

Katrien Vermeire



portfolio text

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Katrien Vermeire (1979, Belgium) graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (KASK) in Ghent in 2001. She has received a number of grants from the Flemish Agency for Arts and Heritage, to support her artistic endeavours. Her work has been exhibited in numerous galleries including the Alexandre Cadain Gallery in Paris, Museum M in Leuven and the Crown Gallery in Brussels. This autumn she will be working on the audio-visual project *The Wave* with Belgian director Sarah Vanagt, documenting the process of the exhumation of a mass grave of Franco victims in Spain.

How did the *Godspeed* project come about?

While working on the art integration project *Something To Tell You* I was amazed to see scientists counting moths in an orchard in the middle of the night. It reminded me of the Smut character in Peter Greenaway's film *Drowning by Numbers*. That film, in particular the magnificent use of light in it – by Sacha Vierny and Reinier van Brummelen – had a huge influence on my work.

Photographing the moth/butterfly lamp (Vlinderlamp) for the *Something To Tell You* series is one of the things that led to *Godspeed*. The night I took that picture, the scientists were talking about glowworms and fireflies. I'd already heard a lot of stories about 'dwaallichtjes' (wandering lights), since they often appear in Flemish folktales. I liaised with scientists studying fireflies in Belgium and the United States. But unfortunately Belgium has lost much of its natural environment, so it soon became clear that I would not be able to work on the series here. In 2010, I spent several weeks in the United States shooting at night to capture the magic of this exceptional natural phenomenon.

You can see the fireflies only a few weeks a year for a few hours a night. I'm fascinated by their rhythm, the patterns and the intervals. The fireflies in *Godspeed* flash synchronously; after a few seconds of complete darkness, they emit light all together in a large wave motion. The circumstances were such that photographing at night was a real technical challenge; each photograph was an experiment.

Can you let us in on the secret of how the images were shot?

The light you see is purely the light emitted by the fireflies. They were recorded with regular professional digital cameras that perform well in low light conditions, no infrared.

The only alterations to the images that I made in Photoshop were very simple adjustments you can make just as well in the darkroom.

I worked with long exposure, so you'd see not only the fireflies but the landscapes

surrounding them as well. I like the idea of time slipping into the photographs. The fireflies emit light only for a few hours. I liked the slow process. You're standing next to your camera and for a long time you open the shutter and let whatever is happening in front of your lens be captured on the sensor. Each picture was an experiment, a surprise. There was a lot of trial and error.

'I like the idea of time slipping into the photographs.'

interview by Anne-Celine Jaeger

Both *Godspeed* and *Something To Tell You* are projects that relied on the involvement of other people. Is that an important aspect of creating work for you?

Ever since I was studying photography, a very interesting aspect for me has been meeting other people and getting to know places I would never have seen without my camera. For example, in 2006 I spent six weeks in rural Japan. Families allowed me to live with them and didn't think it was strange to have a stranger in their house. My camera was a *passe-partout*.

How do you come up with new project ideas?

Often it begins with an image or situation that catches my attention. It might be something in the real world (as with the butterfly lamp), or a picture in the newspaper. It's a slow process. Time is extremely important to me. I also like to let the images I make grow in my archive. If I look back several months or years later and still think it's a good image, then I feel confident enough to present it.

When I'm asked to describe my work, the word organic comes to mind. It gradually grows, builds up, isn't strictly planned or structured but has a natural feel nonetheless. It's a chaos that at a certain point resolves itself into a working whole.

What are you currently working on?

This summer I've been selected for Summerdocs at the NFTS in London. I've had an interest in documentary film since studying photography and working on the documentary film *Boulevard d'Ypres/Leperlaan* by Sarah Vanagt in 2009. It was a very exciting time, a new way of thinking and working with images. I especially liked the fact that we were a team. In September I would like to start working on a new series of portraits about the relationship between fathers and daughters, and in October I'm working on a new photo/film project with Sarah Vanagt in Spain.

What has been the single most inspiring thing you witnessed this year?

It was most definitely the first night we were out in the woods in Tennessee to work on the fireflies project. Those fireflies only come out when it's completely dark. We were waiting for the sun to go down, not knowing what to expect. Then suddenly it started. Shy at first, but so powerful. They are all around you. You turn 360° and you see them everywhere. Very close and far away. The fact that they are synchronous is very important. Periods of impenetrable darkness alternate with rhythmically pulsing flickering lights attuned to one another. It has a powerful effect on people who witness it. Most will venture no further than a kilometer or so into the forest, partly out of fear of the black bear and the rattlesnake, but it's only much farther into the forest that the darkness and the flashing and tingling reveal themselves in all their splendor. ●