



LIGHT&SIE

WOUTER DERUYTTER
WICKED CREEK

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IMAGES OF FIRE

Started by lightening that hit an area known as Wicked Creek, two coinciding forest fires destroyed 28,600 acres of Montana woodland on August 9th to 24th 2007. The ensuing natural disaster became known as the “Wicked Creek Fire.” On a ranch 2 miles away from the fire front, Wouter Deruytter bore witness to the event and he photographed the results. A two part series, *Wicked Creek’s* first set of images portrays firemen, the second shows the burnt woods, before and after the first snow has fallen on the charred ground.

As a photographer, Deruytter is more than just an eye witness to catastrophe. As Roland Barthes has said, the photographer is a “witness to his own subjectivity that is to say to the way he as a subject responds towards an object.”ⁱ This subjective view is defined as much by Deruytter’s own personal interests as by prevailing cultural filters. Both positions communicate strongly through those images, allowing the series to reach far beyond notions of traditional documentation to become complex cultural images, images of fire.

Although the Wicked Creek fires must have been intense, the photos show no flames. There are no all-consuming walls of fire, no dramatic images. Instead, there is profound calm. The firemen pose, march or work. Fire-fighting itself is not on display, but rather, contemplative images of men who rest in thought, men on their way, men who show off their preparedness for action. The men appear against a natural backdrop that is intact. In a pastoral setting, their bright yellow and green uniforms stand out against the green of the grass and the tress. The only flames that surface are flames at their hands, flames that are contained, under control. These men could be out there in the woods practising, rehearsing the moment of urgency and challenge. Meanwhile, with the viewers in a position that originally was that of the photographer, they see, “what the photographer saw as he took the picture.”ⁱⁱ Since this position is strongly defined by the artist’s subjectivity, they view as he viewed it and are thereby led to share his fascination for men in uniform. Here, so the images suggest, it is not only the photograph ‘an invitation impossible to resist’. The artist’s gaze at those men, is extended as an invitation that seems an equally irresistible one.ⁱⁱⁱ

In two triptychs Deruytter contextualizes these images of firemen with a depiction of the woods devastated by fire. In his triptych #7 (*A Full Day*) men with full equipment move in line through a sunlit clearing into the depth of the woods. The middle panel features a hillside where vegetation has been completely erased to burned soil. A few charred trees still

standing and burnt logs on the ground appear like a memento mori of the lost woods. In a third panel the men walk out of the woods again, still in line, this time along a path in the open against the background of an intact tree-covered mountain site. The panels are suggestive of a timeline. The men walking into the woods and the men walking out again enter and leave a scenery of destruction. The intact environment they are manoeuvring through however suggests a job done. These are Men of Fire.

A strict formalism in graphic composition is an important strategy for Deruytter in developing his narratives. The central panel of triptych # 1 (*Lost*) is a good example for the successful use of such a strong graphic order. To illustrate this observation I would like to describe such order to some detail.

A hill is covered with the charcoaled remains of tree-trunks, most of them scattered on the ground, some, in the foreground are still standing. The line of the horizon marks a sharp edge against a nondescript grey sky. In the centre of the image, framed between two trees, a deer appears at a considerable distance, caught in the motion of flight.

The image offers two perspectives: the “situation” the image presents and a pictorial narrative. The situation is that of a deer spotted in the middle of the woods. Where there should be a thicket of trees and undergrowth, the deer is now fully exposed to the camera with no shelter to run to within the depicted scenery. This casts a spotlight on the devastation of the landscape.

The pictorial narrative processes a more complex picture. More than just a snapshot, the graphic composition of the pictorial order fixates the deer in a full arrest of its movement. In a second step the same composition presents a perspective for a future development of the story board.

The trees in the foreground that seize the entire pictorial space can be seen as a graphic system that structures the visual surface level of the image. Some bigger trunks laid out in the fore-ground graphically link the standing trees with the way the burnt logs are laid out in the spatial depth of the hillside. This layout constitutes a near geometric pattern framing the position of the deer whose posture is one of departure with its rear legs resting while the front legs are set out for movement. The position is visually pin-pointed by a burnt tree that is still erect. This vertical is counter pointed by another trunk lying in front of the deer. Such visual construction

becomes part of the verticality of the parallel order of the trees in the foreground. It also becomes part of the geometrical pattern of the fallen trunks on the hill. Here it constitutes a coordinate system that reinforces the current position of the deer. It also forms an overall triangle which indicates a direction for the animal's future movements. Such "triangle" is visually reinforced by the rising horizontal curb of the hill and the way some of the trees on the left hand side are bending into the picture.

