Éric Rondepierre in the Film of Life

by Etienne Hatt   (in *Artpress* n° 418, January 2015, pp. 48-52)

We lost sight of Eric Rondepierre in 2005. We found him again a decade later thanks to a retrospective at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (February 4-April 5, 2015) and four other shows throughout the year starting with Images secondes at the Maison d'Art Bernard -Anthonioz in Nogent-sur-Marne (January 16–March 1, 2015). Here we track the latest developments in a body of work open to multiple interpretations.

For artists who like to make series of pieces, especially photographers, a retrospective can be an occasion to revisit their work and make new connections without the constraints of chronological coherence. Éric Rondepierre did not choose that option, even though the omnipresence of movies in his work might have suggested it. Instead, his retrospective at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie will present his series in the order in which they were made. Thus the vision offered by this show is pretty much what you would expect from this artist whose practice, based on the appropriation of filmic images, has developed gradually over twenty-five years, even though there have also been sudden ruptures—for example, at the turn of the century, when his "reprises de vues" (revisited shots) of the previous decade (stop-time photos and the straddling of two film images) seemed to have irrevocably given way to the montage of film frames and photos he took of daily life.

Yet these two successive phases sometimes blurred together because of the workings of two distinct elements. For example, take two upcoming simultaneous shows. On the one hand, the Maison d'Art Bernard Anthonioz will feature previously unseen work, including pieces that continue series he began in the 1990s. Le Carosse d'or (1997-2015) is an ensemble of altered film stills from Jean Renoir's 1952 movie. It derives from Précis de décomposition (1993-95) and Moires (1996-98), which scrutinize the curiosities created by the corrosion of film stock, like the smudges that surround a couple exchanging words of love and the burned film inflaming a body in the throes of orgasm. Another previously unseen series, Moins X2 (2003-2015) is, like Moins X (2003), a set of variations using X-rated films continuing the technique used in Suites (1999-2001) in which two successive frames are cut and joined together to make a new image. On the other hand, while Parties communes (2000–7) and Seuils (2007–12) are also based on the montage of film frames begun around 2000, DSL (2010-12), made up of screenshots of frames from famous -movies distorted by electronic glitches, seems to revisit the freeze-frame technique he used in the 1990s. Thus, the two consecutive periods in his practice, one characterized by "revisited shots" and the other by montage, correspond to two recurring modes of operation in Rondepierre's work. Lately, he has added a third: reconstitution. Background (2013-14), a series of movie sets, inaugurates the virtual reconstitution of real backgrounds using movie frames that Rondepierre cuts out, glues, homogenizes and empties of all human presence.

A new era

What his series made since 2005 have in common is that they bear witness to the new conditions of production and distribution of movies in the digital era. Rondepierre has always been mindful of these issues, which are more than just technical. It was no accident that his first photo works coincided with the rise of the VHS cassette recorder. That apparatus made freeze-frames easy, but for Rondepierre, it also marked the beginning of the evolution of film in which digital is the latest stage. When the cassette recorder cinema shifted from "the imaginary to the symbolic" it modified our -relationship with movies such that it would no longer be the stuff of memories and fantasies but rather be constituted by frame-by-frame fast-forwarding and exactitude. His series made in the digital era refresh ones made in analogue times. The distortions in DSL are no longer produced by alterations to the physical film as in Précis de décomposition and Moires but brief perturbations in the digital signal. The images freeze or combine; shapes distend and blur. In DSL 13, a landscape takes on the silhouette of an automobile. In DSL 17, Audrey Hepburn bumps into her transparent double. The series as a whole has a painterly quality, and the flowing pixels seem to be brushstrokes. Rondepierre was a painter before he was a photographer, and he is conscious of this effect. He says he makes paintings but is content with waiting for the right moment.

Similarly, the tension between two images in Parties communes and Seuils is digitally obtained, while the collage effect in Loupe/Dormeurs (1999-2002), where he began using montage as his m.o., is strictly analogue: in front of his camera Rondepierre held up a piece of film superimposed on the rest of the scene. As for the Parties communes, they result from the superimposition of a movie frame and a photo, often insignificant, taken by the artist. The montage confers a narrative charge on the image, but many details are inconsistent. For example, in Rixe, the fighting figures, taken from two different original photos, are not shown on the same scale, and one of the movie characters seems to be emerging from the abdomen of one of the two homeless men lying on the ground. Conversely, in Seuils the relationship between the two source images is not one of superimposition but insertion. The figures, whether silent movie characters or real people Rondepierre photographed, are inserted into a different background. The image is internally consistent and our gaze no longer stumbles on the often disturbing and even vertiginous anachronism of the situations. In Courant, early twentieth-century Paris seems to come through a contemporary scene a hundred years later.

Self-portrait

In Photographie, a portrait of an actor from a century ago partially obliterates the reflection in a sheet of glass of Rondepierre himself, who was also once an actor. This insertion technique references the now common television and movie procedure of filming people in a studio in front of a green or blue background so as to later show them amid some other environment. In the Background series Rondepierre does the opposite, making virtual backgrounds that await being brought to life by the insertion of people.

The latest developments in Rondepierre's work seem to confirm that it can be seen as a commentary on cinema and its history, its production and distribution, like a photographic comment on its moving picture descendant. But this analysis is embodied and enriched by the presence and gaze of the artist, whose hand can be seen in Loupe/Dormeurs and whose face now appears in Seuils. It takes on an autobiographical character. This character is explicit in the previously unshown series Agendas (2002-

12), with no direct relationship to movies, where photos taken by Rondepierre to document his day are superimposed on his diary entries.

It is implicit in Background, which for the most part reconstitutes backgrounds from 1950s and '60s movies such as Breakfast at Tiffany's and The Birds. Unintentionally, this pairing of the artist's troubled childhood with movies of that period,(1) with nothing remaining but occasional images, seems to become a quest or even a restoration. While this hypothesis may seem like pop psychology, it has been validated by Rondepierre's recent book Champs-Élysées (Éditions Nonpareilles), a memoir, even if the status of his text alternates between documentary narrative and fiction, and the images, once again, are mostly taken from footage of himself as a child playing and walking around in the Champs-Élysées gardens. Using the same procedure as for Background, he took images from the 1963 movie Charade to reconstruct a broad panoramic view of "the magic square that the deserted clown, protected in the bushes, draws, with the merry-go-round on his left, the swings in front of him and the fourth angle a blind spot." On the left in the picture, a little boy dressed in blue playing ball serves as a self-portrait.

Thus the movie images that Rondepierre has pioneered in using tend to become a fictionally insignificant document in which the actors and extras become mere passers-by—when they are not simply erased. Now this document does more than recount the history of the seventh art; it reconstitutes the artist's world of the past and restores a phantasmal vision of cinema in which one's memories of films are mixed with the film of one's own life.

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(1) For the biographical facts, see Pierre Guyotat's preface to Éric Rondepierre, Léo Scheer, 2003, and Rondepierre's Placement, Seuil, 2008.

Éric Rondepierre will show his work in three other exhibitions in 2015, at the Galerie Michèle Chomette in Paris (April 2-May 30); the Centre d'Art Image/Imatge in Orthez (October 1, 2015-January 16, 2016); and the Galerie Isabelle Gounod in Paris (November 7-December 19). In addition to Champs-Élysées (Nonpareilles), he is the subject of two more new books, the monographic Images secondes with texts by Catherine Millet and Jacques Rancière (Loco), and Le Voyeur, an interview with Julien Milly (De l'incidence).