



THE  
COUNTRYSIDE  
AS  
A LANDSCAPE  
IS  
A CULTURAL  
PHENOMENON

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*“All things considered, the traces of human activities in the countryside, visible in my images, are in the end a kind of ‘pars pro toto’ for the enormous and irrevocable impact of mankind on this planet.”*

My work develops from an interest in a specific place or as in the case of my series *Brabant* from an interest in the landscapes surrounding my hometown Tilburg. I have an emotional connection with these places because they constitute the landscape of my childhood. I spend a lot of time investigating narrow geographies within these landscapes; I tend to move around in certain areas over and over again with the changing light and through the different seasons. Wandering around, it is fascinating for me to see how we have changed and how we continue to change our surroundings. In this respect it is important to note that my photography is driven essentially by an emotional involvement with places rather than by an attempt to gain some exact knowledge about changes that

have occurred. With regard to investigating and gaining knowledge, I wonder whether a medium like photograph is an appropriate means for documenting or providing evidence of ecological or other not directly tangible changes.

I grew up in the outskirts of Tilburg, an industrial city in the heart of Noord-Brabant. Brabant is a province in the south of The Netherlands. At that time these outskirts were newly built in a more or less rural landscape. So in my early youth the countryside, fields and woods were not too far away to make endless wanderings. I believe that those were formative years for my predilection for rural landscapes.

The *Brabant* series has originated from my profound feeling of loss. I mean the loss of familiar places, the loss of the original landscape

and the visible history of it and of course the loss of biodiversity and free space. Since my childhood days I have seen Brabant changing continuously and often rapidly. These changes in the landscape are, of course, the result of our efforts to provide food, housing and other needs for a growing population. Eventually to create a better world for more and more people. I look at these changes with mixed feelings; these inevitable changes have an upside and downside. The downside has to do with loss. The images of the *Brabant* series show mainly rural places. It is precisely this rural aspect of the landscape that has got lost largely in the last fifty years. My sense of loss has been strengthened for sure by the fact that it concerns the context of my youth. So it is often somewhat painful for me to see all these changes, not only the negative aspects of the changes. I guess that is why I have a preference for fading light or for the last light of the day for the subjects of my images.

The sites I choose to photograph are mainly rural places in the south of The Netherlands. Many of these places I have known since childhood and most are considered countryside. I feel that the rural orientation of my images allows me to see and show more clearly how we have changed and how we continue to change our surroundings. In the countryside, I feel the tension between nature and culture is at its best. I have to remark to this point that the countryside as a landscape is a cultural phenomenon, where culture/humanity and nature come together. Throughout

history, Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory*<sup>1</sup> postulates, there has been a symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature.

For me, it is in these rural places that the signs and traces of human presence are juxtaposed in a meaningful way relative to the natural world. The visibility of the manmade in a more or less natural environment, is basically what I mean with the juxtaposition mentioned above. I want to elaborate a bit further on this subject: the photographic image is only really capable of revealing the superficial or surface level of things. Thus, as a tool, I think the medium is somewhat limited in its capacity to comprehensively and unambiguously document environmental change, especially when it comes to less tangible aspects as pollution and other ecological issues. So I will have to do with the visible aspects of human presence. Because I visit places again and again, it is within this visibility that I can capture changes and suggest the passing of time.

In the above I mentioned that I return frequently in different seasons when I feel a special bond with a place. I try to investigate this bond by photographing places in different seasonal circumstances and light. Of course many rural places I knew in my childhood have been disappeared because of housing and industrial developments, so I am also searching for places in Brabant that bear some kind of reminder of those lost places. Reminders, sometimes almost visible and tangible, sometimes more indeterminate and associative. I also choose to photograph contemporary rural places that evoke feelings connected with those lost places of my childhood.

<sup>1</sup> Schama, S. (1995). *Landscape and Memory*, Harper Collins Publishers. Schama explores the impact of the history of Western civilization, on the natural world, and the corresponding influence of nature on humanity. He contends that it is human imagination that turns nature into landscape. And vice versa that imagination affects the interpretations and memories of later generations.



<sup>2</sup> Fuchs, R.H. (1978). Dutch Painting.  
Thames and Hudson Ltd

I already mentioned the somewhat painful feelings of loss, when being confronted by enormous changes in landscapes, but luckily for me there is also the joyful experience of beauty in (man-made) landscape and everyday subjects. When on location photographing, I have little problem being seduced by the enchanting surface of things or by the beauty of a place. I often share the despair of the planet's progressive and probably irrevocable decay, but my aim is also to create awareness of the fact that there is still much to lose. That is why I want to show the beauty of the landscape (i.e. Brabant) through photography. I hope that my images somehow contribute to the appreciation for the contemporary landscape, for Brabant as it is nowadays.

When thinking about the pictorial tradition and my photographs, I am thinking about more or less realistic paintings of Dutch landscape. More specific about seventeenth-century landscape painting in which you can see clearly the Dutch sensitivity to changing light and atmospheric detail, although no Seventeenth-Century artist ever painted outdoors.

In landscape paintings of Rembrandt and Hercules Seghers you can see landscapes that go beyond naturalism towards an emotional vision. Also Jacob van Ruisdael's visions of landscape have great emotional qualities; they are more than just observation. The skies in his paintings are suggestive; the skies give his images a strong emotional accent. Paintings like these, and many realist seventeenth-century images of the Dutch landscape, contained more or less a 'vanitas' as meaning<sup>2</sup>. Even though there is no direct emblematic reference, in these landscape paintings there is an obvious symbolic reference to the transiency of things. I see a connection or similarity between my photography and the indicated Seventeenth-Century painting, in the emphasis on changing light and atmospheric qualities and also in the resulting emotional power and the sense of impermanence.

Originally I was educated as a painter at Academie voor Beeldende Vorming Tilburg (Academy of Visual Arts) and art historian at Leiden University. Photography was continuously a part of my visual artwork and profession. In that time landscape photography (on slide film) was a lasting but mostly an additional interest. The rise of digital techniques in this century and my renewed interest in the Dutch landscape gave a fresh new boost to my landscape photography.

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