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Flemish photographer hits late career milestone

By Tom Peeters

Summary

The now retired photographer Jacques Sonck captured an eccentric cross-section of Flemish society in his free time, and his striking photographs of random passers-by have now finally caught the attention of gallery owners both here and abroad

When local becomes universal

The individuals in Jacques Sonck's black-and-white pictures don't have names. Neither does the Flemish photographer mention where the photos were taken, although 95% of them were shot in the triangle between his birth city of Ghent, and Brussels and Antwerp, where he worked until he retired a couple of years ago.



With all those other details missing, there's only a date to hold on to. In an ideal world, Sonck (64) wouldn't even give that away. "The images have to speak for themselves," he says, as we explore the *Encounters* exhibition on view at Fort Napoleon in Ostend this summer. "They tell a story and don't ask for an explanation."

The title of the new exhibition is obvious. All his portraits are the result of fleeting encounters and have one thing in common: Sonck's characters all look eccentric, strange or peculiar, often by virtue of a striking physical feature. "You don't meet someone who's worth being photographed every day," he says. "They have to be special."

He points to a picture of a black child. "The boy has a gap between his teeth," he says. "You can't take a picture of a psychological quality – that's nonsense. You can only see the outside, the things that are on the surface, and that's the reason I pick someone."

All this may sound a bit superficial and even voyeuristic, but there's an obvious mutual understanding and respect between the photographer and the outsider(s) in front of his lens. The random circumstances of the encounters, which often take place in the subjects' natural environment, do them justice.

"I don't judge the people on my pictures," Sonck explains. "I just meet them on the street ask them to pose for me, preferably against a neutral background, often against a wall, so the environment is not too distracting, and then we separate. It only takes 15 minutes, max."

These meetings are purely accidental and anonymous. "I have never met these people before, and I don't ask their names. For me, this information is not important, only the image is. If they don't want to pose, I move on."

An inspiring library

Sonck obtained his formal training at the Brussels NaraFi Institute in the 1970s and worked at the Antwerp province's department of culture where he mostly did technical photography for the catalogues of the museums run by the provincial authorities, until he retired in 2009.

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JACQUES SONCK

"I had to shoot silver and tin for the Silver Museum in the Sterckshof castle in Deurne, diamonds for the Diamond Museum, textiles for the Fashion Museum," he says. "There I learnt to handle the light, crucial for any good photographer."

In addition to working on these technical assignments, in his free time he also began to hit the streets of Flemish cities with his camera in the mid-1970s. "The job gave me the freedom to maintain financial security, while being able to shoot free work in my pastime."

In a lucky coincidence his office was located in the Photo Museum, which can today be found in the trendy Antwerp Zuid quarter, but in the early 1970s it occupied just one floor in the Sterckshof's general museum. "During lunch breaks you could find me in the library, where I discovered the work of acclaimed documentary photographers, such as Diane Arbus and August Sander."

Sonck's street photography has also been compared to the work of those two pioneering figures. The resemblance to Arbus' black-and-white photos, which often turned the lens to people on the margins of society, is striking.

A journalist who recently interviewed Sonck for *The New York Times* on the occasion of his Manhattan show points to the iconic Arbus image, "Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park, New York City, 1962", but the identical twins Arbus shot in Roselle, New Jersey in 1967 could also easily have been Sonck's work.

“Of course, there are clear distinctions, but the way we look at people is somehow similar,” Sonck says, adding that both he and Arbus have a special eye for the eccentric, but without compassion or an intention to ridicule.

Intimate universes

“Sonck is not a voyeur,” Pauline Vermare, curator at the International Center of Photography in New York, writes in the preface to the Ostend exhibition catalogue. For her, Sonck sees his subjects as actors allowing themselves to be looked at — their eyes staring straight into his lens.

“From shy, playful or defiant children to older naked ladies, Sonck transports us into detached yet very intimate universes,” Vermare writes, “sailing through feminism, machismo, classicism, anarchy, norms, exceptions, shyness, exhibitionism, order, chaos, modernism, traditions.”

