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Press release

Dorade Royale by Conradin Frei

In the economic boom from the 1950s to the 1970s, beach holidays became affordable for the masses. On the Adriatic, Mediterranean, and Atlantic coasts, a gigantic infrastructure was built to create a stage set for the good times. Conradin Frei has photographed these dream factories on the beach for a number of years. He revels in the artifice of these places, their incongruous admixture of nature and civilisation, their crudely eclectic mixture of architectural styles. *Dorade Royale* is a poetic and playful visual travelogue, whose subtle mastery of colours ironically evokes the elusive utopias of bygone summers.

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Conradin Frei (*1983) is a photographer based in Zurich(CH). Besides his artistic practice he is a freelance photographer working for architecture offices, museums and galleries. Since 2016 he has been a lecturer in the Fine Arts Department of the Zurich University of the Arts.

Beach holidays epitomize the 20th century. In the Victorian era, the upper classes would congregate every summer in the seaside resorts of the Riviera and the Atlantic coast, but the lure was not the beach. Rather they were attracted by the curative powers of the fresh air, afternoon concerts al fresco, leisurely walks up and down the grand promenades, gambling in casinos, and the thrill of horse races. At the beginning of the 20th century, the body slowly began to take centre-stage. Reform dress banished the cumbersome fashions of the past; a vogue for sports, from cycling to tennis and swimming, gave birth to a new fashionably modern idea of the body. The swimming costume, albeit still a full-body affair, was born. In the inter-war years the increasingly affluent middle classes started to flock to the sea in summer to swim and idle in the sun. The abundance of swimmers in Art Deco imagery testifies to the then daring modernity of seaside holidays. After the war, during “les trentes glorieuses,” the Adriatic, Mediterranean, and Atlantic coasts exploded. National highway systems, cheap and fast construction methods, industrial food production, and the rising wages of the working classes laid the ground for the boom in beach holidays. Summers at the sea were suddenly within reach for everyone, and hefty profits beckoned for the tourism industry. Hotel after hotel, resort after resort sprang up to accommodate the masses, hungry for the sun and media-generated fantasies of “dolce far niente.” The ecological and aesthetic price tags of this boom were a mere after-thought.

The architectural remnants of this era are still with us, bygone dreams of summer, frozen in time – a gigantic infrastructure dedicated to create images of a good time for the newly affluent common people of post-war Europe. The visual vocabulary of these seaside resorts is crudely eclectic. Huge prefabricated concrete structures intermingle with remnants of a more exclusive past, diluted Art

Deco blends with brutalist brashness, pastiches of folklore and antiquity are thrown in for good measure. Conradin Frei has explored this dream factory on the Adriatic, Atlantic, and Mediterranean coasts over a number of years. His interest lies decidedly not in documenting and denouncing the excesses of consumer culture, or in creating a typology of seaside urbanism. Rather, he revels in the artifice of these places, their incongruous admixture of nature and civilisation. He uses the seaside image-machine against its grain for his own purposes, creating images in the blind spots of its bombastic abundance. He playfully wrestles with it to see who gains the upper hand.

Often it is the alchemical quality of light that redeems apparently banal situations. Frei waits for the exact hue of golden orange that turns the washed-out graffiti “Stefano Forever” into a wistful harbinger of transience – the light that in its very beauty signals that Stefano was not meant to be forever, but would remain a summer fling. He catches the haze that turns two monstrous cruise ships into majestic vessels of desire. He knows how to turn blue neon light into a promise of disco futurism. It’s Frei’s mastery of subtle hues that suggests stories, injects emotions into the mundane, and makes the images speak. This wryly ironic artifice of sentiments is aptly congruent with the fantasies of summer holidays destined never to be fulfilled, which makes these images so poignant, unsparing and loving all at once.

Interspersed throughout the volume are images of fish for sale, dead, slimy, and prone to rot. They are mercilessly realistic. The light is cold and blue, with no redeeming golden sheen. We see an animal turned into a product to be sold as soon as possible. Inherent is the temptation to sell a fish that may no longer be quite so fresh, a familiar holiday experience. Everything organic

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is destined to die and rot, no matter how intensely we celebrate the pleasures of the body on the beach.

Frei's work continues and renews the traditional response of photographers such as Walker Evans and Luigi Ghirri, who investigated the fate of beauty in the age of mass consumption and thus created precise analyses of these historical moments. Frei shows the twilight of European modernity: a last glimpse of the dream of the "holidays in the south", which came within reach of everyone in the 1960s and 70s, the flimsy fulfilment of egalitarian promises of progress, which have lost their lustre in our globalised world. Today Thailand beckons with even cheaper prices. The after-images of these dreams are though still with us along the coasts of Europe, but their allure, if any remains, lies now in the nostalgic charm of a future that once was. It is this moment that Frei captures so precisely.

Martin Jaeggi