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The family van Manen

Personal keepsakes and snapshots that creep into view help illustrate the stories of the Dutch photographer's subjects and raise them from the ordinary to the individual, finds Jean Dykstra

Bertien van Manen's photographs – rich, textured, from-the-hip – might be described as a kind of visual anthropology. But while that term gets at what she does – immersing herself in the communities she photographs and investigating visual manifestations of culture, namely photography itself – it's too academic and fusty to describe how her pictures look. A cross between Robert Frank and Nan Goldin with a little bit of Martin Parr, her pictures are deftly composed, with an intuitive sense of colour. At the same time, they can feel casual, and almost accidental. Which is, of course, entirely intentional.

Like a number of her contemporaries in the Netherlands – Rineke Dijkstra, Wijnanda Deroo, and Hans Aarsman, among them – van Manen is interested in a version of the documentary tradition characterised by a dispassionate reserve and a preference for the everyday over the extraordinary. Dijkstra's large-scale photographs investigate individual identity and the human condition, while Aarsman works in the tradition of the New Topographics. Deroo, like van Manen, is interested in vernacular aspects of photography, focusing on unpopulated spaces and interiors. The globe-trotting Van Manen, meanwhile, has created remarkable artworks out of her own lyrical blend of portraiture and documentary.

In 1976, van Manen was successfully, if not happily, making fashion photographs for a magazine, when a friend showed her a copy of Robert Frank's landmark book *The Americans*. 'That made the change for me,' she says. 'It was so dynamic and so personal, I thought – this is the way I want to take photographs.' Like Frank, she operates from the point of view of an outsider, but her work has a sympathetic quality, a sense of optimism and humour. 'I am very much interested in people,' she says. 'To take photographs of them, it's important that I have a good relationship with them; I have to have the feeling that they trust me.'

Between 1997 and 2000, van Manen made some 15 trips to China, where she made friends with a group of young people. The intimate, diaristic photographs she took at discos and restaurants, at parties and in bedrooms, in their homes and on buses, became the well-regarded series 'East Wind West Wind'. There is no inkling of the exotic Other in her photographs, which point to the influence of the West and show a culture in transition. Instead, they sketch out a rich skein of personal relationships and capture the rhythm of the day to day. Van Manen was shortlisted for the Citibank Prize for the series in 2003 (Juergen Teller won), and the Dutch publisher De Verbeelding issued the series in book form, with a foreword by Ian Buruma. De Verbeelding was also the publisher for one of van Manen's earlier projects, 'A Hundred Summers, A

Opposite, top: Bertien van Manen, *Miners, New Sharlston, Yorkshire, England*, 2005, chromogenic print. **Right:** *Munich, Germany*, 2005, chromogenic print

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Hundred Winters' (1995), photographs taken from 1990 to 1994 in the former Soviet Union. Straight-on, laconic portraits of people in their homes and in bars and restaurants, surrounded by their often meagre material possessions, the series presented a country in collapse and the corrosive effects on its citizens. 'Her work is direct and rough,' says Amsterdam photography dealer Willem van Zoetendaal, who shows van Manen's photographs. 'It has humour, but with an eye for suffering.'

Van Manen has spent significant periods of time in communities all over the world, including the Western Sahara, the Appalachian mountains of Kentucky, Romania and Nicaragua, as well as her native Holland. For her most recent project, however, she has taken a step back geographically, making Europe as a whole – Madrid, Vienna, Prague, Paris, Toulouse, Kosovo, Stockholm and Berlin, from Greece, the United Kingdom and others – her territory. But in another sense, she has moved in closer, literally and figuratively, to explore aspects of memory and history in tightly framed portraits of people's treasured family photographs. The photographs in 'Give Me Your Image', which will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *New Photography 05* from 21 October until 16 January, are remarkably textured and layered, both visually and conceptually. Eve Respini, assistant curator of photography at MoMA, acknowledges that it might seem odd to feature van Manen's work in a showcase for new photography, given that she's been working steadily, and successfully, for more than 20 years. But the Dutch photographer isn't as well known in the United States as she is in Europe, despite a group show at the Art Institute of Chicago earlier this year (*In Sight: Contemporary Dutch Photography*) and a solo show in 2003 at New York's Yancey Richardson Gallery, where a second solo exhibition has been scheduled for early 2006.

