

*Luxury, serenity and sensuality*  
Alain D'Hooghe

*The subject then is portraits. Mainly, but not exclusively. Unless one accepts Jean Le Gac's thesis whose reasoning is couched in a pithy turn of phrase holding that "photography is reporting", as all the other disciplines have to do with painting. Behind this killer or at least provocative phrase - a godsend for anyone interested in revitalizing the eternal debate pitting art and photography against each other, there is something to think about. Maybe when photographers are up against a reality they control barely or not at all, when their margin of maneuver and mark are limited (?) to point of view, framing and moment of shooting does the photographer's act prove the most strictly photographic. Only in these conditions, as against any mise en scène, would they find themselves closest to the specificity of their medium. Likewise, one could say that all photography not falling within the realm of fact or moment could be measured by the portrait. Landscape: portrait of a place. Architecture photo: portrait of a building. Fashion photo: portrait of an article of clothing or accessory. Still life: portrait of one or several inanimate objects. Nude: portrait of unclthes body(ies) Etc.*

*Therefore, in that Franck Christen does not practice this furtive art of seizing the ephemeral as it occurs, it can probably be said that he operates in all things as a portraitist. But what difference does it make after all? Futile rhetoric this obsession, to label, to tag everything, everywhere. Let us settle for seeing these photos for what they are: photographs.*

*Since life nourishes work, and the remain indissociable, linger briefly over Franck Christen's path. He grew up in Alsace, in a house in the village of Heimsbrunn, a stone's throw from Mulhouse, among his parents, sister and pets. Nature was omnipresent and daily life followed the rhythm of the seasons. Like all family stories, hi is both banal and unique. Child's games, first adolescent emotions. An uneventful school record.*

*Basel is close by, rich in galleries and above all its annual fair, the all-important international happening that contemporary art people converge onto. Franck was sensitive to refinement and elegance and discovered in Basel a world he barely suspected but one he then appropriated. Minimalism and conceptual art - Joseph Beuys in particular - attracted him. Producing beauty didn't necessarily demand great means. He found the same bareness, the rigor that drew him to certain works in some museographical arrangements or in the design of luxury shops. A succession of coincidences more than a deliberate choice took him to Brussels where he began studying art history. While he didn't yet know exactly what the place would be like, he was determined to make himself a place in this world that fascinated him. Critic? Gallery owner? He only knew he was bored at university listening to droning teachers he wasn't turned on by. This plan fell apart in a year.*

*In fact, more than theory or analysis, he was tempted by doing, even though until then he hadn't yet appropriated that idea. He enrolled in La Cambre photo department and stayed there five years, singling himself out at the outset by the sharpness of his look and the seriousness with which he was envisaging this new direction. He had no trouble matching the exercises and themes set by his course of study with his own interests, desires, his own world. And little by little - quickly in fact - he found and developed his visual signature. While he worked in series (The Collectors, The Alsacians, The Parisians, The Abbey of Oelenberg), it was more to respond to specific demands, to enter into the frame than because he wanted to segment his work. Invited to treat a subject "in the style of", he picked an homage to August Sander, a choice that today seems a decisive and illuminating sign. From then on, nearly everything brought him towards the portrait of people close to him, acquaintance, family, those he wanted to meet. Photography was much a pretext as an end in itself. As it often, the case, it enabled the author to discover his sitter but also to find a facet of himself, to recognize himself in the one with whom he was face-to-face. Spontaneously,*

*Franck Christen sought affinities rather than differences so that virtually all this production can be considered as a mosaic of which each element composes nothing else but a necessarily unfinished and unfinishable self-portrait. To a greater or lesser degree, he is the collector taken with his objects, the Parisian social lion par excellence, the Alsatian attached to his traditions, the monk seeking harmony in silence and the repetition of simple gestures, the young man attentive to his appearance, the stylist matching pure lines and noble materials, the painter recreating a universe in his image.*

*The choice of medium format is obviously meaningful. In addition to the characteristics of a negative that offers a better definition and therefore more details, it fits photography as Franck Christen understands and practices it. The relatively heavy and cumbersome camera is not unobtrusive, which confers a real physical presence to it, a solemnity that each of the protagonists feels. No question of dissimulating here, of doing anything without anyone's knowledge. Besides, as the camera is held at stomach or chest level rather than at the eye, there is no screen between the photographer and his model so their relationship is one of equality, a real face-to-face. Lastly, the square suggests another harmony, like a better foundation.*

*To the more or less stark stylism of the studio, Franck Christen prefers the portrait on location, using the natural setting to compose his frame. Most often the person fits into a clearly defined environment.*

*The lines are more straight than curved, the angles sharp as if the author was reserving the softness of the curves for the essential, the human being.*

*It's the same softness, the same curves from the lights falling like a caress. Light - always; day light - only, over shadow. Literally as well as figuratively.*

*Although they don't seem nervous, although they seem to have confidence more than to be on the defensive, Franck Christen's sitters still generally betray their fragility. As there's no hint of malevolence, they lower their guard and mask, revealing themselves in all their vulnerability.*

*Bodies are as "talkative" as faces. The photographer has also understood that. There's a curious ritual as preamble to the shooting. Before posing the model is "subjected" to a few stretching exercises, an incongruous way to break the ice but even more an almost infallible way to avoid the stiff, rigid attitude of anyone placed opposite the lens. The position loses its rigidity and the gesture becomes more natural.*

*Even in the process leads to an almost total control of the various elements of the image, from the choice of the frame to that of the time of taking the picture, Franck Christen remains attentive and receptive to the serendipitous accident, to the unexpectedness that swings something well-done into the realm of grace. It's the accident, the chance, unsuspected until the development of the film, that presides over the final selection. Every time it's the indescribable magic that allows a photo to join its elders in the ledger where "those who remain" are inscribed. Fortunately, art drinks more from the irrational than from certainties or recipes.*

*While the human figure remains at the heart of his work forming its epicentre and its guiding red thread, other themes enrich and diversify it, substantiating its consistency? Whether he takes a famous dress designer or architect, painter friends, his parents, neighbours, a mother and child doing somersaults in the Tuscan fields, the dog Corto, a sparkling petticoat, a bottle of holy water or the ruins of the temple of Faqra, Franck Christen quests after elegance.*

*Beauty, of human beings, of things as well as of feelings - this is what keeps his eye open. This is what stops him when a cloud crosses the sky, the cedars forma delicate vault, a pillar of the Eiffel Tower becomes an incomparably interwoven lacework.*

*Strange paradox: these images are surely of today and yet they attain intemporality. Out of norms, out of fashion, out of currents. Surely that is where their real, their undeniable modernity lies.*

*Some photographers accompany their work with words to give it meaning (Nietzsche spoke of waters that one troubled to try to hide their shallowness); other endlessly describe images they won't make, discussing projects with their audience that'll never see the light of day. Franck Christen settles for taking pictures, silently. But everyone knows the strength of silence.*

*When all is said and done, any analysis of this work can only lead to redundancy. All it asks is to be looked at and it will reveal all its charms, distil its delicious poison. What it offered here is an invitation for a trip, like the one Charles Baudelaire promised : "order and beauty, luxury, serenity and sensuality".*