

Olivier Valsecchi

Dust

Olivier Valsecchi, a young French photographer, finds that all his work, from capturing his images to constructing his series, is based on intuition.

His first works in photography were self-portraits that helped him discover things about the medium, as well as himself. But the series of self-portraits left him unsatisfied, not fully seeing himself in them. He then started making portraits of others: encounters with people that attracted him and that he wanted to photograph. What he enjoyed was the intimacy, he says. He undressed his models because he noticed that their expression was different once the barrier that clothing creates is removed. He photographs young couples "for fun," staging poses along with a prop, a personal object of theirs, that symbolises the couple's relationship. The images are in bright colours, in stark contrast with his next work, *Dust*.

In his series *Dust*, models don't have the impression of being nude – they are dressed with ashes. "allowing them not to feel so exposed." Ashes were actually used, and not dust as the title implies, for both practical reasons and visual effect. The images here are much darker, literally and figuratively.

As if sprung from unbridled unconsciousness, the photographs evoke death, birth, even maternity (fire, earth, air and even water – all the elements seem reunited here and interpreted by near abstract beings). What they symbolise for the photographer is a rebirth – his. A life in which he says he didn't feel part of, up until now. Even though he is not portrayed personally in any of the *Dust* images, they are all about him. All the bodies evoke something deep inside of him, even the female bodies. He guided his models' every movement so as to convey exactly what he felt. *Dust* is therefore a great more revealing about its creator than any of his self-portraits.

Valsecchi finds his models through relations or chance meetings. They are people that inspire him and even people he meets via the Internet, where he posts casting ads. He instantly knows who will work and who will not, as what he seeks is very precise. The models need to become a mirror, and reflect him, as it were. For *Dust*, the models were "showered" with ashes all over their bodies, and then long sessions took place with constant movement between the photographer and his subjects until the right posture was captured.

The first image of the series, where the model is as if bundled up, is the photographer's own position when

he sleeps. All the images that come after that (he selected a shortlist of ten for the official series, that can easily number up to thirty for special exhibitions, while having shot many more that he keeps secret) are meant to convey a story along a certain rhythm. Highs and low, bodies flying up or falling down. The last image of the series, where the man is almost in a foetus-like position, is a form of closure for Valsecchi, his own rebirth.

The photography sessions take place in a studio where Valsecchi isolates himself alone with his model. He feels he doesn't need any assistance, as he knows exactly what he wants and how to achieve it. He uses only a single camera on a stand and a very sparse setting. There is no elaborate design, no hair, no make-up (aside for the ashes). A single pierced nipple appears on one of his images, that he didn't dare remove.

The sessions themselves can sometimes be strenuous circumstances, with fatigue settling in... and an occasional burn! But there are also models that play with the ashes, the way children do in a sandbox. When occasional constraints arise, Valsecchi handles them accordingly. Some models are not comfortable taking their clothes off and so he switches to portraits. Others make forceful propositions, but he exercises rigorous control over what he wants. Some poses can be aesthetically pleasing, but if they're not what he's searching for, he'll just keep on going until he gets the image he wants: that mirror-image of himself that he seeks through foreign bodies. Some of the sessions even reach trance-like states that the photographer likens to near orgasmic feelings. After the sessions, when making his selection, he picks out the images that echo the emotional state he felt during the shoot.

Once Valsecchi embarks on a project, he tends to get obsessed about it. He sees images in his dreams, and then sets out to recreate them, with slight variations, in the real world. His dreams thus become an intuitive inspiration for his work.

"Tohu va bohu" (a biblical Hebrew phrase found in Genesis 1:2, usually translated as "formless and empty", or some variation of the same, describing the condition of the earth before God said, "Let there be light") seems to be the setting for *Dust*. Is it fog? Exploding liquid? Sea? Sky? As for the models, some resemble statues frozen in time, lost in space or in their thoughts, floating in primordial matter, an ooz-

ing no man's land. The ashes may express death or, conversely, a return to earth, to life... They may also evoke solitude (a ghostly embrace, a fight against loss...). If Valsecchi is very sure of what images he wants, they also leave great room for interpretation.

A tattoo on one body is the single touch of colour in the entire *Dust* series, made entirely with digital technology. "Sometimes you must use the best means at your disposal in order to create the images in your head. Negative film would not have been an option for this series", confides the photographer.

All the photographs were made in a studio with a black backdrop, with flashes and artificial lighting to create a softened light. But the photographer won't reveal any more of his technique, wanting to preserve a little mystery. In fact, he doesn't believe in captions or accompanying texts for his series. Explanations, in this case, are superfluous. The only thing he's willing to reveal is that he tested the ashes on himself, and made a self-portrait out of it. But he didn't pursue that approach, as it was just too much work!

Dust will be shown next summer at the Promenades Photographiques de Vendôme, in France. Meanwhile, Valsecchi sells prints via his website. Once a series is completed, he does not pursue it in any way. He has even had people who that have enjoyed a particular series offer to be part of it. But he has to explain that once the work is done it's over! The project he's currently working on couldn't be more different from *Dust*: it's a reportage on a man with handicaps, but treated in a whimsical way to make it interesting both on a social and personal level. That's all the photographer is willing to reveal at this point. Ultimately, Valsecchi considers himself more of an artist than a reporter, feeling more at home making portraits and self-portraits.

TEXT BY SARAH BAXTER

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