

The symbolic imagery of Krystyna Ziach by Florent Bex, 2006

Florent Bex is honorary director of the Museum of Contemporary Art MuHKA, Antwerp, Belgium

In our current consumer society images are omnipresent, but they are trifled with. Their communication value is reduced to primary messages. The images are mostly used to manipulate consumer behaviour, or to give us the illusion that all sorts of meanings are hiding behind the visually ephemeral image.

This book not only offers an engaging selection of Krystyna Ziach's photographic body of work, but also leads us into a world of symbolic imagery. Images that are to a large extent timeless and universal, because they result from the human imagination looking for sense and meaning in the phenomena of the world and the universe. A symbol is always twofold, because it consists of an intelligible and recognizable aspect and an underlying invisible dimension. The unknown, which lies hidden behind the known, may only be approached intuitively and will never clearly and completely relinquish itself. A symbol remains effective as long as it is laden with hidden meanings, as long as it remains suggestive, the symbol playing a mediating role between matter and mind, between nature and culture. The magic of symbolic images lies in the fact that they tell more than they show and especially in that they link up concepts that are often bipolar, such as heaven-earth, space-time, real-unreal, immanent-transcendent. The symbol brings us closer to what seems distant and moves us away from what is evident.

In the photo series *Infinity* Krystyna Ziach shows us that the symbol functions in the first place for the individual, or for a specific collective which identifies with it. Thus the symbol has a unifying and social function. The Shinto temples, the *Secret Rooms*, with their surreal play of light and darkness, the nature created with astounding care in the *Imperial Gardens*, they illustrate fundamental aspects of Japanese culture. A culture with an eye for order and harmony, always in an intimate relationship with nature that refers to the bond between heaven and earth, to the permanent interaction between the divine and the human. There is the sense of repetition in the infinite sequence of gates, or in the accumulation of thousands of Buddha statuettes which tell us that there is a potential Buddha hiding in each of us.

Water and fire, together with wind and earth, are the four basic elements contained in all aspects of life.

In many cultures we find the symbolic meaning of water, *materia prima*, as the source of life, as a means for cleansing and as an element of rebirth and revival. Water also stands for spiritual, immaterial life and hence for eternity and immortality. In all cleansing rituals water has a sacred meaning, it erases the past and makes new life possible.

Fire always goes together with water in an antagonistic way, both having connotations of cleansing and recovery, but fire also standing for light and by extension for spiritual enlightenment, passion and love. Water is an essential element in the photo series *Archê* and *Aqua Obscura*. The major difference with the previous photos is that these are by no means existing or found situations, but very personal *mises-en-scène* created by the artist.

Droplets of water on body parts and especially the water flowing over the face, spring from direct personal experience and observation, seized however by the imagination

and thus changing into metaphorically laden representations which simultaneously reveal and hide. The face is the seat of all senses, but the eyes are closed. It is as if the intimate self only wants to be known surreptitiously and not to relinquish its deepest secrets. The face as a mystery, a gateway to the invisible, an obfuscated reflection of the inner intuitiveness.

In *Aqua Obscura* the streaming, clear and transparent water is replaced by the stagnant water of a pond, soiled by floating seeds waiting for new life and photo portraits from the past. It seems a pool of oblivion into which the effigies of loved ones are doomed to disappear. These are the waters of death, yet temporarily, just for a bit, it is a place of remembrance.

Krystyna Ziach offers us images which again and again evade rational explanation. They neither give unambiguous, nor conclusive answers, but ask to be continually reinterpreted. These are images of all times, which create an unavoidable interaction between the universal and the individual by appealing to our personal imagination. Images which refer to the inscrutable and the inexplicable, to suppressed desires, to man who, in his daily emotional experience of the world, is eternally in search of the existential meaning of life. Images which seem to offer themselves in a mediating role between mind and matter, nature and culture, the conscious and the subconscious, between dream and reality. Simultaneously recognizable and alienating, they remind us of ephemeral brevity and inescapable transience. But, in the tranquil vulnerability and the melancholically poetic, the wonderment remains unassailably active.

Translation: Hanny Keulers