

Unsettled

Photographs by Isabelle Pateer

There is a melancholy we feel when passing something that we know could have been transformed into something else, something better. “Unsettled” has a multiplicity of meanings, but at the core is change. To be unsettled is to be in a state of change.

Over the years, I’ve heard the statement proffered that “change is good,” as if that adage has any credence, value, or basis in fact. More often, it is a way to place oneself into a process in order to gain credit, pad a resume, or prove that one’s insignificance is only transitory. Sometimes, the goal is sound, but often the impetus is the underlying belief that true change requires exploding what is in place. It often seems that one’s grit is on trial, to progress smartly and with consideration is to demean one’s leadership and so the result is the “bring it on” style of change. Often the larger a project’s complexities, the more we see of this slash-and-burn attitude. How else to progress with so many different concerns? To get something done, it is understood there will be collateral damage, from people’s lives to the environment, especially in large public works projects such as the transformation and expansion of the Antwerp port.

The fact that disruption itself is rarely positive often goes unmentioned; that it occludes the actual mission at play seems unimportant. What is important to those who believe in change unrepentant, the belief is that without change life is stagnant; almost unworthy of life. A useful response to that sentiment is that “appropriate change is good,” since to blithely accept and pass on the idea that change is good without context and examination is illogical. Still, we are bodies in motion, and the idea of informed refinement seems out of place in the rush to effect change.

In the United States, there exists a profoundly held belief that land which lies fallow, free of change or improvement, is somehow a wasteful sin; this wastefulness lies at the drive to plow under, denigrate, and ultimately destroy the land along with its occupants should they be in the way. This course of action is often a source of later regret. Dams are built, only to be dismantled a few years later. Wetlands are drained and built upon, then found to have been crucial to wildlife and mankind. Mining lands for riches, with no plan to remediate the lands afterward, is like a giant shovel that leaves not only a hole but also a pile of rubble next to it with no remediation plan. Occasionally, efforts are made to limit this damage – the grand idea of national parks or preserves. But those efforts are rare, and highly fought over; after all change is good, and change is almost always centered on some notion of economic gain. To put it another way, if there isn’t any money to be gained, change doesn’t occur. Rarely are people or organizations compelled to incur change for reasons without financial gain. And even more rarely are the results of such changes actually analyzed for the appropriateness of policy or actual gain.

The word “develop” points to a process of unveiling the true value which is laying latent, waiting for release. To develop a piece of land is to find its true value in land developer parlance. To expand an industrial complex is on its face an act of development for the better. Putting land to use that isn’t producing anything is to realize its potential. But

potential comes at a cost, and that cost is the subject of Isabelle Pateer's documentary project, *Unsettled*.

Sometimes a cultural asset is recognized as such, and if a whiff of melancholy is introduced, then preservation can occur or at the very least can allow us to recognize the potential loss. Isabelle Pateer seems to fill her images of the Belgian village of Doel and the surrounding polder area with that sense of inevitable loss. At first glance, this documentary project on the expansion of the port of Antwerp, itself a massive industrial development, seems unsurprising. The photos reveal a landscape full of intrusion, so nothing seems amiss when we encounter an image of churned up dirt, or wetlands with massive cranes in the background. Nor does an image or two of abandoned homes, empty rooms, or other artifacts of what we might confuse for suburban decay surprise us. Residences and structures left to deteriorate and die are one of the mother lodes of photographic expression. They invoke in us the mortal fear that we too could end up that way. That our homes, that we have endeavored to love and cherish, could end up looking this way is what fuels our second looks, our morbid curiosity.

Pateer adds to these views the rich and glorious reward of color, not the color of exaggeration, but the color of emotion. Color introduces another language to photography. It is not as many think, merely a filling in the blanks of tonal expression, but an entirely different set of blanks of emotional response. That is one reason it's so tough to use color properly. Do it wrong, play the easy card, and all we remember is the color, a visual one-trick pony. Do it properly and we fall transfixed, full of emotions that the quality of light brings with it. Fortunately, Pateer does it right, and despite an overriding sense of impending loss, almost doom, many of the images are warm, revealing life in full bloom, colors awash with weather, people, and motion. We don't know the meaning of the images, a woman looking down the staircase in an empty home, a kid on the roof of a building. We don't really know what's going on, and the images taken out of context could fit into essays all over the globe. And that global ubiquity is strangely appropriate. The development of Doel and the surrounding lands is fueled by a variety of forces, from the local wish to expand the port to the impact of the European Union mandates, all are stuck in a state of stasis due the economic doldrums and crashes of the past decades.

So, some houses are still standing, almost ready to be reoccupied, while others are far enough gone to cement the notion of a land already dead and dying. The portraits go beyond melancholy to despair - quiet despair, but depressed nonetheless. There is aimlessness not only in the portraits but also in the landscapes themselves. It is as if the soil and plants don't know what they are doing or for whom. The only thing that seems certain is that they know the future is not within their control. Whether these images and the attention they garner can help to subvert the change that seems on a march to transform Doel to yet another mailstop for the Antwerp port is yet to be determined, but the document they present, of a land in flux, of people wandering and living amongst the flux to the best of their ability, and their questions about the very process of change are strong invectives of decisions that seem to ignore other, more positive possibilities.

Pateer's choice of palette is fascinating since the images are so singular in process. All are linked by place, but one step outside that construct reveals an attention to the individual image. I'm currently at work on an essay that explores in the explosion of photo books and the accompanying explosion of images that for a lack of a better word

are weak and seem only there to flesh out the rest of the book, and thus don't really work as individual images. Fortunately, Pateer's images work outside of the documentary framework, and for me that is as exciting as are the whole of the images seen in context. Like a locket with a lock of a loved one's hair inside, her images rekindle in us, the constant battle we feel for that sense of what might have been, what could be, maybe even what should be. Wandering alone in her images, one can sense the water underfoot, the constancy of nature kept at bay by mankind's history of land and water management, and the melancholy of change for change's sake, oblivious to the damage and disruption it brings with nothing to show for it but ache and loss. Unsettled indeed.

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