

maika
the elan
pink
choice

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par / by
christian
caujolle
3

soissons, 2018

The palladium over ink prints of the twelve photographs from the series The Pink Choice, by Maika Elan, have been made by Anne-Lou Buzot on Arches Platine paper.

The texts were set in Baskerville and Helvetica Neue by Florent Fajole.

Letterpress printing of the texts by Hannah Harkes at Labora workshop, in (Tallinn, Estonia) on Giấy Dó bóc 4 (Classical Dó 4 layers) paper handmade by the Phạm Văn Tâm family (Bắc Ninh Province) for Zó Project in Hanoi (Viet Nam), and on Labora and Shojo-shi papers (title labels) handmade by Tamara Sobaleva (Labora workshop) and Kiyotaka Ozaki (Kochi Prefecture, Japan) respectively.

Covers are made of Giấy Dó Sắc Phong (Royal Dó) and Giấy Dó Cậy (Zen Dó) papers handmade by the Phạm Văn Tâm family, and enhanced with an original calligraphy by Nguyễn Thư.

First edition print run of thirteen copies, of which eight are numbered from 1 to 8, and five hors commerce numbered from I to V.

The chromopalladium prints are numbered, signed and titled by Maika Elan.

The cases have been made by Justine Delval (Atelier du cartonnage, Arles, France) and are covered by Giấy Dó bóc 3 (Classical Dó 3 layers) paper handmade by the Phạm Văn Tâm family.

Size of the prints: 28 cm x 38 cm

11.02 x 14.96 inches

Size of the portfolio: 31 cm x 40 cm

12.20 x 15.74 inches

Bilingual edition French / English.

Translation by Michèle Bergot.

Soissons, July 2018

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anne-lou buzot
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& nicolas peyre
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**collection mékong
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christian caujolle *maika elan, the pink choice*

The mood is blue, deliciously blue. Sky blue, perfectly clear, reflected on the water of the pond, itself suffused with the same blue. Two men are bathing; they are smiling, laughing probably. One of them, wearing blue trunks with a floral print, gently touches the other's chest; his face is not visible. There is something heavenly about this quiet moment of intimacy, suspended in time, the green reeds blending into the faded, welcoming landscape. A scene of happiness, absolute happiness: soothing, joyful and calm all at once.

These two men are a couple; one of the homosexual couples Maika Elan photographed for her project *The Pink Choice*. It is the only picture taken outside. This family album of homosexual couples in Vietnam, features men and women of all ages, even if the majority are young. They are all urban, all very different, affirming their singular identity as much as their sexual preference.

When Maika Elan started this project, her first documentary corpus, she had just ended a period of fashion photography for a leading magazine. The theme came to her quite by chance: during a workshop with Antoine d'Agata at Angkor Photo Festival, she was having trouble finding a subject. It was through her Internet research on activities offered to the many tourists who come to Siem Reap to visit the temples of Angkor, that she fell on *The Pink Choice* that she describes as «*some sort of a Lonely Planet for gay people*». She found the address of a gay-friendly hotel, went there and asked if she could photograph the guests. These were almost invariably foreigners and accepted without hesitation.

Once the workshop was over, she returned to Vietnam without really intending to continue this work: «*At first I thought it wasn't really my own struggle. But then I saw an exhibition on homosexuals in Vietnam, and I really didn't like it. They only showed blurry faces and all the people were photographed from the back. I have worked for fashion magazines, and I've met a lot of gay people there. For example, a stylist I work with is gay. And he isn't like the people in that exhibition. He and the other gay people that I knew were open and happy people, and they liked to show their faces. They weren't hiding like the people in the photos. That hiding made it seem like something wasn't right with homosexuality. When you see gay people hiding, you still can't see them as part of our society. So I wanted to show homosexuality as something normal, as something that exists. I also wanted to show gay people's private moments. Because many Vietnamese people are afraid of that moment. They think that two men touching is something bad. I wanted to make them less afraid...*».

