

Anonymous grids, ambient mist, and illegible, monotone grains: though we know these textures well, the objects to which they belong can be difficult to name. The artist's cropping often omits any identifiable marks, isolating or enlarging otherwise familiar things to the point of abstraction. In his latest series, *IMG_*, Johan Nieuwenhuize's photographs have an immediacy that draws less on sight than on the faculties of touch, scent and taste to generate significance. His photographs call up associations with the urgency and strangeness evoked by only the more primal forms of sense memory. But when and where exactly we have encountered these surfaces, these fields of color, it is impossible to say.

Through his generic yet familiar textures, Nieuwenhuize evokes what we might call the tactile experience of globalization. He shows the common fabric and modes of travel that have united New York, Berlin and Shanghai into a single megalopolis. The objects and scenes from whence the images are drawn have no place of origin, no characteristic nationality. They are everywhere and nowhere at once. Receding as the backdrop of contemporary experience, they are made invisible through their constant presence.

What his images suggest, however, is that ubiquity has *not* deprived these objects of an aura. Rather, it is precisely by our repeated encounters with them that they become layered with recollection and meaning. The intimacy of his work reveals the mass-produced object as the modern storehouse of emotional experience and memory. For Proust, it was the taste of tea and a petit madeleine that revived the Belle Époque. For us, perhaps, it will be the matte finish of a synthetic countertop or the smell of faux leather grain that recalls the turning of our own century.

This engagement with globalization as lived experience stands out as the defining characteristic of Nieuwenhuize's work. From his early series *Zelfportretten (Self-portraits)*, through 2009's *Made in China*, to the ongoing project *Collected Memory*, the artist has addressed the ways in which identity takes shape in a world increasingly dominated by monoculture.

In *Zelfportretten*, Nieuwenhuize has coupled self-portraits with still lifes of accumulated objects found in his family home. Piled newspapers, egg cartons and old blankets – though easily identified by his use of wide, conventional framing, these subjects share an everyday quality with the images of *IMG_*. They appear at first glance like charming but trivial ornaments to the more enigmatic images of the photographer's face, but we may take them as auto-portraits in their own right.

Their accrual suggests the happy rituals of domesticity, the routines that bind and shape a family culture. Paradoxically, these disposable objects have been invested with meaning, have become a reflection of ourselves and our daily life. Suspended in a melancholy limbo, they are neither heirloom nor trash. We make excuses that we might need them at a later date but, Nieuwenhuize seems to say, we retain our old containers and dailies because of their unacknowledged emotional charge.

The accompanying portraits mirror this ambivalent relationship to household goods. Through soft focus, shifting light and angles, or fogged glass, the photographer deliberately obscures or alters his image, suggesting that the instability of these objects may in turn problematize our conception of self.

From April until June 2009, Nieuwenhuize was artist-in-residence at the Three Shadows Photography Art Centre in Beijing. The body of work that emerged from this trip, titled *Made in China*, may fairly be called a pendant to *Zelfportretten*. The two series share much in common. Again, we see conventionally framed still lifes of quotidian objects combined with self-portraiture, though here augmented with near monotone images of the Chinese sky.

We may wonder if the artist has not simply gravitated toward familiar subjects when confronted with the radical difference of another, distant culture. But when we look closer, we notice subtle reversals in the themes of his earlier work. The materials captured in his home were untouchable and sacred, yellowed and

gathering dust. In *Made in China*, we see the same disposable objects, though here actually repurposed, kept not out of sentimentality but for their use value. A plastic Nestea cup becomes a toothbrush holder, a mass of synthetic packing material serves as a window shade, and carefully stacked debris from a demolition site awaits new life in another home. In tandem with *Zelfportretten*, an implicit contrast of Western and Chinese identity can thus be read here in his work.

This contrast is made explicit in the self-portraits, from whence *Made in China* takes its name. Here again, Nieuwenhuize has succeeded in making awkward, unsettling images of himself. He has posed in copies of the clothes he traveled with, copies that he commissioned from local tailors. Some of these poses mimic traditional stances of Chinese workers themselves. He squats in one such pose, wearing knock-offs of his native Dutch G-Star jeans. There is no rigorous logic to be worked out in these images; confusion is the point. He questions the integrity of Western signs of identity when these signs have little or no material connection to the culture in which they ostensibly belong.

His images of the sky become the symbol of this theme. Utterly banal, they are ironic tourist photos that give as little a sense of place as the works in *IMG_*. In a way they mark the inception of his next project, *Collected Memory*.

Beginning in 2009, Nieuwenhuize has travelled to locations where events of historical import have taken place. On the exact month, day and minute of their passing, he has aimed his camera in the sky and taken several pictures. At times, these are events that have affected us all – 9/11, of course, but also the 1989 student uprising in Tianan'men Square. Other times, they are events that hold meaning for the photographer and his countrymen – the 2004 murder of Theo van Gogh, or the 1992 plane crash in the neighborhood of Amsterdam Bijlmer.

As with *IMG_*, *Made in China*, and *Zelfportretten*, what Nieuwenhuize explores in the series *Collected Memory* is the generic quality of our experience of modern

life. The even, varying tones of blue and gray that drift listlessly across these images suggest the way in which our collective knowledge via newsprint and electronic media has supplanted the richness of the first-hand encounter. The photographer shows us a parallel world above our own, abstract and detached. He reminds us of the virtual cloud into which human life has begun to shift, a place where national boundaries dissolve along with traditional indicators of identity and character.

Though never expressly negative in his outlook, Nieuwenhuize has sought to reflect and interpret the crisis of identity brought on by globalization. It is fitting perhaps that the task has, in part, fallen to a native of the Netherlands. After all, there is perhaps no other place in the West where the anxieties and possibilities of modernity are more explicit than in this most cosmopolitan of countries.

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