



ARBEID ADEL'T

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With

Anastasia Bay

Claudio Coltorti

Mark Dion

Jot Fau

Gerard Herman

Constant Permeke

Yann Nirvana Yoy

The devouring shaft had swallowed its daily ration of men: nearly seven hundred hands, who were now at work in this giant ant-hill, everywhere making holes in the earth, drilling it like an old worm-eaten piece of wood. And in the middle of the heavy silence and crushing weight of the strata one could hear, by placing one's ear to the rock, the movement of these human insects at work, from the flight of the cable which moved the cage up and down, to the biting of the tools cutting out the coal at the end of the stalls.
— Émile Zola, *Germinal*, 1885

Groundbreaking: (adjective) Innovative, pioneering.

In the rural village of Sint-Martens-Latem a group of Flemish expressionist painters put their pencils to work creating portraits of villagers, farmers, and working men. Shovel strikes earth to a crisp crunch of crumbling earth, wet-brown striations that separate the world above from the world below. The scenes that accompany them are often winter landscapes covered in snow and the brown waves against a clear blue sky of the North Sea at Ostend. Flourishes in lines define curved and muscular bodies whose gait is defined by the muscles of labour. Whose thick fingers know the quality of dirt, whose sun-brushed faces and permanently rosy cheeks have been caressed by wind and ice. “Arbeid Adelt!” they say, as if the body’s reconfiguration to conditions of the earth would ever confirm the possibility of social mobility.

This is the beginning of a final product, from harvest to table, a new construction, a speculative row of luxury-flats, the foundation for our new world. What is below emerges into the daylight air, cold sea-wind whipping the sun-worn faces that nevertheless know the lightness of the butterfly, heavy forms that dance into the evening. After a day’s work, there is always time for reclining on the sharp-gentle swaying grasses when the sun breaks through the persistent silver cover of Atlantic clouds.

Arbeid Adelt

Waldburger Wouters

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The body reacts to labour. It is shaped by repeated actions. The broad shoulders of the farmers are not an inheritance but evidence of perpetual motion, a metamorphosis defined by gendered performativity. The domesticity of “women’s work” creates different forms, slender fingers are for threading, visible stitches in home-made garments, soft curves for the fireside. Constant Permeke’s drawings expose thick thighs (powerful) while De Smet’s graphite sketches define red cheeks (comely). And what today of our blue-soaked pale faces lit by the faint light of a mobile phone. Languid limbs slope off the bedside towards the nature mort, close to death, extraction revisited, data-mining, creative industries, assignments finish overnight, home-office, typing tic-toc against the faint light, constant persistence – Arbeid Adelt!

“In industrializing Europe, there were factory workers who lobbed wooden clogs in protest. This October, what could be initiated by a boot hurled in the American strawberry¹² processing plant? Cough cough (goes the worker). Bang-Clatter (goes the boot). I pick strawberry because a strawberry cannot be lobbed like the stinking boot—as might a turnip or potato. I pick strawberry because it is small and sweet.”

—Mary Walling Blackburn “Swim to Us”, 2020

Text by Àngels Miralda