'Wallpaper, a lace doily, a statuette, lend a feeling of poignancy to the pictures'

'Her photographs have an almost abstract quality to them,' says Respini. 'You don't know quite what you're seeing. There's a sense of layering in terms of the viewing space.' In some images, bits of wallpaper are visible, or a bibelot or two – a lace doily or a ceramic statuette that lends a feeling of poignancy to the pictures. Others include the frame of a mirror or a painting that the photograph has been casually stuck into, a lamp on a desk, or a blurred view of what lies beyond a window. In most, there is only the barest sense of the identity of the photographs' owner – their socioeconomic circumstances, or even the age or sex. Van Manen's labels provide only the city in which the photograph was taken, primarily to

preserve her subjects' privacy, but also, one would assume, to let the viewers supply, or imagine, their own narratives. The images themselves are tantalisingly reticent. Viewers can hazard a guess from certain clues – a computer, for instance, in one image, as opposed to the old-fashioned cabinet holding dusty glasses in another. The photographs showing colour snapshots can seem slightly more accessible, but only because they're more familiar. A pregnant naked woman poses with her toddler son in one, for example, and in another, three blonde girls, sisters perhaps, are shown smiling in a colour snapshot stuck into the upper corner of a mirror. But what are the relationships behind these pictures, and who has selected them for van Manen to photograph?

In one terrific picture, two small, fading, black-and-white portraits of two men wearing tophats, who seem to be clowning and making faces, are stuck on to what look to be exposed electrical wires coming out of a water-stained wall. It's hard to know what to make of these whimsical pictures and the puzzling background, but that doesn't make it any less wonderful. With a sure hand, van Manen has captured the satisfying serendipity present in the best collections of vernacular photography.

Van Manen herself works with a small automatic camera, which lends the work a sense of spontaneity and leaves room for the accidental. 'If you look through the lens of a view camera using a tripod,' she says, 'you know exactly what is where. What I like with the automatic camera is that sometimes there's something that I didn't see that makes the picture more lively and interesting.' The flash is visible in some of the photographs, for instance, or the compositions are off-kilter. But it's a fitting form with which to record these bits of memory and history.

'Give Me Your Image' also begins a conversation, through photographs, about photographs and their role in our daily lives. The project, which is being published by Steidl in early 2006, grew out of an assignment van Manen did for the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which she was asked to photograph immigrants in the suburbs of Paris. She had been taking pictures of family photos from her subjects' homeland, which seemed to her a good way to reflect the sense of homesickness and disorientation they were experiencing. She began thinking more and more about the role of these family photographs, however. Totems, keepsakes, preservers of family history, they are as relevant today as they were 50 or 75 years ago. This is evident in the fact that people selected photographs that were brittle and yellowed with age as well as shiny new colour snapshots for van Manen to photograph.

There's a Family of Man quality to 'Give Me Your Image'. 'Very human things like death and birth and happiness and family are in all the pictures,' she says. But van Manen's photographs are ultimately so quirky and strange and remarkable and poignant that what they point to, instead, is our specificity and individuality.

Bertien van Manen's work is featured in 'New Photography 05', 21 Oct-16 Jan, MoMA, New York (+1 212 708 9400, moma.org). Her new book will be published by Steidl in spring 2006, coinciding with a solo exhibition at Yancey Richardson, New York (+1 646 230 9610, yanceyrichardson.com)

Previous page: Bertien van Manen, *Prague, Czech Republic*, 2005, chromogenic print. **Above:** *Sofia, Bulgaria*, 2005, chromogenic print

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