

Benjamin Beker Blocks

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Private View Thursday 25 March 6 – 8pm

FLOWERS

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Untitled Block no.1, 2009, Lambda print, 105 x 80cm



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Benjamin Beker was born in Bonn, Germany, in 1976 and moved to Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan before settling in Belgrade, now the modern state of Serbia, at a time when the socialist republic was unfurling and ethnic tensions were at their height. Whilst too young to establish an active political engagement with the country of his childhood, Beker left Serbia for London as a young student with his own repository of images replete with the semaphores of war and liberation. These images have come to form the units of his work; photographs that reflect the curiously composite nature of Yugoslavia through their deconstructive play with the registers of fiction and documentary.

The 2009 series 'The Blocks' draws together images of the housing estates built in Belgrade in the 1950s and 1960s, which Beker has manipulated by adding or taking out floors and facades and combining them into striking aggregate arrangements. The Blocks are a series of monolithic structures designed in accordance with the utilitarian edicts of High Modernism; architectural emblems of socialist idealism that were built to house government offices, but which also became home to thousands of Belgrade citizens. Beker re-configures their brutalist concrete syntax by removing them from their original context and placing them on a plain grey background, thus neutralising their socio-political charge and transforming them into harmonised geometric configurations.

Beker's apparent drive to de-historicise The Blocks and subdue their Communist-era overtones is not based in apathy, nor a post-historical anti-idealism, but in more formal concerns. Whilst he is clearly aware that his images can be construed as re-presenting the buildings as "the detritus of failed administrations and the bathetic remnants of failed dreams", he also courts a degree of aesthetic disinterestedness, suggesting his viewer see them as 'shapes' rather than soliciting an associative reading. Concurrently, there is a playfulness in his approach that transforms the architectural monoliths into almost toy-like entities (he has described them as "looking more like Lego", than monuments to malignant ideology, in their reconfigured form).

It is Beker's concern with splintering and synthesising, extracting, emptying-out and re-imagining spatial anatomies that drives his photographic practice. Perhaps consistent with this proclivity for formal play, which produces understated and arresting images that inhabit the fertile ground between documentary and photographic treatise-by-design, he is equivocal on the subject of his artistry: "I like the idea that my main focus is not on taking photographs but on putting the pictures I already have into a different context: In a strange way I have become less of a photographer."

Benjamin Beker studied photography at the BK Art Academy in Belgrade and completed an MA in Photography at the Royal College of Art in London. He received the National Magazine Award in 2007 and, for his final exhibition piece at the Royal College, was awarded the Painters and Stainers Prize, the RCA Society and Thames and Hudson Art Book Prize and was short-listed for the Conran Award. After winning the Artsway Open 08, Beker was awarded a solo exhibition at Artsway, Hampshire, in September 2009. He has exhibited in various group shows including Fresh Faced and Wild Eyed at The Photographer's Gallery in London.

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After Yugoslavia

Paul Carey-Kent interviews Benjamin Beker

The young Serbian photographer Benjamin Beker has developed three sets of work out of the former socialist republic of Yugoslavia, which emerged after World War II but suffered increasing ethnic tensions following Tito's death in 1980 and then broke up violently. Beker shows us cleanly edited re-presentations of war and liberation monuments, would-be ideal housing fallen on tougher times, and the interiors of former government buildings. He is interested in mixing fictional and documentary registers, and in the series 'The Blocks' he combines elements of reality to make artificial constructs in a way which resembles the curious nature of Yugoslavia – which was a melding of different nations into an artificial whole. His work deals, then, with the often tenuous distinctions between the real and the artificial, and with the disappointments but also the persistence of failed dreams and lost ideals.

Do people often confuse you with Boris Becker?

Not so much me, but my brother's name is Boris... Both spellings are variants on a common German surname ('Baker' in English). My parents chose 'Benjamin' as a neutral name which would sound neither German nor Serbian.

You have a rather international background, don't you?

I do. My father is half-German and half-Ukrainian but moved around the world on business. My mother is Serbian. I was born in Bonn in Germany, lived in Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan as a child and then moved back to Belgrade when I was 19. I stayed for ten years and took a BA in photography there, graduating in 2001. Then I came to London to work but with the idea of taking an MA, which I did at the Royal College of Art in 2006-08.

What led you to photography?

I drew all the time as a boy, so painting might have seemed natural, but I had a family friend who helped me buy my first camera, and suddenly something clicked and I started to find I was more interested in the direct reality.

Who has inspired you?

Mostly American photographers, such as Walker Evans and William Egglestone. Also Langlands and Bell's work with architecture, David Thorp's collages of buildings, and Sophie Ristelhueber and Waalid Raad as photographers who play with fiction versus reality.