The pictorial narrative, made up by the way the photographic eye has framed the scene, adds complexity to the situation captured by the camera. This surplus in visual information serves as the blueprint for the interpretation, the "reading" of the image.

Deruytter's works are all single images. Many of them are effective viewed in series. In *Wicked Creek* he has for the first time combined images. Traditionally, a triptych is composed as one work: each panel when seen on its own is a mere fragment. Those of Deruytter's works that are made up of more than one panel function as sequels, constructed panoramas or arranged series which, once united as one work, highlight their newly found connection in very different ways. Triptych No. 2 (*First Snow*) shows burnt trees on a hillside alongside the shores of a creek, establishing a cinematic narrative.

Panel 1: The banks of a creek, on the right a group of mostly intact conifers. In the background a hillside is framed by a dense line-up of burnt trees, at the foot of the hill some larger burnt trees form a group. A cluster of fallen trunks, covered in snow, extend into the water of the creek.

Panel 2: The camera zooms back. With the first scene still visible in the background, here the pile of logs in the water has been replaced with big trees that bridge the creek. Their snow-covered surface is underlined by the charred wood underneath, which highlights the almost parallel order into which they have fallen.

Panel 3: The camera swings right, giving a near frontal view of the creek, turning towards the hillside. Again, a group of familiar trees remains visible as well as the two bridging trunks. Interestingly, the central panel and the left panel join in a way that at first sight is suggestive of a continuous space. The hill rises gently. At the right bank of the creek a fallen tree partly obscured by a group of trees at the far right of the central panel reappears on the far right of the left panel. The two trunks — which are in fact one — merge into one long black

line drawn across the white ground. The second of the bridging trees in the central panel lends its branch-covered crown to the first tree in the central panel, which thereby seems to extend into the left panel, creating its false double while it reappears, depicted in diagonal perspective, in the foreground once more.

Though these repetitions and implausible joints are more than obvious, they are still part of a plausible continuity of visual space created in the joining of the panels. The work thereby presents a fictitious panoramic view of a landscape.

In a separate fourth image, (*Frozen River*), the camera closes in on a frontal view of the hill. The trees on the hill, reduced to their bare trunks, appear like parallel black lines against a white background creating an intense black "scripture." The natural contrast is highlighted by the fact that the photo is a colour image.^{iv} The bank of the creek is now almost parallel to the bottom edge of the picture. The bridging trees reach radically into the foreground. In a near symmetrical position they strongly highlight a concentration of tree trunks as the central axis of the image.

Woodland is usually understood as a closed space, yet here it is visible as an open space. The viewer's position facing the scenery is mediated into the depth of the pictorial space through the two parallel tree-trunks. Following this path the view penetrates the entire space way up to the line of the horizon. This contradiction between object identification (woods) and the visual experience (open space) makes the event (the fire) and its devastating consequences a potent visual experience.

In the same way that all important elements of the picture are brought together in the tight pattern of the composition, they also form a narrative open to interpretation by the viewer.

Many images of *Wicked Creek* feature motifs that resemble the art historical notion of the heroic and the romantic. The dramatic setting of a lone broken-off tree, recalls familiar imagery of well established landscape painting traditions, including that of the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich.^v But well beyond the choice of shared motifs, the most striking reference to romanticism are aesthetic concepts. Rather than simply offering obvious similarities in compositional devices, it is in the strategies of narrative that these aesthetics become apparent.

This is evident in one of the most striking and dramatic images of the *Wicked Creek* series, a photo entitled *Beartooth Wilderness*.





A group of five singular trees rises against a wide winter landscape. In the foreground a stretch of trees all reduced to their trunks appear as dense black lineage before a white snow covered ground. Towards the upper part of the lower third of the picture a row of trees still possessing branches and needles form a solid band. Above them a line of snow covered hills nestle at the foot of a mountain chain that is overgrown with trees. Reduced to their trunks, these trees reveal the snowy ground. A solemn grey sky is brightened by a discreet afterglow of a setting sun. The landscape becomes a horizontal order against which the five trees stand out in determined verticality. The second tree of the group is positioned on the central axis of the image. It almost meets the curving of the hills and mountains which thereby function as its visual support. Even within a composition that otherwise follows a fundamental rule for traditional composition building, the golden section, the frail trunk is given enormous visual weight. Bare of all branches, its surface cracked by the fire (like the trunk in the photo entitled *Solitude*), burnt to the point of fragmentation, it recalls a carved totem pole.

