

INSIDE CAIRO

MICHAEL VON GRAFFENRIED



School's out for girls, 2007, photographic c-print on dibond, 112½ x 49 in, (286 x 125 cm)

JUNE 15 – JULY 15, 2012

OPENING RECEPTION: FRIDAY, JUNE 15, 6-9PM

The work of Swiss artist, Michael von Graffenried has attracted increasing recognition in the contemporary art world, though he originally gained acclaim as a documentary photographer. While the artist has stated that he seeks to “show the reality of today” in other words to record and show what is there with complete objectivity, he has chosen subjects and developed techniques that have allowed his practice to gradually emerge as something far more than simple recording of reality.

Indeed, Graffenried has developed a personal and penetrating body of work that has taken itself far beyond the criteria of photojournalism. Each image stands on its own as a revealing microcosm of the societies and communities in which humans exist, and this has been made possible, as we shall see, by the photographer’s efforts to “disappear” – to be an invisible eye in the midst of humanity.

One of the artist’s breakthroughs came when he accepted an assignment to document the drug scene in Bern, Switzerland. In order to do this successfully, Graffenried felt he had to embed himself amongst the drug users, and completely gain their confidence in order to properly experience their community from within. Like much of the artist’s work, the resulting images were as powerful as they were mundane, in the sense that they showed the daily reality of these particular individuals without voyeurism or pretention. Just as Graffenried had managed to put himself at the

center of the action, the artist's preoccupation was to exchange this position with the spectator, and in order to do this as effectively as possible, he decided to show these images on publicity billboards in a number of cities in Switzerland. An important part of the functioning of such large billboards is to invade and envelope the viewer's environment in order to strive to take over his or her consciousness for the time that the image (or advertisement) manages to hold the attention. A similar technique has been used, of course, by color-field painters and others, whose large-scale works offer an environment that takes over the spectator's field of vision, so that even the most passive viewer is drawn in and submerged by the experience of the work of art. The German critic and curator, Robert Fleck pointed out that this is what Graffenried's large format, panoramic works do too, creating "a monumental, totally flat space which almost reminds one of Abstract Expressionism". Indeed, in Graffenried's work, this device functions both physically, as described, but equally in terms of the photographs' content, which also places the spectator right in the midst of the image. The curator, Harald Szeeman recognized the significance of the artist's innovatory approach here, stating that the artist was able to put the spectator "at the heart of the event".



Astrid I, 2004, silver gelatin print on aluminum, 117 x 49 in (298 x 125 cm)

Building on this experience, Michael von Graffenried's works realized in Algeria and Cairo represented a further development in his desire as an artist to get inside these particular societies where photographers were viewed with great suspicion, which itself demanded solutions enabling him to take photographs unnoticed. In order to do this, Graffenried began using a small panoramic Widelux camera, that he could hold discreetly on his chest, operating it without his subjects being aware of his actions. Functioning in this way allowed the artist the great advantage of creating images that totally removed the relation between the photographer and people being photographed. Robert Fleck has commented on this, saying that "The whole distance that photography traditionally established between the camera and the subject is reduced", and that in developing this fusion of his desire to capture reality, with the technical demands of achieving it (ie: by hiding his actions), Graffenried has arrived at a "true form of language, a new kind of photography".

This way of working also poses special problems, since most societies do not condone the photographing of individuals without their permission. In the USA, this is often cited as an invasion of privacy, while in predominantly Muslim countries like Algeria and Egypt, photography has religious repercussions with the belief for some that it "steals" a part of the soul, and the related tendency of avoiding representations of the human face. This a grey area, however, in such contexts that have something of a love-hate relationship with the West, and while people might have the reflex of hiding from the camera for superstitious reasons, billboards representing politicians in Egypt, for example, have seemed nevertheless to abound. For Michael von Graffenried, this has certainly been an issue. On the one hand, his hidden camera technique has contributed enormously to the special nature of his images – endowing them at the same time with an extraordinary authenticity, as well as a conceptual premise that takes them beyond photography: the images seem to exist in a rarefied dimension that belongs neither to the artist, nor the subject, nor the spectator. On the other hand, Graffenried has stated that this technique "makes you feel dirty", and in the case of his work in Algeria, he actually returned to what he called "the scene of the

crime” with the express intention of finding the individuals he had photographed during the civil war, and discussing this very issue with them. The result of this “confessional” trip was a film by Mohammed Soudani (*Algeria, I know that you know, 90*”, 2002), documenting the intense debate that was provoked by the artist’s second visit.



Riot Police, 2007, photographic c-print on dibond, 112½ x 49 in (286 x 125 cm)

Throughout Michael von Graffenried’s practice, his camera has always been a tool that allows him to communicate – with his subjects, with society, and with the public at large, whether in the specific context where the photographs were made, or in a much wider context internationally.

The exhibition at Parker’s Box is intended to be an integral part of that communication – presenting unassuming images that bear witness to the rather giddy, and very loaded atmosphere of Cairo in the years before the Arab Spring of 2011. Unlike the overload of media images that covered much of the subsequent events, flooding into our consciousness through the filtering effect of the multitude of screens that accompany our every waking moment, Michael von Graffenried’s photographs pull the spectator physically into their arena.

The closeness of foreground subjects in these panoramic images adds to the flattening effect of the panning action of the camera, making the space inhabited by the subjects seem to come close to fusing with the space occupied by the spectator. In this way, details become more formally imposing, like aesthetic devices in classical painting, while at the same time becoming ever more intriguing and ambiguous. The proximity to the content of these photographs that the spectator enjoys, means that such details as the Arabic writing on a riot policeman’s shield, a white veil entirely enveloping a joking schoolgirl’s head, a butcher’s chopping block, etc...all take on powerful “painterly” presence.

While the exploration of societies struggling to deal with oppressive political contexts is a highly charged arena, by removing photography’s usual veneer of artifice, Michael von Graffenried’s work has succeeded in revealing the true features of humanity in such places.

Among Michael von Graffenried’s numerous solo exhibitions feature those at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, France; Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Cologne, Germany; Swiss National Museum, Zürich, Switzerland; Museum of Fine Arts, Bern, Switzerland; The Swiss Institute, New York; Musée de l’Elysée, Lausanne, Switzerland; Hong Kong Arts Center, Hong Kong; National Library, Alger, Algeria; as well as gallery shows at Galerie Bernhard Bischoff & Partners, Bern, Switzerland; Galerie Esther Woerdehoff, Paris, France; Witkin Gallery, New York, and Galerie Agathe Gaillard, Paris among many others.

In 2010, Michael von Graffenried won the prestigious Erich Salomon Prize of the German Society of Photography.

Gallery Hours: Thurs-Sun, 1-7PM. Further information: +1 718 388 2882 or info@parkersbox.com