

Wouter Deruytter's *Crow Warriors*

by John Wood

Wouter Deruytter's work is always beautiful, even when his subject matter is deliberately chosen for its ugliness, as in his first book, *Brussel . . . ? Het mooiste aan Brussel is haar lelijkheid*, which means "Brussels . . . ? The beauty of Brussels is her ugliness."¹ Beginning in 1996 with his *Arabian Knights* series and moving through the work of *Cowboy Code*, his art started to take on a harder, blunter, more direct and powerful beauty.² That nearly ten year process of stripping his vision to its most luminous and sculptural essentials has culminated in the *Crow Warriors*, his most minimal yet most dramatic body of work. Light and space have flooded into these photographs in a defining and shaping way; nothing is extraneous; everything we see is essential. These pictures are about absolute clarity of vision. They may be in Montana, but because Deruytter has so erased the well-known landscape, they could, but for the Crows themselves, as easily have been taken on the Aegean. The cropping has become more radical than in any of his previous work. The horse, which has appeared in three bodies of work and of which he is a master photographer, has been so cropped out of most photographs or so slightly suggested that horse and rider have become one.³ There are even photographs here of riders in which we see no horse at all but can tell from Deruytter's composition that one is there.

I have written about Wouter Deruytter's work on several occasions and have pointed out that the observer will always find in it, regardless of the subject matter, a finely chiseled, classical precision that produces both artistic and emotional revelation. Deruytter achieves this effect through a near documentary exactitude. But in this new work Deruytter has even refined what was already a distinct, pristine, and delineated way of seeing.

We have been looking at photographs of Native Americans since just about the invention of photography—Thomas Easterly was daguerreotyping Sauk and Fox as early as the spring of 1847—but no other photographer has ever looked at them the way Deruytter has and given us such a frank, honest, unsentimental, unromantic, yet moving portrayal. We naturally bring to these portraits our preconceptions of Indians but immediately encounter real, live people of the 21st century who happen to be Native Americans, not preconceptions. They are overweight; they wear sunglasses; they have mustaches! But these are portraits of real people—not some nostalgic reminiscence, some "made for TV" fantasy about the noble Red Man. But this is not to say that Deruytter has robbed them of any of their native nobility, anymore so than he robbed his Arabs or his Cowboys of theirs.

Look at "Crow Warrior #2." Could there be a finer picture of natural nobility than this—this proud, painted man with his head dress blowing in the Montana wind. In truth, he is probably a businessman, a physician, a realtor, or perhaps a stockbroker. But here he has connected with an earlier and richer identity. His partially painted face and his confident look of authority are suggestive of Leni Riefenstahl's great portraits of the Nuba tribesmen. Years after making those famous photographs she went back to the Sudan and discovered that the Nuba changed. They were not yet businessmen, physicians, realtors, or stockbrokers, but their culture had drastically and radically

changed, just as the Native American culture was radically and drastically changed by the white man. In this photograph we see the businessman or whatever he is making a noble gesture to connect back, if only for a moment, to something fundamental in his peoples' past. This photograph is exactly what it looks like. Even though we may be looking at a businessman, there is no acting or fakery here. This is, as I said, a portrait of natural nobility.

In a similar way we can see that Deruytter captured something equally authentic in "Crow Warrior #15." Anyone can look at that gesture, the way the man leans on his horse and the way his left arm and hand rests on the horse's side, and see tenderness and affection. Again, nothing is staged; there is no play-acting here. Deruytter has caught the emotional instant. And he is equally skillful in capturing the sensual instant. A great many of these photographs exude a rich sensual beauty, as well they should. The sensual is a significant part of any comprehensive portrait. "Crow Warrior #43" is a particularly fine example. The warrior's back and sculpted thigh glowing in the sun, the slightly hidden buttock's curve, the curve of his shoulder and the exposed pit of his arm, his chest, and his posture all suggest sensuality and sexual allure. But beyond the sexuality, it is simply a photograph of classic beauty, if we can use a word like *classic*, usually applied to ancient Greeks and Romans, to describe a Native American Warrior. But Deruytter's eye has always been one that could find both beauty and the *classic* where it might normally be unexpected. Consider his amazing "White Buffalo #1." Who could think a severed buffalo head hanging on a post could be beautiful? But it is, and it's also deeply moving. In the background the teepees are deliberately out of focus, as if they are fading away, as they, in reality, have. But bright and brilliant in the foreground and in perfect focus is the glowing, mythic head. The teepees have vanished but the archetypal symbol of people, the great creature the white man also tried to eradicate, still persists, still speaks, still glows with ancient wisdom.

