer-by to hand over his wallet. Are these really stories? Aren't we rather dealing with situations here that are so open they refuse to confine themselves to a single meaning, where most of the time meaning is suspended, and any impulse to materialize something vanishes? This undecidability of situations takes shape in a wide range of ways and is fueled by the presence of conflicting elements that act together in tension, sometimes verging on an explosion: the mysterious cello case and balaclava worn by a young woman looking back over her shoulder as she climbs a stair, that computer disc competing with the male figure's virile advances in *Object of Desire*, the Walkman contradicting that outlandish nude descending a staircase, the pyramid of ice facing the cool reverie of a young woman who has apparently plunged her hand into the pile, which is akin to that strange wooden animal posed on a table facing a young girl, which in turn irresistibly calls to mind that other—living—dog lying at the feet of its white-faced mistress. All these umbrellas encountering sewing machines on the famous operating table impart a whiff of surrealism to Balogh's mysterious arrangements. Other recurrent motifs reinforce the coherence of the whole, moreover, the stair, for instance, or the curtain, whether cloth or vegetal, which heightens its theatricality. For this is indeed a contemporary theater, sometimes a circus (that levitating man who seems suspended between science and vaudeville, or that woman tossing her shoes, which could just as easily be knives), maybe a succession of crime scenes, such is the lurking threat that works its way into the images' calm composition. The almost levitating violence of that Christ facing the Abu Ghraib prisoner, who alternately share their scars, all of which is set in an art gallery left vacant between shows (yet another interval). The AK-47 potentially hidden in the cello case, those nails stuck into potatoes that Palestinians use to puncture the tires of Israeli jeeps, which have been changed here into a Mercedes, part of the opulent setting of Zurich; the jerry cans of the arsonist right down to that impossible look on the face of the woman in a garage who is emerging from an immense puddle of what could be water or oil, we don't know, and who seems to come from death itself. There is not one of these situations that is not on the

verge of dramatically changing and is nonetheless balanced on the threshold of disaster or a solution. “Truth lies at the bottom of a well” goes the old saying, and it’s at the bottom of a well that a potential Haruki Murakami, between reverie and taking notes, will find, who knows, one of the threads of his improbable tales. Conversely, it is from the heavens that the ray of disaster or a solution bursts forth (*Shooting Star*) right in the midst of a dull peace. Of the solution as of the disaster, however, nothing more is known, not even by the artist, who, like justice with her blinded and veiled eyes (a wink, if I may put it that way, in the direction of Aziz and Cucher), blindly advances and poses the hypothesis of clairvoyance by maintaining his images in their semantic suspension, in the indecision that, associated with a discreet humor and a subtle sense of the absurd, grants complete latitude and utter freedom to the dumbfounded gaze that alights there.

Jean-Marc Huitorel
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Jean-Marc Huitorel was born in 1953. He lives and works in Rennes (France). His is an art critic, a regular contributor to *art press* and an exhibition curator.

¹ The original title of this essay, reiterated at this point in the text, is “Suspens(e).” In French, the term *suspens* in the expression *en suspens* means “on hold,” “in suspense,” or “in suspension,” referring to what is suspended (*suspendu* in French) or left hanging in the air, physically, mentally or temporally. The French term *suspense*, on the other hand, is an English borrowing and refers specifically to the suspense created in films or novels, for instance—
trans. note.