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Sonck’s social documentary photography represents an authentic cross-section of society. He is not interested in any specific social class: He presents working-class kids, their mothers and poodles, but also posh kids in skirt suits and overdressed old ladies with chic handbags and coiffured pets. “I don’t categorise people,” he says. “They all fit into the bigger picture.

A crucial difference from the younger generation of photographers working today is that he never works in series. “Nowadays, artists often focus on large projects, allowing them to exhibit and publish a book about a very specific topic,” he says, adding that he takes a different approach.

“I’m not going to follow punks or hippies for a few months, but if a member of such a subculture crosses my path and looks special, I will not hesitate,” he says. “I’m only interested in the extremes, those who stand out and attract attention, the archetypes.” He points to a photo of a gay cowboy with a JR Ewing T-shirt. “He is an archetype.”

Sonck, who describes himself as reserved, had to teach himself a certain level of assertiveness to go up to passers-by. “Someone interesting can pass you by at any time,” he says. “Also, when you’re not in the mood you have to approach people immediately, otherwise they are gone.” Explaining that he carried his camera with him at all times, he says: “You can be sure that the ones you failed to approach are the ones you remember the longest.”

In the moment

When Sonck sees someone interesting, he immediately knows if he wants to portray them or not. Circumstances sometimes also help, like the time he took a picture of a curved

lady in a white swimming suit and a dandy in ultra-short swimming trunks. Their proud pose on the beach of De Panne made it on to the cover of the Ostend exhibition catalogue.

“After I asked both of them to pose, a man with a potbelly passed behind them, and the moment I clicked my camera he also looked into the lens,” he explains.

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The anachronistic background details and the clothing styles recorded in his images often point to a not too distant but bygone period. Sonck’s older photos especially, shot in the late 1970s and early 1980s, are souvenirs of a lost era that is never coming back.

Take the photo of boy on a bike, for instance, taken in 1977, which makes it one of the oldest images in the exhibition; or the young girl with rubber boots behind a bucket of potatoes, or the obese farmer leaning on his hayfork – these images all offer the viewer a trip back in time, no matter on which side of the ocean they live.

“It certainly documents a time when the world was still small and life seemed so much slower,” the photographer says.

A late breakthrough

“People are especially interested in the older street photography,” Brecht Bosteyn says. He curated the group show *Insight* at the Photo Museum in Antwerp three years ago, an exhibition that would mark a breakthrough for Sonck’s career when Roger Szmulewicz from the Antwerp Gallery Fifty One approached him. Those contacts eventually resulted in his first-ever US exhibition, *Jacques Sonck: Archetypes* currently on view at the L. Parker Stephenson Gallery.

“The New York gallery only shows these older pictures, not the studio portraits Jacques has made since the 1990s and which you can also see here in Ostend,” Bosteyn says.

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In this later phase of his career, Sonck broadened his horizons from the streets to the studio, a move that enabled him to work with artificial light and a medium-format camera. “Sunlight is often too bright,” he says. “My studio portraits are purified. Without background, I can focus more closely on people and faces. Sometimes only body details appear.”

But two things will never change: In an ever faster-paced world, Sonck is sticking to film and to black and white. “Colours would only distract,” he says. “Black-and-white leaves out the stuff that’s not crucial. And in America, where everything is digital nowadays, the reactions are: ‘Awesome, you’re still shooting on film.’” But it’s the only way I know. And considering the fact it’s also a good commercial move, why would I change? Digital photography also likes to blow up the format, but where do you hang up these giant pictures when you live small?”

That’s why Sonck likes to keep things small and authentic. “Photography is a peculiar medium,” he says. “It is closely connected to reality; that’s why almost all pictures get better when older, even if they’re technically not perfect. The relation to reality never fades.”

Until 21 September at Fort Napoleon, Vuurtorenweg, Ostend

Photo: Jacques Sonck and courtesy GALLERY FIFTY ONE

<http://www.flanderstoday.eu/art/flemish-photographer-hits-late-career-milestone>