

## Photographer Otto Van De Steene on the road to his ultimate pic “I’m a real scoundrel, living on the edge.”

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Otto Van De Steene cycles around the globe, looking for perfect pictures and the picture perfect. He’s a romantic soul trapped in a young man’s body, strongly opposed against commercialism. I pulled him out of his artistic rush after an exhausting shoot for the *Brussels Philharmonic – het Vlaams Radio Orkest*.

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BY JULIAN DE BACKER

*Otto, you were able to photograph conductor Giancarlo Guerrero during his rehearsal today (Monday 7 February 2011). How do you approach your subject?*

Otto Van De Steene : “I did more than just follow the conductor. Sure, I concentrated on him but I have tried to capture the full orchestra. They had already started their rehearsal and I merely joined them. I introduced myself after a while, but they never regarded me as obstructive. Fortunately, percussionist Gert François knew who I was. A repetition is an ideal, non-formal photo situation : whenever a seat is available, I take place between the musicians. That way, you can make photos from their point of view. Weird angles don’t scare me.”

*Do you have a favourite position while taking pictures?*

Otto : “No. (pause) Yes maybe I do. It can’t be weird enough! (laughs). I’m positive about funny angles and I’m sure they can produce a lot of interesting images. I toyed around with piano reflections today, for example. “Light in the blur”, or *bokeh*, generates circle-esque effects which I love. Or what about highlighting blurry objects and placing them in the foreground? Usually, a photographer will have blurry elements in the background but I try to achieve both kinds of blurriness to enhance my photos and make them more dynamic.”

*Does a photographer have to be a director of his images?*

Otto : “I’ll *never* force someone to pose. I snap whatever I see. Otherwise, coincidental beauty will disappear. When I ask someone to stand “over there”, the result will be artificial which is loathsome. I want to show my audience what I saw as a voyeur.”

*Are there any photographic taboos in your rulebook?*

Otto : “Well, yeah, to have someone posing is a personal taboo. I could never be a fashion photographer or a wedding snapper. It’s all fake, to say the least. And I find it saddening that so many soloists and conductors want to look younger on their press photos. I try to capture them as they are, now, at this point in time. But my work ethic has been known to clash with the artist’s vision. In the past, I have been forced to remove photographs from my website.”

*Speaking of your website, it features both portraits and landscapes. What's your favourite subject?*

Otto : "I used to be very into landscapes, because I went looking for the human element in our natural environment. Since then, I have switched to people. It's easier to make good images of human beings and I adore human tableaux. Nothing is more satisfying than getting off the train in Brussels and walking to the Flagey square, because that trip leads me through the Matongé district. A sunny day like today automatically makes for great picture material."

*Do you ask the people in the street for their permission?*

Otto : "(resolute) No. I'm a real scoundrel, living on the edge (laughs). I never really experienced any trouble. I'm always making photographs, even in the *middle of nowhere* in Nairobi, Africa."

*What is your photographic dream, time permitted?*

Otto : "My bike, my camera, enough dough, a backpack, a pair of good walking shoes and me : travelling around the world taking people's pictures. The greenhouse effect can be nefarious : both rich Norwegian farmers and poor Kenyan farmers complain. But I love their stories, not the effect of global warming on some glacier. I couldn't care less! I can find and snap melting ice in my freezer!

Using a bike has an added bonus : you stand out in a crowd. People will come up to you and ask what you're doing, which in turn can be a source of quality photos. Lest I forget, the ecological aspect of travelling by bike is very appealing to me. I'm never dependant on trains or airplanes. I'm not forced to do anything I don't like. And the last plus : I like to mingle with international crowds. I never considered myself to be "Belgian", let alone "Flemish".

*Who are your influences?*

Otto : "I've got a few. The usual suspects, like Henri Cartier-Bresson, have influenced my street photography. He too waited and captured the reality. My landscape photography is rooted in the work of the Romantic painters like Théodore Géricault."

*The work of Belgian photography greats like Patrick Despiegelaere, Herman Selleslags and Els Vanopstal is known to the general public, but their name isn't. How come?*

Otto : "I, for one, don't want to be recognized when I'm out on the streets. When people know and notice you, my chances at making naive photographs significantly decrease. A true photographer is proud of his work, but he dislikes becoming too famous."

*He likes to frame, but he hates the fame. Thank you, Otto, for your wise reflections on your craft.*

**More on Otto Van De Steene? => <http://www.fotto.be/>**

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