This is a figure of monumental presence, dramatic and heroic. This is an image ready for interpretation. Yet there is nothing in the photograph that indicates a specific message, no content-to-go. What the image offers is a blank slate for projections and interpretation by the viewer.

This leads back to Caspar David Friedrich, who works with strong images that are easily understood as carriers of symbolic meaning. Closer examination of Friedrich's work however conveys that there is no clear iconography serving as the codex to his images. Rather, Friedrich invites his viewers to reflect and meditate. With refined compositional techniques, he gives only aesthetic guidance and direction, allowing viewers

to realize the aesthetic order and reflect upon it as an indicator for meaning.^{vi}

Deruytter shares Friedrich's approach to romanticism, aesthetically mediating a potential for meaning through strong compositional devices. Where *Wicked Creek* images seem to relate directly to Friedrich's imagery, Deruytter does not necessarily consciously or deliberately choose these historical images as specific models for his current photos. This is more a case of pictures being always there, irrespective of whether they are called upon or not.

Marcel Proust describes individual memory as being like a set of vast photographic archives that remain mostly unvisited unless opened up by coincidence or chance.^{vii} It can be argued that in each culture there is a pool of images exist as such "photographs" which make up the archives of a given collective cultural memory.

Deruytter takes photographs after a verifiable historic event, the fires at Wicked Creek. He creates images of considerable aesthetic complexity offering the potential of great narratives, — a potential to be met by the viewers. He thereby creates images that reach far beyond the aspects and strategies of simple documentation. These are images of fire.

Rafael von Uslar
Berlin, New York, 2008

Rafael von Uslar is a contemporary arts curator and writer based in Berlin. His exhibitions include: ZIMMERDENKMÄLER, Bochum, Edifying Sappho and Socrates, Sydney, Amsterdam, Blondies and Brownies, Amsterdam, Munich, Surfaces Paradise, Arnhem, Interventus Australis, Essen, "Was ist Deutsch?" Bayreuth.

i Roland Barthes: *Über Fotografie*. Interview with Angelo Schwarz 1977, translated by Wilfried Prantner, in: *Paradigma Fotografie*, ed. Herta Wolf, Frankfurt am Main, 2002, p.84.

ii Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Who is speaking Thus? Some Questions about Documentary Photography, in A. S.-G., Photography at the Dock. Essay on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 180.

iii The photograph as an offer one can't refuse is a reference to a remark by Victor Burgin. Much of Deruytter's work relies on posing, a response of the photographed to the camera, whether conscious or not. This is a collaboration between the photographer, his model and a well established convention, which can readily be called upon. What makes his photographs exciting is the radically subjective position with which he takes over each and every one of his chosen objects in a very clear and defining way.

iv Consequently, this colour representation of a natural black and white composition relies on more than one abstraction. According to Vilém Flusser, the photographic black and white bear testimony of their origin from the theory of optics; this notion is in turn an abstraction, since colour is also rooted in chemistry See: Vilém Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, Edition Flusser, Berlin, 2006, p. 40.

v From an American perspective such imagery also evokes references to the Hudson River School. American landscape painting was heavily influenced by American artists who, in the 19th century, studied at the art academy of Duesseldorf under teachers who were under the influence of Caspar David Friedrich and the German Romantics. For reference for this exciting history of an international migration of styles and images see for example: *Vice Versa. Deutsche Maler in Amerika Amerikanische Maler in Deutschland 1813 – 1913*, Berlin, 1996 and *New Worlds from Old. 19th century Australian & American Landscapes*, Canberra, Melbourne, Connecticut, Washington.

vi For a long time the interpretation of the works of Caspar David Friedrich relied on the assumption that Friedrich used clearly identifiable symbols out of which he composed his pictures as sort of romantic text. Werner Busch has taken a different and more convincing position on this issue. The remarks in this text on Friedrich's aesthetic strategies are based on his essay *Friedrichs Bildverständnis*, in *Caspar David Friedrich Die Erfindung der Romantik*, ed. Hubertus Gassner, Essen, Hamburg, 2006.

vii After: Brassai, *Proust und die Liebe zur Photographie*, translated by Max Looser, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, p.138. The original text: Gilberte Brassai, Marcel proust sous l'emprise de la photographie. Paris, 1997.















