

Machiel Botman's Mysteries: Depth and Beauty in Monochrome

by VALERIE GLADSTONE on Dec 19, 2011

The Dutch photographer Machiel Botman has a distinctly personal vision, choosing subjects for his exquisite black-and-white photographs that touch him emotionally. Superficially, it's impossible to discern a unifying theme or figure out what drew him to the scenes or people he commemorates. Each image resembles a self-contained theatrical event, with its own distinctive drama and resonance. Using a variety of exposures, depths of field and focal distances, Botman creates photographs that are as much about their atmosphere as their subjects.

The current exhibition at Gitterman Gallery includes works from the past 10 years and coincides with the publication of his third monograph, *One Tree* (Nazraeli Press, 2011). Along with images, it includes a short story, "The Hawk and The Cat," about a young boy's fascination with a hawk.

In the dream-like "Tree House," a blurred image of a graceful tree stands in front of a white house, its empty windows like randomly spaced geometric shapes. All of the leaves point upward, a strange coincidence or perhaps an odd kind of tree. One imagines the house deserted, its whiteness a reflection of a distant sun. Beauty emanates from the soft grays of the shadows that fall on its walls.

A hand holds a piece of glass sprinkled with droplets of water in "Ijke's Hand," the fingers spread and slightly flattened by the weight of the glass. Because the glass is unevenly cut, it seems dangerous, as if part of a broken window. In both these photographs and the others here, Botman hints at many meanings.

The lovely "Julia" shows a little girl, one strap of her summer dress falling off her shoulder, walking down an overgrown path. In my favorite, "Horse and Church," Botman has imposed the image of a white horse on a scene of a field of hay with a primitive church atop a hill. The horse's eyes are closed, as if dreaming. But why the church? We will probably never know, but what we can take away from this photograph, as well as all of the others here, is a sense of life's mystery caught by a man who looks deeply into his surroundings.

Though not widely known in the United States, Botman has taught workshops (primarily on bookmaking), curated exhibitions for museums and edited and designed books on other artists. His work is included in many private collections and institutional collections in the Netherlands, France, the United States, Australia and Japan.

Machiel Botman: One Tree

Through Feb. 18