

## Contemporary Photographer Hughes Dubois

What actually is contemporary art and what is not? Is this a relevant question or a silly semantic quarrel? Let's see!

Simply stated, Hughes Dubois is a Belgium photographer who has established a formidable reputation for making extraordinary images of non-western art. Today, he lives for the most part in Paris because it is a centre of tribal and ethnic art and home of many of the world's largest ethnic art museums, all which need a photographer to record their treasures.

On the surface, there is no immediate evidence to suggest that Dubois is a contemporary artist, but wait - isn't this conclusion a bit hasty if we ask why photos of the early masks of artist Carl Evans made by a little known photographer are classified as art? To the point - doesn't logic dictate that a stunning photo of an ancestor statue by an antique artist merits the same label?

We can push the point further because Dubois uses as much if not more creativity when practicing his art. Under his attentive gaze, Dubois actually brings the power and magic of these ancestral statues back to life in a contemporary setting. He is not some stodgy anthropologist recording dead specimens but a maker of living portraits.

From Songye to Borobudur

Concerning their latest project, one must ask why Caroline and Hughes Dubois spent four years and countless long nights atop Java's famous Borobudur Temple under the full moon? What drove them, while wrapped in silence and solitude, to make extremely detailed photos of the reliefs of this venerable ancient monument?

The answer is self-evident when one carefully studies the resulting magnificent panoramas, which exude an inner light that makes the figures and events depicted seem to spring to life with an intensity that is from a photographic point of view completely original if not unique. This is not mere recording but an artist's quest for self-expression.

Hughes Dubois' creative journey began many years ago, in 1990, when he released his much acclaimed, ground-breaking photographs of sculptures of the Songye people of Africa, which he then presciently described as portraits. More than twenty-five years later, the photos of Hughes and Caroline Dubois of Borobudur can be seen as the culmination of his personal and original approach to photography and art. Once again Dubois infuses an ancient human treasure with a soul that makes it real and relevant to contemporary audiences. Borobudur has never been more alive!

Notably he uses black in a fashion reminiscent of the work of the famous French artist Pierre Soulages by seemingly drawing luminosity out of the depths of time. As with Soulages, this concerns a dialogue between the artist and his 'models'. It is also a battle with the limitations of their chosen mediums.

Dubois expresses himself with force, "Light is connected to volume just as volume is connected to light. As in the plays of Robert Wilson, highlighting is paramount. In sculpture, it combats uniformity and flatness. It creates a three-dimensional volume that allows us to fully 'read' the reliefs."

After all, photography is only a label used in the circle of contemporary arts. Simply speaking it is about making images. As for the definition of what makes a good photograph, the answer is again simple – a good photograph is one that resonates with the viewer in a compelling personal fashion.

Through their Borobudur project, the Dubois couple demonstrate their dedication to illuminating our collective human consciousness and heritage by uniting the ancient past with contemporary society.

From Picasso to Dubois

We must also not forget that the artistic-cultural revolution experienced by Europe at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the result of an epiphany triggered by the 'discovery' of tribal and non-western art by the likes of Matisse, Picasso, Derain, Kirchner, Apollinaire and Breton. Inspired, they went on to explore new visual and conceptual frontiers that changed the world.

A century later, Hughes Dubois has experienced the same emotions and has in a sense inherited their mantle. As we well know, art is constantly re-invented. It draws on deep and ancient wells. As his predecessors, who used painting, sculpture, drawing, graphic arts and photography, Dubois questions the meaning of our existence and seeks to transmit his own unique vision.

Back to Borobudur, we know from his letters to his brother Theo, that Vincent van Gogh was inspired by its compositions and realised their relevance to the new artistic paradigm that he and his contemporaries were striving to create. Dubois does the same in photography guided by his intuition and the firm conviction that it is a task of immense importance.

Art, after all, is a question of how we see things and express our viewpoint.

By Roger Pierre Turine – 2016

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