WOUTER DERUYTTER
WICKED CREEK

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WOUTER DERUYTTER
EXHIBITIONS

Born in Belgium, 1967. Lives and works in New York (USA)

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

2008	Light & Sie, Dallas, TX (USA) (<i>Wicked Creek</i>) Galeria Omar Alonso, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico (<i>homage to Maurice Bejart</i>)
2007	United Nations, New York (<i>Crow Warriors</i>) David Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (USA) (<i>Billboards, NY</i>)
2006	Caermersklooster Museum, Ghent (B) (<i>Billboards, NY</i>) Galeria Omar Alonso, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico (<i>Billboards, NY</i>)
2005	Chelsea Art Museum, New York (<i>Billboards, NY</i>) Briggs Robinson Gallery, New York (<i>Crow Warriors</i>) Wessel + O'Connor Gallery, New York, (<i>Billboards, NY</i>) George Billis Gallery, Los Angeles (<i>Arabian Knights</i>) Galeria Omar Alonso, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico (<i>Crow Warriors</i>)
2004	Galerie Torch, Amsterdam (N) (<i>Arabian Knights</i>) Galeria Omar Alonso, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico (<i>Circus in Egypt</i>)
2003	Musei Centrale Montemartini, FotoGrafia, Rome (<i>Il Codice Dei Cowboy</i>) Galeria Omar Alonso, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico (<i>Arabian Knights</i>) Wessel + O'Connor Gallery, Paris Photo, Paris (<i>Arabian Knights: Negative</i>)
2002	Galeria Omar Alonso, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico (<i>Anachronism Abroad</i>)
2001	RoseGallery, Santa Monica, U.S.A. (<i>Cowboy Code</i>) Galerie James Van Damme, Brussels (B) (<i>Rodeo Days</i>)
2000	Museo de Arte Carillo Gil, Mexico City, Mexico (<i>Codigo Vaquero (Cowboy Code)</i>) Wessel + O'Connor Gallery, New York (<i>Cowboys & Indians; Brave in the West</i>) Museo del Pueblo, Festival Internacional Cervantino, Guanajuato, Mexico (<i>Caballeros Árabes</i>)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2008	Museum NRW-Forum Kultur und Wirtschaft, Düsseldorf, Germany "Radical Advertising" (<i>Billboards, NY</i>) (book)
2006	Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, (IFA Gallery), Berlin and Stuttgart, Germany "Nazar / Photographs from the Arab World" (<i>Arabian Knights</i>)
2005	Corpus Brugge 05, PMMK / Museum of Modern Art at Seminary, Bruges, (Belgium) "SOUL" (<i>Arabian Knights: Negative</i>)

WOUTER DERUYTTER EXHIBITIONS

FotoFest, ArtCar Museum, Houston, Texas, (USA) "Nazar / Photographs from the Arab World"
(*Arabian Knights*)

Langhans Galerie Praha, Czech Republic, "Nazar / Photographs from the Arab World" (*Arabian Knights*)

FotoMuseum, Antwerp, (Belgium), "Belgische Fotografen 1840 – 2005" (book)

Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, (IFA Gallery), Stuttgart, Germany, "Nazar / Photographs from the Arab World" (*Arabian Knights*)

2004 Photofestival Noorderlicht, Leeuwarden, (the Netherlands), "Nazar / Photographs from the Arab World"
(*Arabian Knights*)

2003 Museum Boehringer Ingelheim, Germany, "Das Geheimnis der Photographie"
Kunsthal, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, "Vier eeuwen roken in de kunst"

2001 Museum Of Modern Art (PMMK), Oostende, (B)
"Between Earth and Heaven — New Classical Movements in the Art of Today"

2000 Cultureel Centrum De Spil, Roeselare (B), "Valentino Mania"

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Cowboy Code, Arena Editions, U.S.A., 2000

Knights of the Impossible, Museum of Modern Art, Ostend / Stichting Kunstboek, Belgium, 1997

Valentino Mania, Provinciaal Centrum Beeldende Kunsten, Hasselt, Belgium, 1996

Tu Tu Much, Jem Jender, Seibu International, Japan, 1991

Brussel...?, s.l. (in collaboration with Maurice Béjart), 1990

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Museum of Modern Art (PMMK), Ostend, Belgium

Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France

DZ Bank, Germany

Sprint Corporation, USA

Buhl Collection, New York, USA

Chelsea Art Museum, New York, USA

Frost Art Museum, F.I.U., Miami, USA

Sir Elton John, London, UK