

Brent Meistre - For Six years a Sojourner

The first time I met Brent Meistre and encountered his work, was in November 2011 in Bamako, Mali. I had problems with visa clearance and Brent waited with me at the airport.

In the days to follow we embarked on a small adventure in the country of ancient manuscripts before it was seized by the Tuareg rebels. His black and white video which was part of the Bamako Encounters was called 'The stranger who licked the salt back into our eyes'. It did exactly that.

That work created 'the history of the arrival of a stranger in a land where he had come to find himself and his love.' Instinctively, one sensed an artist with an acute sense of collating image and stitching a tale, with all the pathos and subtlety that has resulted in epic works throughout history.

Three days after our arrival, Brent Meistre escalated a ladder and so revealed one small secret of his skilful trade; five metres above the ground, slightly hovering from the vantage point of a low-flying bird. Always the same - top down central perspective (look carefully), nothing here is coincidental and there is even a correlation between William H.Fox Talbot, *The Ladder 1843*, plate 14 of the Pencil of Nature XIV.

At dusk on the fifth day we finally make it to the popular *bla bla bar* – an area which at the time was teeming with life, emanating from the makeshift shops and street hawkers. Goats were stacked on roofs of emerald green Peugeot-taxis, pulled on ropes, on the back of motorcycles, blaring and gasping to the captivating sounds of Toumani Diabate's kora. Tabaski was drawing closer and every household in preparation of this cardinal event on the Muslim calendar. We perched on a derelict wall on a sidewalk next to Avenue De La Liberté and surrendered to the hypnotic ritual of chaotic order in front of us: mesmerized by the tall slender women who moved like swallows in their indigo blue dresses amidst the dust and the heat and the poverty. The night became a catatonic symphony.

On the sixth day a stranger invited us for Tabaski.

From that point onwards my experience of Meistre's work was imbued with the sense of the temporary traveler on a continent always foreign and familiar, frozen by the shutter's rite of passage.

(And to sojourn thus, to *stay as a temporary resident*). . . *Meistre for six years a sojourner*.

On July 10, 2015 I e-mailed Brent Meistre some questions to which he replied:

What do you remember about Bamako?

The heat and wind from the Sahara, the music drifting around street corners. The worried goats and photographers.

Choice of photographic techtonics i.e analogue vs digital for instance?

Mainly analogue cameras, but use digital tech where needed. I don't own a digital camera yet. I like the way film cameras make me behave - think more, shoot less.

What resonates strongest about the South African landscape?

It's deceptive emptiness, layered with history and untold stories. But most importantly there is something to be found out there where people and land meet.

Earliest childhood memory?

Hiding behind a door

Where is your father?

In Port Elizabeth

I can vaguely remember that you mentioned Greek family ties. Was I imagining this or not?

Yes, Dina's is half Greek. We have been to Greece twice. What are the names of your children?

Matteo and Elio

Choice of music? Especially in your work.

Always drives the tempo of the work, music that is timeless and evocative, emotive. I always alter or manipulate the music to shift it into another work itself so that it begins to evoke the crux/centre of that particular song, be it pain, longing etc

What do you think is the name of the key that you give to your students?

Well you get to the key by 'riding the fire', this is called the duende (Spanish) it's a power or magic, the word is really untranslatable. But when you get it, you get it. It's like an amazing work of art, it does not need to be explained to you, you and your body understand it.

Five favourite movies

Magnolia

You the living

Dancer in the dark

Son of Rambow.

Five favourite books

Country of my Skull

Fugitive Pieces

Paul Celan - collected poems

Edmond Jabes - Book of Questions [Alex Obrigewitsch's review](#)

“What is this work that moves at the margins of definition, the margins of the book? It is a wound, a desert, of the darkness of the day and the bright light of the night.

Do not seek to fix it, pin it down. Follow it, in and out of the book. Experience it, and yourself, in and as this wound.”

This Mestre is a wandering poet, scribe of the iris and of the exact middle-world, where focus and longing meets. You will see this in his work; the still frames are always central perspective, meticulous - akin to the production of a *maestro*.

