

Mark De Fraeye, *Grandfather and Grandson (Sancheong, Korea), 1988*

‘Travel doesn’t merely broaden the mind. It makes the mind,’ as British literary globetrotter Bruce Chatwin (1940-89) put it. Mark De Fraeye has also been travelling around the world for a lifetime, recording with his camera what he sees and experiences – mostly together with the people he visits or meets: landscapes, moments from everyday life, and the beauty and the strength – or demise – of age-old traditions or nature.

We have become so accustomed to treating photographic images uncritically that we often overlook their layering. A photograph seemingly gives the impression of a situation or something present, but in fact the photograph is the very place where absence reigns. The truth is that there is an abyss between the moment when the image was created, and the very moment when we are looking at the photograph now. Moreover, the message or meaning of a photograph is never fixed. You search for it, your eyes scanning the image.

It is about interactions: between the eye of the photographer (via the camera) and the eye of the viewer (via the printed or displayed photograph). But also the interplay of how light and time miraculously combine to graphically capture an image: in colour or black and white, abstracted from time or – if you like – timeless, standing outside time. In this sense, photographs are never unambiguous and always layered.

Is there such a thing as travelling in time and space? Sometimes you get lucky, and, as a photographer, you only realise afterwards that your image allows the viewer to move in both dimensions, such as in the picture taken by Mark De Fraeye in 1988 in the Korean countryside.

First, let’s try to describe what we see. An old man sits in an open veranda on a wooden floor. He leans against a cloth bag, with a bamboo basket above him. Unperturbed, he watches a toddler step out of the living space of a traditional Korean house through a sliding door with dramatic fanfare. Some distance away, behind the child, a young girl looks on, smiling. Peering into the house, you see a photo, a Buddhist lamp or lantern, a crucifix, a piece of cupboard with another photo (a baby) and vaguely defined objects.

Compositionally, the image consists of a subtle but contrasting play of darker and lighter surfaces. The old man quietly grounds the image, while the toddler is demanding all the attention. And what is the girl doing in the background? In a way, she is reaching for the key to understanding the photo.



Mark De Fraeye (photographer), *Grandfather and Grandson (Sancheong, Korea), 1988.*

Museum archival silver gelatin print
Paper size: 40x50cm, image size: 30x30cm

Donation Collection De Fraeye-Verburg, 2016
Depot location: Museum Dr. Guislain, Ghent

Suppose you lived in a country in full transition. In the aftermath of World War II, another war was fought in Korea (1950-53), resulting in the country's partition. Grandpa, a former rice farmer, stays home with the grandchildren as mum and dad go out to work together in the city. The girl watches over her younger brother like a little mother. Traditional Buddhism, meanwhile, has been overshadowed by messianic Christianity. Capitalism and democracy have brought a new Western lifestyle and values.

Nothing is what it seems. Because nothing is the same anymore, even if everything seems the same. When images speak to us wordlessly, they can be wonderfully simple in their complexity.

© author: Joris Capenberghs