

Perruche situation #1: Bianca Baldi – *Versipellis*

Developed out of her long term-research project Zero Latitude (2012 – present), Bianca Baldi's exhibition takes the colonial archive of Museum for Central Africa Tervuren as a point of departure. After reading the personal diaries of colonial explorer Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904) at the museum's archive, she developed a corpus of works that question imperial imagery and their persistence by revealing their seductive potential. In *Versipellis* Baldi restages historical documents and collections, setting the objects and images in scene as indices. By interweaving personal experience with collective history, the exhibition can be seen as both a seduction and a warning at the same time, as the title of the show *Versipellis* indicates: The term stands for the adaptive quality to change one's skin, as known from shape-shifting creatures eluding their enemies by blending into their new habitat.

Thin Skins (1) presents a smartphone shot of Henry Morton Stanley's personal notebook, giving a subjective and somehow poetic description of Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's face – another (in)famous explorer of King Leopold II.'s age, known for giving France entry along the right bank of the Congo river and his great physical charm. It was through these first-hand accounts of colonial desire, set on the background of the Congo River that the character of De Brazza was born as a modern allegory. The diptych *De Brazza* (2) shows two digital photo prints of the skin of a *Cercopithecus Neglectus* (De Brazza's Monkey) – an Old world monkey, endemic to the wetlands of central Africa and named after Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza. The photograph *Panthère Naturalisée* (3) depicts a studio set up as an almost surreal *mise-en-scène*: The image was taken on site at the Musée de Quai Branly (Paris), where Baldi photographed several objects of De Brazza's personal collection, among them a leopard shot by the explorer himself. *The River* (4), a collage, is derived from a reproduction of a glass plate negative photographed by Nadar in 1882. It depicts a portrait of the explorer De Brazza enframed by two unnamed African natives in sailor suits. The image was famously mentioned in Roland Barthes' study on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980), who saw "the punctum" in "the second boy's [African sailor] crossed arms". Most importantly, the depicted characters on Nadar's photograph become invisible through the cut outs on Baldi's collage, shifting the focus from the subject of portraiture as a genre to the object of the photograph as a colonial document and testimony.

With an awareness of photography as a tool of modernity and simultaneously a medium of truth and of artifice, Bianca Baldi's artistic work shows how power structures work invisibly and how artistic work can point to this. The artist sets the elements in play and develops an aesthetic to describe complex historical, political and economic entanglements.

Jana J. Haeckel



Versipellis

Bianca Baldi

26th - 4th February 2018

Opening 26th February 2018, 18:00

SUPERDEALS, Chaussée de Waterloo 4,1060, Brussels

Lotte Arndt and Bianca Baldi in conversation 27th February 2018, 19:00, Jester, Avenue de la Porte de Hal 2-4, Brussels

List of works

1.
Thin Skin (2018)
IPhone photograph , 2018-01-11 09.29.19.jpg, in digital frame.

Henry Morton Stanley's notebook collection King Baudouin foundation, HMS INV N° 4625

De Brazza's face ~~revealed~~ was an index to the vain joy he felt at having triumphed. It was an intelligent face – but it had one of those thin skins on which one may read who loves to study them – the lively thoughts of their owners. _____ and I felt the chuckling that was going on within at having outwitted us.

2.
De Brazza (2014)
Mounted C-Prints in Wenge Frames
80 X 86 cm
Edition 3/3

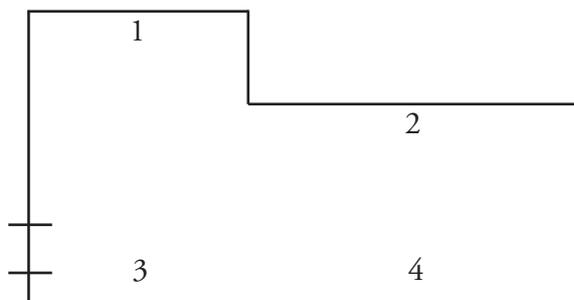
Cercopithecus Neglectus (De Brazza's monkey) specimens, collection Museum Senckenberg, Forschungsinstitut Mammalogie, Frankfurt am Main

3.
Panthère Naturalisée (2014)
Inkjet on Baryta Paper 325gm
90 X 135 cm
Ed 1/5

Photographed onsite at the Musée de Quai Branly 13 December 2013. No. inventaire: 75 15650.
Collections Histoire, Musée de Quai Branly. Leopard shot by Pierre Savorgnan De Brazza.

4.
The River
Collage
50 X 39,5 cm
Unique

Mapping Zero Latitude (2014)
www.zero-latitude.net



Chapter I

A Meeting at the Petite Vache on the left bank— The local Friday night haunt of explorers, cartographers and the like —Avid reader of escapist literature born with silver spoons in their mouths—A handsome count of slight build enters — Hands that have never seen any manual labour—Years in the navy his good-breeding and deportment shine through—A perfect balance; sartorial elegance and dishevelled explorer.

Chapter II

Day dreaming of the mysterious equatorial region —Envisioning a trunk bed—His naturalised country, offer the trunk makers of the day —Aboard the Venus-making their way south to the tropics—Only imagining the destination- Reading stories from Stanley en route.

Chapter III

Faced by the harsh reality of the equatorial conditions— Drugged by the intense heat and oppressive humidity . “I haven't slept indoors or had a table to write on”—His portables; the trunk-bed, a foldable table— Reminders home—Familiarity a comfort in the jungled setting.

Chapter IV

Pondering the distinction between nature and culture— Civilised society now suspended here at point zero—Meeting his animal equivalent in the bush—His own name seems apt for his new friend—Observing his mischievous nature, his peculiar pelt and complex coiffure—Gobsmacked by his human characteristics —The creature's scent reminds him of his own—A likeness without the social restriction—Scratching his balls without thinking.

Chapter V

Assembling the bag in a ritual manner—Modular components laid out like an elaborate table settings — Movements that seem almost choreographed,effortless and never stiff—The tension: functional object wrapped in its luxurious casing— Bisogno: a need—Sogno : a dream—Childhood dream of uncharted territories driven by curiosity —The lucrative rubber—Adding fuel to the French fire—Trading in mirrors—The Gift—The Commodity.