

BORDERCROSSINGS

BOOKS

Lieux mêmes by Bertrand Carrière

by Chester Pelkey

There is a series of five journeys taken to northern France and into Belgium at the centre of Bertrand Carrière's photographic landscapes in his book *Lieux mêmes*, 2010, journey taken with his friend and guide Guth Des Prez, the French storyteller and historian, as together they searched to locate, some 9 years later, those relics and vestiges that mark where the near stagnant lines of battle had been drawn and joined in the wholesale destruction and nearly incomprehensible slaughter of what can be named "The Great War" "The War to end all Wars," which was WWI. Carrière's work is now posed in an abstract frame but goes, instead, to a response where synchronicity is involved. With *Lieux mêmes* some years before an old photographic album can be found in his hands containing images of that conflict—destroyed forests of barren, stunted trees, fields of muck and mire pockmarked with shell holes, and villages where we see only the skeletal remains of a few houses. What then folded into this frame was his encounter with Des Prez, who for some 5 years had focused his efforts on gathering the stories and marking the traces—his "secret places," he tells us—so that these thin would not slip into oblivion.

Des Prez's work, which is his grandfather's war, centred on that area known as "The Western Front"—northern France and Belgium—that exactly coincides with Carrière's intent where, on the Somme, the Pas-de-Calais and the fields of Flanders his images followed in the footsteps of the soldiers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. In that raging struggle, Canada, bloodied in battle, emerged as a nation in

own right. Then, on that much darker side of those events, a staggering sense of grief for the tens upon tens of thousands fallen and maimed reverberated into every small corner of this country. As Carrière notes, while here we have stone memorials, however solemn, however grand, commemorating that experience, it is only across an ocean in changed landscapes bearing the wounds of that cataclysm that we can locate the ambiguous mix of closely fought triumph and profound loss in more tangible, though still elusive, forms. Therein lies the image. A jagged line of trench under a grey, oppressing sky, now caved in, covered by long, wild grasses, scarred by the yawning abyss of a sunken bunker that in reaching out into a field also reaches back into time. It is caught in the wire of opposing trenches, impossible to reach, and continuing to resonate with phantoms residing in that perdition and uncertainty of no-man's land.

Carrière situates us into the exacting context of *Lieux mêmes* in the first, much smaller section of his project and book where, in a series of corresponding images, we have, to the one side, photographs from the album and, facing them, images of these same places taken today—fields now burgeoning with ripening crops, houses in that village whole again and that forest, up upon a rise above a curving lane, grown back once more. Seamlessly combining into the second section of free-standing images, Carrière speaks of centring upon "eliciting a voiceless memory, a memory inscribed in the soil itself," aspects of memory in such images as that of a small, rough stone memorial choked by dead weeds in a wood set off to the side of a narrow forest lane, where its lettering, eroded by



the elements over time, is capable now of only carrying cryptic messages into the generations.

There is a sense of an uneasy, conflicting beauty in these deceptively pastoral images that bear a quality of entering into "a living museum," as the essayist John K Grande notes—the knowable and unknowable, the past and present tense as a single entity. A shell hole, now an immense pool of water in a forest grove that has grown up surrounding it, where the trees, reflected in the still water, stand as if muted sentinels—that one hand disclosing, the other withholding. Carrière names his central theme as "memory intersecting time," the very frame of *Lieux mêmes* but as well, in differing perspectives, this same theme in two previous bodies of work in which he took up an examination of nature—the classic *Signes de jour*, 2001, where he explored a dark, fragile, human presence—a thing of omens and portents abroad upon the land—and *Dieppe: Landscapes and Installations*, 2006, his first war project, with images expressing a

disturbing, abstracted ambience, as if wrenched from their contexts. Elsewhere, the acclaimed curator Martha Langford has noted of Carrière's photographic landscapes that light is the "primary conduit," where light is both "language and silence," "theatrical and strange," a narrative photography in which light, as a sculpting tool of composition, merges together with Carrière's keen sense for the moods of weather. In these striking, remarkable photographs, the physical properties of his topographies of distant war receding into the ages merge into the intuitive, metaphysical properties of our collective memory. ■

Lieux mêmes, photographs by Bertrand Carrière with texts by Guth Des Prez and John K Grande, Quebec: L'instant meme, 2010. 120 pp, \$49.95.

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1. Bertrand Carrière, *Small shell crater, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 62, Near Ypres, Flanders, Belgium*, 2007, pigment print, 75 x 90 cm. Courtesy the artist.

2. Walter Tandy Murch, *Large Doll*, 1965, oil and mixed media on two Masonite panels, 48 x 32". Estate of the artist. Courtesy The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, ON.