In a country, which unlike others, never decreed homosexuality illegal, and whilst not adopting same-sex marriage, ceased to ban it in 2015, acceptance of homosexuality remains difficult outside certain social classes. «*There is more and more attention to homosexuality in Vietnam*», says Maika Elan. «*There are for example movies about gay people, and they do try to make their audience understand more about homosexuality. But there is usually a lot of drama in these movies. So, in the end, what you can learn from these movies is that if you come out as gay or lesbian, your family will leave you and also, you will probably die. Movies that are made about homosexuals in Vietnam are never happy movies. But I know that there are happy gays!*». The situation is not the same in the countryside as in the city, and varies between regions. «*In Hanoi it's very difficult to be gay, because people there still live with their families. But in Ho Chi Minh City it's much easier, because people*

work and live in the city, and they just rent rooms there, so they don't have their families intruding in their business. They're much more open there».

How could she photograph this situation? How could she lend the subject a «natural» air without making it seem clichéd? Her only option was to extend the project and develop it over time. Maika Elan quickly gave up trying to photograph people outside: *«They were uncomfortable and the way people looked at them in the street made them behave artificially, they either hid or became unnaturally assertive. So much so that when we were in the flower market with one of the couples, people would ask us why two men were kissing».* Apartments and other living areas became the natural backdrop for the photographs, which were not, however, intrusive. After having been introduced to couples by her friends and having chatted to them - they often met in a café and had a drink together before starting - the photographer simply accompanied the sitters to their homes. She did her utmost to be inconspicuous, taking few, sometimes no pictures. Once her presence had been accepted she waited for those instants conducive to capturing tender, fun moments, of which everyday life is full, resulting in a successful combination of lightness and seriousness.

At every stage of her slow project, which would take two years to shoot, Maika Elan was extremely precise, alert, finding the right distance, never forcing things, but approaching each situation with elegance and simplicity. Getting the final selection right was crucial to what was at stake: at first, she chose the photos she found most beautiful, but on seeing them several days or months later, she began to look at them differently: *«I want people to believe in the moments that I photograph, I want them to believe that they are real and about real people. If you see two people that are too beautiful, if they look like models, then I'm not sure if people believe it's real. I want my photos to be of moments that people could encounter in their own lives. So I avoided lighting that was too beautiful, or the photos in which people simply looked too good».*

Nonetheless, the work is resolutely aesthetic, in marked contrast to much documentary practice, at least in its formal and descriptive conventions. Even if the frame is relatively wide with enough breathing space considering the size of the small apartments, it is in her approach to colour that the photographer shows both her sensitivity and her skill. Having long experimented with Lomography, and delved into superimposition with delight, she has invented a colourful language, a singular palette, which is both intense and glossy. She develops this in the *Lomo Diaries*, mixing drawings, photographs, texts, collages, self-portraits - either photographic or sketched with coloured pencils. All these constitutes a wonderful graphic universe of immense freedom. We get the feeling that by putting all the images in the final selection of *The Pink Choice* together, that she applied her research to a self-commissioned subject, showing her colour palette off to best advantage. This series draws on the range of Maika Elan's photographic research (chiaroscuro, shadow puppets, dramatic colour palette and visions in candy-coloured pastel) allowing the coexistence of images, each of which appears to be governed by its own internal balance: from photographs verging on over-exposition such as the one featuring two young women having fun, appearing to check whether they have a penis, a luminous, tender and happy vision, to the high-contrast night scenes. The coherence of the work stems from the feeling we have that the series was made effortlessly, happily and stress-free, in one fell swoop. A straightforward approach was adopted to convey the evidence of calm lives, apparently calm, in framed narratives, each of which summarises a love story, which has become a portrait of gender.

Maika Elan's work is rooted in documentary practice, even if she is capable of expressing herself in areas other than photography. Curious, smiling, as determined as she is rigorous, she always affirms a form of mysterious engagement respectful of her «subjects». And she loves taking photographs, all the time. *«But sometimes when I see something really beautiful I just stop taking pictures. Because I know that I cannot capture it exactly as beautifully as I see it with my own eyes. During those moments I think that it's more important to enjoy the moment than to photograph all the time. Landscapes are a good example. I enjoy looking at beautiful landscapes, but to photograph them is a bit more difficult. I always thought that landscape photography is so easy, but in fact it's very difficult. I see that older people are better at landscape photography, so maybe I just have to wait ...»*. Always the same sense of humour, applied to a philosophy of life and a practice, which conceals a rare determination and work ethic, allowing her to approach any subject without voyeurism. Devoid of voyeurism as much as sensationalism, she never transforms her spectators, whom she respects as much as her sitters, into voyeurs.

