

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Desire to experience the wintry North

In The Fortress, Peruvian-Italian photographer Luca Solari shares his experience of the island Schiermonnikoog. The book is made up of different sections, starting with coastal images: dune, beach and sea against clouded skies. His portraits are also there, as well as images of the village and the yearly billiards tournament - an important event on the island. His black and white photographs are rich in contrast. According to Solari, this fits with the season in which he took them: winter. On the book: “After looking through it, you haven’t necessarily learnt anything about Schiermonnikoog - nothing about the nature, the people or the history. It wasn’t about that for me - it’s more to share an emotion, my experience.”

His first encounter with the Wadden Islands was not on Schiermonnikoog, but on Texel. “I stayed on the island a few days, together with my Dutch wife. There was no spark with Texel. It doesn’t really feel like an island. It bears too much similarity to the mainland. For example, you can just take your car. It also doesn’t take long to get there - the ferry crossing is short.”

Connectedness

The following year, he goes to Schiermonnikoog. He immediately feels a connection. “We were there around New Year’s, in the winter. I went for a walk to the beach and that’s when I knew: I have to come back here. There’s an unusual atmosphere on the island, especially in the winter time. I wanted to explore this atmosphere further, and I wanted to experience the real North. As an Italian I am used to travelling in the South. That’s why I wanted to head North with my wife. And in winter. Winter and the North - for me they are inseparable.”

Solari travels back to the island to experience the winter every year. On the island, you can really feel the influence of the elements. “The wind, the rain, wrapping up in layers of clothing to keep the cold out: I loved it. As a human, you feel puny compared to the power of nature.”

Rhythm

“I could have come to the island during a different season. I was once there in the Spring. But it feels different. There’s more colour. It is the winter that lends itself well to black and white photography, that’s why I chose it. The rhythm of the island is also different. The tourists bring a certain rhythm with them. In the winter they’re not there and the islanders are focused on themselves. The island and the islanders come to

rest. I wish this for every tourist resort - a month without tourists. Some time to breathe, to have the place to yourself again. The residents of Amsterdam or Venice would love that.”

As an outsider he is impressed with how everything functions on the island. “Everything is well organised. I live with my wife in Switzerland, the safest country in the world, at least, that’s what I’m often told. Schiermonnikoog, as far as I’m concerned, goes one step further. I could leave my equipment and my bag lying around without any problem.”

Billiards tournament

Another thing that’s well organised is the billiards tournament that takes place every winter. It’s an important event. “On the island there are ten billiards clubs.” During the tournament, he meets Tiny Dijkhuizen. Tiny is a lady of a ripe old age, who still plays billiards. “We sat beside each other and got to talking. It was through Tiny that I came into contact with the other islanders.” At first, they’re not standing in line to have their portraits taken. That is until they see the results at his next visit.

“At some point I was asked to photograph the women’s billiards club, where Tiny was a member.” One thing leads to another. After a number of editions, Solari becomes the unofficial tournament photographer. “To me it felt almost like an obligation, I didn’t want to miss a single edition. In the beginning the tournament director once came up to me. ‘We don’t need to be famous’, he said. The tournament is supposed to belong to the islanders, something they want to keep private.”

Young and Old

One special thing about the tournament is that both young and old compete. “I can remember a match I attended where Tiny played an elderly gentleman. Both far into their older years. I didn’t have a camera with me but I quickly went back to get it.” He likes the fact that in billiards, you also play yourself. “It’s about your points average. Imagine you have an average of 40 points, and you play someone who has an average of 50. If you reach your average of 40 faster than your opponent reaches their average of 50, then you win. Even if your opponent has more than 40 points.”

Solari returns every year, but not for long periods. “All together I’ve been there maybe 90 days.” Because he keeps going back, in the same time period, people get to know him. Trust grows. “Sometimes I had doubts about whether I should go back. Again to the same place, shouldn’t I discover something different? But after the first encounter coming off the boat, any doubts were gone.”

Cultural Capital

Tiny asks him to exhibit his work. She doesn't ask him directly, but through a different route. Along the way, the idea for a book is born. Plenty of photos. When Leeuwarden is named the Cultural Capital, Schiermonnikoog is asked if it wants to join in. The island wants that. Solari is nominated to represent the island. "A huge honour. A beautiful reason to make the book a reality."

The photos in the book were made between 2009 and 2015. The forward is by Eric Bos, and the texts in the book are written by Mathijs Deen - author of the book, 'De Wadden, Een geschiedenis'. On the collaboration: "I gave him full freedom. His texts are based on the photos in the book." The Fortress, Schiermonnikoog can be ordered here. More information: <http://lucasolari.ch/>