Does it feel inevitable that your own work focuses on Serbia?

It might seem so: I still go back to Serbia frequently, and most of my projects are based there. But actually Serbia as a subject only started after I left, and had the distance to see how interesting it was. When I was living there, I was always looking to the outside for what to photograph.

You were 13 when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989?

Yes, but in Serbia the changes took a different direction and officially socialism didn't come down until the year 2000. Yugoslavia was not in the Warsaw Pact and had a very light form of

communism: people look back on the socialist period as a golden time of secure incomes and safety, with none of the repression there was in other East European countries. The big debate is more around the creation of Yugoslavia and all the problems which came with it, leading to the war in the nineties. But I was too young to be involved in that.

So there is no critique of the communist regime intended in your series 'The Blocks', based on Belgrade's housing blocks of the sixties?

No, though the buildings may seem inhumane that is a more general issue. They are photographed in New Belgrade, a completely new city built on the other side of the Danube from old Belgrade, using marshland which was dried in the fifties. It's a bizarre place - you can walk for miles and have the same type of blocks: there are hundreds, all named by numbers so people would say 'I live in block 70'. If you don't live there you will never find your way around. They were supposed to make an ideal city with everything you needed: shops and in the basements, playgrounds, parks... but it has become something else.

What condition are the blocks in now?

They are still inhabited, but are deteriorating. They have been neglected since the end of the Yugoslavia. They were built for workers, and government and administration buildings were built alongside them. Everyone who worked for the Yugoslav government or in state run companies (which were almost all of them) had some kind of flat, often in New-Belgrade. But all sorts of people live there now.

How does 'The Blocks' vary from straight photography?

I use my original photographs as my own kind of building blocks, adding or taking out floors, combining different buildings, giving them interesting stair-like shapes. They end up looking more like Lego. And I remove them from their background context so that the shapes are emphasised by the lack of surroundings. So the fictional is introduced to the documentary, something which I find interesting in general. I don't manipulate the colour, though, other than choosing a neutral grey background.

How do you decide on the size of your Block images?

Each one is different – and I like the mixture in installations – but the scale is always consistent – the units which make it up, such as a window, will always be the same size. The buildings themselves, similarly, vary a lot (so in that way they are quite creative) but are all made of the same basic units.

What are the sources for 'War and Liberation Monuments'?

They are all from around 1920-2000, and celebrate all sorts of different events. The fiction I impose is to de-historicise the monuments, taking them out of their surroundings and recycling them to make the small ones bigger and the big ones smaller so they are all shown at 60 x 60 cm. That lack of respect for size contradicts what a monument is meant to be.

Have Communist era memorials not been removed in the former Yugoslavia, as they have been in other East European countries?

They remain in place. There never were statues of Lenin and Stalin anyway, due to the break with the Soviet Union; and Tito was never reflected in monuments. He didn't have that kind of cult of personality.

Did you consider using more colourful backgrounds?

Yes, I was quite attracted to different colours to represent different ideologies, but decided at this stage to use a neutral grey, as with the Blocks.

Are the Monuments and Blocks completed series?

There were 24 monuments in the original series, but I've add new ones as I come across them, and there are now more than 30. I have five blocks now, and three in the making, and could make more. I have lots of material I can use.

How easy was it to gain access to the ex-government buildings to make your slide show 'Interiors of Power'?

Most of the buildings have always been closed to the public, and most remain inaccessible. It took months for me to get permission to photograph some of them – I had to use every contact I had, and then I was accompanied all the time - in a friendly way, but still intrusively.

What is the status of the buildings now?

Most are unused, and some are just left to rot. They may be used again, it's not that Serbian and Montenegrin authorities are set against it, just that it hasn't happened. For example, they don't know what to do with Tito's villa in Montenegro. And White Court was a former monarchist residency later taken over by Tito, then by Milošević, which has now been returned to the royal family, but they have not lived in it. There are traces of all the past residents – for example there was a red colour on the chair which came from the dye which Tito used on his hair. Many of the same people, incidentally, are still employed in these buildings, but are now doing almost-fictional jobs – as they have been for twenty – thirty years. They are maintaining a hollow version of what they used to do in increasingly old and dated uniforms. It would have been interesting to film them, too, but it was too complicated at the time.

What is your next show?

I am in a group show starting in Lausanne in Switzerland, which will go all round the world over the next five years - so I'm very happy with that!

And what are you working on now?

I'm in the early stages of manipulating landscapes so that views with personal significance are combined. I like the idea that my main focus is not on taking photographs but on putting the pictures I already have into a different context: in a strange way I have become less of a photographer.