Deruytter's is a vision of clarity and brilliance that in itself is emotionally affecting, but as we consider his photographs, we begin to understand that he has chosen his shots with great care and constructed sympathetic and psychological dimensions into them. His affinity with the world of his subjects stems from the honesty of his vision, the fact that he is an objective observer and can depict something's grandeur along with its eccentricity. It is Deruytter's objectivity that allows him to capture a subject's humanity and allows us to identify with the subject—even if he does not fit our preconception of what he should look like. Eventually preconceptions fall away and we come to see that the middle-aged, overweight Indian is more truly affecting and moving than the cliché.

The Crow Warriors, like his Arabs and cowboys, are not trying to cultivate antique personae for themselves. They don't need to; they already possess ancient and fabled ones, and in the case of Native Americans, have died trying to preserve them. But they are also citizens of a modern world, and Deruytter reminds us of the fact that his work is always about the present.

I have previously described Deruytter as a photographer of myth and mask. These are the subjects he returns to again and again to weave into his art. His well-known book *Knights of the Impossible* is an eccentric yet brilliant mix of five mythic yet "impossible" orders of knighthood—two artists who like to dress in old clothes and live as they might have lived in the past; circus performers, transvestites, Arabs, and cowboys—placed in

jarring juxtaposition one to one another. But it is also a collection of varied public personae, those masks of who we are, presented in five suites that involve and intermingle the warpings of time, identity, and gender. These Crow Warriors are also “Knights of the Impossible,” and they illustrate several particularly peculiar warpings of time and identity.

The Crows in Deruytter’s photographs are members of the Real Bird family, and they come from all over the United States for the annual June 25th reenactment of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, where Lt. Colonel George Custer and over 200 men under him were quickly annihilated in 1876 by the combined forces of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho—but not Crow. The Crow had suffered greatly in wars with the Sioux and supported the whites. They considered the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho as invaders of their land, and Crow scouts died with Custer on not only what was their native land but since 1868 the Crow Reservation. In 1999 when headstones inscribed “Died in Defense of His Homeland” were placed where Sioux and Cheyenne had fallen, many local Crow were deeply offended, and there still exists animosity toward the Crow from members of the other tribes. There are even rival reenactments, but the nature of the rivalry is difficult to discern. There is a scripted reenactment, written last time by a Crow, that includes Crow, Lakota (Sioux) and other Native Americans playing the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho, and there is an unscripted one in which only members of the Real Bird family play the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho! Whites play whites in both.

Identity and time could not be more curiously warped than in this modern absurdist drama of these Crow Warriors, who have come to portray their enemies. But all of Deruytter’s knights—be they Indians, cowboys, Arab kings and princes, circus performers, men dressed as women, artists dressed in antiquated clothes, or people who impersonate Rudolph Valentino⁴—suggest a multiplicity of readings. They tell mythic tales; they suggest historical parallels; they document changing ways of life; they sometimes exude a sensuality the sitters themselves may be unaware of; and they contain a kind of wonderful, disjointed confusion, wherein much of their appeal lies. Deruytter has always been gifted at telling a story we soon discover has several different plots.

