

DEATHLY BEAUTY

AFTER TWENTY MONTHS OF REBUILDING WORK, THE FAMOUS PARIS ENTOMOLOGY SHOP DEYROLLE REOPENED ITS DOORS LAST WINTER. PHOTOGRAPHER MARTIN D'ORGEVAL HAS IMMORTALIZED THE DAMAGE RESULTING FROM THE FIRE THAT DESTROYED THE PLACE IN 2008.

Founded in 1831 by entomologist Jean-Baptiste Deyrolle, the Deyrolle shop opened at its present address at 46 rue du Bac in 1888, securing itself a lasting place in Parisian history. The purpose of the establishment was primarily educational (it published books on animals and plants, made scientific equipment and even supplied equipment to schools), but it has also been a source of fascination for over a century, attracting visitors from all over the world including Salvador Dali, André Breton and Bernard Buffet.

The shop is located in a fine town house in the 7th arrondissement, originally built for Samuel-Jacques Bernard, comte de Coubert, who was the son of Louis XIV's famous banker. Over the years, the animal kingdom has found a resting place here thanks to the passion, skill and foresight of its guardians. 2001 marked a turning point in Deyrolle's history. Having fallen into serious financial straits, it was acquired by Louis-Albert de Broglie, who was to be the redeemer of this sanctuary of natural history. He put all his energy, devotion and talent into what was to remain one of the finest curiosity shops in the world. De Broglie carried out extensive restoration work, reviving the original purpose of the shop-cum-museum and launching a publishing venture focusing on educational prints via the foundation 'Deyrolle pour l'avenir' (Deyrolle for the future). He also presented exhibitions, the earliest of which showcased the work of artists such as Niki de Saint Phalle and Bettina Reims.

Visiting Deyrolle is a unique experience; it is an astonishingly lively place where visitors are invariably surprised to find themselves talking in hushed voices and avoiding sudden movements for fear of disturbing its inhabitants: lions, monkeys, peacocks, wolves, tigers, zebras, elephants, lobsters, bears and butterflies. As this fascinating Parisian Ark continued its immutable cruise, the most unlikely event occurred during the night of 1 February 2008, when a fire ripped through the slumbering kingdom. The result was a spectacle that was both moving and disturbing. Amidst the smoking debris, the damage was colossal: upturned workbenches, shattered glass from dioramas, ruined outlines, charred manes.

Faithful friends, anonymous admirers and curious onlookers came from the four corners of Paris, and support flooded in for Deyrolle and its owner Louis-Albert de Broglie. He then took an initiative that was commensurate with how he saw his duty: he invited artists including Martin d'Orgeval, Sophie Calle and Nan Goldin to come and work on the site of the apocalypse. We were especially impressed by the work of Parisian photographer Martin d'Orgeval. A regular visitor to Deyrolle, he was immediately able, with discreet humility, to immortalize the intense, deathly beauty of the situation.

AN APOCALYPTIC, DEATHLY SPECTACLE. CHARRED BUTTERFLIES, SCATTERED SKELETONS, ERODED BODIES...THE DEYROLLE SHOP LAY IN RUINS.

D'Orgeval talks of the silence and the palpable shock of seeing these creatures blackened by the tragedy. Whereas the idea of a second death seems appalling, Martin d'Orgeval wisely prompts us to see something more uplifting in this cataclysm: the advent of new life in the flames. Attracted by this ambivalence, he takes us into an extraordinary world and invites us to stop and think, focusing on the all too precarious frontier between life and death. The artist reminds us of the basic tenets of documentary photography - frontal, functional and devoid of anecdote; but he also invites us to leave behind a culture of photography that is often too narrow and relinquish certain obsolete aesthetic parameters. This is how Martin d'Orgeval inspires and fascinates us with *Touched By Fire*, a series that is at once poignant, graceful and poetic.

On 24 September 2009, after 20 months of rebuilding work, the last room in the Deyrolle shop opened its doors once more, thus ending a painful chapter in the history of this Parisian institution. As the shop emerged at last from its deep coma, Martin d'Orgeval's photographs found themselves elevated to the level of a prophecy.

Vassili Verrecchia

Touched by Fire by Martin d'Orgeval is published by Steidl.
www.martindorgeval.com

(Translation by Martyn Back)