In the end, the only thing that matters is emotion and the ability to convey it: *«photos have something of themselves that words cannot reach. It means that photography has power in itself»*.

Translated from the French by Michèle Bergot

maika elan

biography

Born in Hanoi in 1986, Maika Elan now lives in Ho Chi Min City. She settled there in 2017 with her husband, himself a photographer, and their 4-year-old son.

Nguyen Thanh Hai is only five-years-old when her mother dies in a car accident. The young girl is subsequently brought up by her father, who comes to mean everything to her. A strong relationship is forged between the researcher and Philosophy professor and his daughter, their discussions and exchanges form the basis for the important decisions she would make throughout her career, which was not destined to include photography nor indeed in the visual arts. In June-July 2013, she devoted a series to him, *Like my Father*:

My father is receiving treatment for cancer. For many months, he could not get out of bed due to his poor health. His weight dropped by 20kgs in a short time. One day I watched him as he was wearing his own clothes, which were so big, they looked like they belonged to someone else. It surprised me how very small he looked. He looked like a child trying to wear the clothes of adults – like when kids wear the clothes of their parents. I suddenly felt so grown up.

Then I was reminded of the past when my dad used to take me to the park and buy me stuffed animal toys. He also took many funny photos of me. I think it's my turn to do something for my father, as he has done for me in the past. We both went back to the same park and played like old days. He had to try very hard to cope even just for a few hours.

I hope these pictures I make will motivate him. I hope they let him see that he is not as sick as he feels. In my heart, he is always a happy person and full of optimism.

The brightly coloured photographs, almost all of which use the technique of superimposition, show a happy old man against the backdrop of nature, in leafy surroundings, leaning against a tree trunk in bright sunshine or in an amusement park in the middle of the rides and other signs of a background designed for children. He did pass away, however, Maika Elan lost her father three years ago.

In 2005-06, in her 2nd year of a Social Sciences and Humanities degree at the University of Hanoi, she takes part, quite by chance, in a photo forum where she meets a number of local photographers. Having fun, she starts using the equipment she finds at home, amongst which there were the Lomo cameras.

She takes photos of those around her, her family, her friends, then the street and daily lives in the villages around Hanoi. She is helped by one of the photographers she had met at university and who, for two years, teaches her the basics and gives her advice. At this point she develops a passion for colour and colour composition.

After graduating in Sociology in 2008, she makes a living working for the magazine Sahn Dieu for which she takes fashion photographs until 2011. After taking a course in Photojournalism organised by the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation in Hanoi in 2010, she glimpses what will become her new photographic terrain: documentary. Meeting Gaby Sommer, ex-photojournalist and editor at AFP (Agence France Presse) is decisive in helping her to leave fashion photography behind in order to explore reality. Feeling that she needs further training, she decides to participate in workshops; the one run by Antoine d'Agata at the Angkor Photo Festival in 2010 is of paramount importance as this is where

he idea of her project *The Pink Choice* takes shape. This series, shown for the first time at the Goethe Institute of Hanoi in 2012, wins a prize in the “Contemporary Issues” category at the World Press Photo Awards in 2013. The following year, the series is awarded first prize in the documentary series category at the Pride Photo Award. From then on, this series has been published world-wide, both in magazines and on websites, and widely exhibited from Cambodia to Denmark, France to the United States, amongst other countries. Between 2012 and 2014, Maika Elan works with MOST 2414, a digital marketing agency and consulting firm based in Bangkok, whose clients are both from the press and business sectors. Her work is thus published in many international magazines.

She continues to take part in workshops when she can and attends different festivals where her different series are shown. She continues to explore colour which she develops as much in her notebooks as in her “stories” on which she works alongside her professional activity. Having worked for the American agency VII from 2014-2016, she subsequently joins the Bloomberg Asia Agency. Since 2017, she is the picture editor of the business magazine Forbes Asia.

She is currently working on a complex series in Japan. Her subject is people who live in total isolation, locked up in one room, having refused all human and social contact for years.