Again and again Deruytter’s camera seeks out individuals in the midst of living out a personal dream or myth. But it is all *pure* myth, a total fiction, as Deruytter knows. These Crow Warriors are reenacting a battle they would have been on the opposite side of; the cowboys are only small town rodeo cowboys—they have other lives and jobs and even college degrees; dressing up like a long dead movie star does not recreate the star; men do not become women simply by putting on women’s clothes and garish makeup, nor can the past be recreated by buying old clothes and doing without electricity. Yet there is more than mere irony in these disjointed confusions; there is something I think humanizing, perhaps even grand, and certainly in the case of the Crows and cowboys, something noble. Consider any Native American’s desire to link in any way with his “vanishing race,” a race nineteenth century America was as determined to wipe out as Nazi Germany was the Jews;⁵ a rodeo cowboy’s belief in a chivalric code of conduct that he perceives as a remnant of a golden past and that sets his actions apart from others; or any individual simply trying to be who he in truth feels he is or would prefer to be. Pure myth, pure fiction: they can certainly be a pose, a lie, a lot of silliness, or even an absurdity—things we are all prey to—but they can also reach out to our larger needs and help us shape more meaningful versions of ourselves. It is Wouter Deruytter’s genius

that again and again he finds these interesting, dream-driven people and through his objective but compassionate eye shows us how alike we all are—or in some cases how much we might be able to learn from them.

Notes

1. Wouter Deruytter, *Brussel...? Het mooiste aan Brussel is haar lelijkheid* (Roeselare, Belgium: Double You Dee, 1990).
2. Wouter Deruytter, *Knights of the Impossible* (Bruges: Stichting Kunstboek, 1997); *Wouter Deruytter: Caballeros Árabes* (Colonia San Ángel: Museo del Pueblo / XXVIII Festival Internacional Cervantino, 2000); “The UNESCO Designates Sharjah as the ‘Arab Cultural Capital 1998’” in *Aujourd’hui L’Egypte* 40 (1998), 41-64, as well as a cover photograph and photo essay on the restoration of the Sphinx, 65-74; *Wouter Deruytter: Cowboy Code* (Santa Fe: Arena Editions, 2000).
3. There are few such gifted photographers of the horse, and Deruytter has vast experience in photographing horses—and not just out West with cowboys and Indians. He has photographed the horses of King Hassan II of Morocco, Prince Sultan Bin Abd El Aziz of Saudi Arabia, Emir Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohamed Al Qasimi of Sharjah, Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khali of Bahrain, Sheikha Lulua Al Sabah of Kuwait, as well as horses at the Equestrian Club in Abu Dhabi, the National Stables in Morocco, and in Europe.
4. In addition to *Knights of the Impossible*, also see Wouter Deruytter, *Circus in Egypt* (Roeselare, Belgium: Double You Dee, 1995), published in conjunction with exhibitions in London and in Antwerp; Catherine Chermayeff, *Drag Diaries* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995); the majority of the photographs are by Deruytter; Wouter Deruytter, *Anachronism Abroad: Photographs of McDermott & McGough* (Roeselare, Belgium: Double You Dee, 1994); Wouter Deruytter, *Valentino Mania* (Begijnhof-Hasselt: Provinciaal Centrum voor Beeldende Kunsten, 1996).
5. Peter Burnett, first governor of California, said in his annual message of January 1851, “That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the two races, until the Indian races become extinct, must be expected” (quoted in Alonzo Delano, *Life on the Plains and at the Diggings*, in *Pictures of Gold Rush California*, ed. Milo Milton Quaife (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons Co., 1949), p. 287).

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12. It is the least interesting book I have ever read. It is soâ€¦ a) boring b) fascinating c) exciting d) enjoyable.Â 15. Iâ€™m awfully sorry. Iâ€™ve torn your book. a) You are welcome b) That doesnâ€™t matter. c) I donâ€™t like reading now d) I wish I could but I canâ€™t. 16. Weâ€™ve got to takeâ€¦all the portraits in the classroom and dust them. a) down b) up c) into d) on. 17. Ken has always hadâ€¦for horror stories. There are thousand of them in his bedroom. a) an entertainment b) an excitement c) a fascination d) an impression. 18. Most species of wildlife are endangered.