

ARCHIVE OF MARCEL DE BAER – By Accident - 11th February - 8th April 2023

'Exhibition review' by Max Wiener, on April 5th 2023 on museemagazine.com.

MUSÉE
VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

APR 5 EXHIBITION REVIEW: BY ACCIDENT

REVIEWS



Written by Max Wiener

Copy Edited by Robyn Hager

Photo Edited by Olivia Castillo

"By Accident," a compilation of photographs by the late Marcel De Baer, presents a macabre collection of automobile crashes with a dark tinge of humor, spicing up the still images with a keen gift behind the lens.

Looking at images of car crashes can be a sort of melancholic task. There is nothing remotely exciting or gratifying about them, and in many cases your natural instinct is to look away and spare your mind from the emotional strife they may present. "By Accident", a photography collection from Marcel De Baer presented by Antwerp's Gallery FIFTY ONE TOO, presents these images in an entirely different light. De Baer was no fine artist looking to break new ground in the medium, but rather a man of trade. His photography was his work - he worked for the public prosecutor's office of the district of Oudenaarde, Belgium, and was on the scene of every major traffic accident that occurred in his region.



©Archive of Marcel De Baer, 1961-77 : Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE_10

The images presented in the exhibition were curated by De Baer's grandson, Erik Bulckens, who discovered ten thousand some-odd images and approximately four thousand court reports in his grandfather's attic. After the dust was swept off, Bulckens realized he was sitting on an artistic gold mine of tremendous proportions. The prints - all developed by De Baer's daughter, are the highlight of the exhibition, and strongly argue that De Baer is one of the most intriguing photographers of his time. His work has a Robert Frank or a Fred Herzog-type feel to it but in a darker, dryer sense. This exhibit presents his unique voice perfectly.



©Archive of Marcel De Baer, 1961-77 : Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE



©Archive of Marcel De Baer, 1961-77 : Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE

Even though he was essentially working for the government, De Baer managed to capture some of the most profound images of automobile accidents to date. They aren't Christopher Nolan films with large explosions and grand scenes, but rather intimate depictions of a rather mundane occurrence in daily life. There isn't an emphasis on the negative aspects of car crashes - death, despair - but rather the dark humor that exists within them. The bending of the metal and the flipping of the cars adds a cartoonish flare to the images, almost as if they're stills from a *Looney Tunes* episode. The image of the bent motorbike is particularly dark and witty. We can't see quite what stopped it, but the bedding and the contortion of it begs you to question your emotional integrity.



©Archive of Marcel De Baer, 1961-77 : Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE



©Archive of Marcel De Baer, 1961-77 : Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE

Given the nature of his work, De Baer places himself within the image so transparently that we feel as though we are looking at the wreck ourselves. Any human subjects that are present in the image are staring dead center at the lens, removing any barrier between viewer and image and thus placing ourselves right in the heart of twentieth-century Belgium. Nothing has been "cleaned up" either, so to speak. Chalk lines are still there, the streets are still dirty, and nothing is altered. No person or thing was prepared to have their picture taken; it has an incredibly raw and candid feel to it. This factor only adds to the importance and consequence of De Baer's work, as well as its impressive brevity. To be able to truly *capture* is a rarity, especially in the modern age of social media and influencers. De Baer's work proves to be a return to the roots of the medium, showing untouched worldly images without a filter. In the ever-present modern zeitgeist, De Baer's work has the power to ground and humble us.



©Archive of Marcel De Baer, 1961-77 : Courtesy Gallery FIFTY ONE

The gallery runs until the fourth of August, and as if the exhibit couldn't have more dark humor attached to it, it opened on this past Valentine's Day.

For more information, click [here](#).

Marcel De Baer, Gallery Fifty One, FIFTY ONE TOO