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Unsettled



**Isabelle Pateer**

Unsettled

15.03.13 - 26.04.13

Photofusion Gallery / London / England

**Unsettled** / Reviewed by Riikka Kuittinen / 25.03.13

Photofusion's exhibition *Unsettled* takes a quietly powerful look into the impact of corporate ambitions on small communities. Produced over the past five years by Isabelle Pateer (born 1980), who works and lives in The Netherlands and Belgium, this series examines the expansion of the Antwerp harbour and how it has displaced everything in its path, including the surrounding villages. Recently, this extensive building programme has been put on hold as the financial crisis has swept the globe. The project is supported by the Dutch Anna Cornelis Foundation, which supports documentary photography projects – a heartening sign that art production such as this can still receive financial support, even in this economic climate.



© Isabelle Pateer  
Untitled (Mattress), 2010

© Isabelle Pateer  
Empty Box, 2010

Pateer's large-scale colour photographs show bleak scenery, with distressed landscapes, images of emptied houses and formal portraits of people within them. Washed with ashen light, the desolate landscapes and emptied homes seem at first glance to have been devastated by a natural disaster, their populations displaced in a hurry. Instead, the upheaval is a capitalist one, decisions made in distant boardrooms impacting entire communities. Left behind are hollow shells of buildings, their residents reduced into inconvenient removable rubble, like the debris strewn across the floors of their vacated houses.

The two portraits, *Kirsten* (2012) and *Cristof* (2009), merely highlight the absence of life from the images. Residential areas have been flattened to make way for bare ground and scrawny shrubbery as a result of an EU law which dictates that industrial expansions should be compensated with the creation of nature reserves. The results would be hilarious if they were not depressing.

The staged interior scenes are as quietly bleak as the landscapes, and are almost like still lives: a mattress blocks the light from a window, an empty blackboard in an abandoned class room. One of the most striking images, *Icons* (2011) shows an old church tower in a dockyard, surrounded by stacks of metallic transport containers sprayed with the names of the companies that own them. The church has lost its nave and transept, only the tower is left standing, squeezed among a carpet of concrete.

The nostalgic romance of the long-distance sea journey with its promise of distant lands is far away from these mundane stacked transit containers. A central element in this story is the changing fortunes of sea freighting. The church stands as an emblem of passing fortunes – those of an individual person, a village or a whole industry. Like the amputated church, these communities are unlikely to be rebuilt as they were, with communities having to deal with the aftermath of profit-focused decision making.

This body of work suggests that Pateer is an artist with a strong, sympathetic point of view. Here, she has created thoughtful imagery combining talent with a social purpose which effortlessly balances the narrative of the universal and the individual and how international capitalism touches on or even dominates people's lives. The underlying truth here is about how global corporations wield their power. This is not to say that the photos don't have visual appeal also, with their startling, sharply observed detail and pale Vermeer light. These are pictures of uncomfortable truths, eloquently spoken.

- [Riikka Kuittinen](#)

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