The horizon line dissects iris between sky and land. *The iris of the eye functions like the diaphragm of a camera, controlling the amount of light reaching the back of the eye by automatically adjusting the size of the pupil (aperture)*. His is the world of *New Topographies*, intersecting planes, allowing for as much of the outlying land as possible. And it brings to mind the labour of photographers such as Francis Frith, who in 1856, conquered deserts and pyramids with large-format cameras.

This is what you think when you stand in front of Mestre's work, be it the *Abandoned House in Seeheim's* menacing vacancy - Who built this, where are they now, what happened? Or in the case of *Two Trees, Kaokoland* - Where is the water, where are the people, where are the birds? *Dead Horse Mariental* - How did the horse die, did the horse wait for this man with the careful way of seeing? And the grave in *Brakbos, Keelafsnyleegte*. . . the name is written in Mestre's lens. *Ons reste gebalsem in salpeter en klip*.

In the *Sojourn* documentary this is echoed in the slow-motion which is signature Mestre; every tone, the vibration of an eland's alert, dust and solistalgia all gathered with a sweeping shutter.

The bleak signs of our outposts signifying that we were here (once.) That we left spoor like our sibling animals. That we also left the detritus of our immeasurable mess and that this man went to the ends of the earth to record it.

The stitching and **untraveling** of myth (and is myth not always connected to human condition in its consequence, its ritual?) The portrait lies inside the eye of the maker – here Brent Mestre. Because it does ultimately imply human presence. Further emphasised by the fact that he utilises portrait film to produce these images.

What does it mean to be human in the landscape? He stretches the view as one would stretch skin. He takes his time, only shoots three frames maximum, he shoots mirror-up and waits for the result.

He shoots between ten am and three pm; mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun. He shoots in winter. He is not mad. Look again.

In an e-mail sent on the 8th of May 2015, he starts a message as follows: *I hope you are well and dwelling in the wonder of it all.*

Bury us Across my father's fault

Crima

Clear a way for my father's tear

We arrive in the reservoir – as if this space and these three works formed a conjugal rite to which we are witnesses. What comes to one? Stone, water, root. . . Framing his own treehouse as a child and as an adult he still does this, but now the treehouse is a wide branch braving his story. You wonder if his father is dead, since you have asked him where his father was and he replied: “Port Elizabeth”.

Perhaps his father lies buried there? “No he is not dead.” This is a reckoning with our history, this is a generic father. It laments the remains of the day, somewhere it has the signal of a Greek tragedy, perhaps the distorted music of avenging erinyes.

(Tell me, Muse, the story of that resourceful polytropoi man who was driven to wander far and wide . . .)

Your face breaks

Our name is your name

We wait at the end

Bury us beneath shelter

Bury us beneath the lesser

You speak ash

But back to this site of pre-history; the cradle of humankind and birthplace of these three site-specific stop- frame animations which simultaneously links us to the historical development of archaeology and photography. In both; the process of investigation developed in a context that valued exactitude – proof – what semiology has called the index. A visiting photographer once completed a series of handportraits of South African artists and he was perplexed to notice that each and every time a curious heart-shape was evident in the printed images of the individuals' palms – The country that leaves a stain in your hand.

What does it mean to be human in the landscape?

'A photographic image is created first and foremost by cutting into reality, by slicing through discursive space. All photography is manifestly answerable for both a presence and an absence.'

Archaeology and photography both work through extraction – dichotomy, the separation of the fragment from the disparate whole in which it is found. They understand one another; one reveals the object to the light of day, the other uses light to record the object.

In geology the two sides of a vertical-fault are known as the hanging wall and the footwall. By definition the hanging wall occurs above the fault plane and the footwall occurs below the fault. A fault is a planar fracture or discontinuity in a volume of rock mass movement. The still images of Sojourn have become the shadows, moving 'Across my father's fault.'

What you hear in the fluent piano you will experience in Mestre's work: Lefthand rootless fragments, poignant contrapuntal and polyphonic scenes; passing tones of an unforgettable vastness.

Lien Botha, July 2015, Bloemfontein.

Notes:

1. Phil du Plessis
2. Michel Frizot, A New History of Photography, Könemann, 1998, Köln
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fault_\(geology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fault_(geology))