

OCTOBER 2013

ARTnews

**Keeping
New
Media
New**



**How Hopper
Created
*Nighthawks***

**China's
Growing
Auction Giant**

**Wyeth
Family's
High Point**

Koen Vanmechelen

CONNERSMITH

Washington, D.C.

Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen's vast Cosmopolitan Chicken Project (CCP), which he began in 1999, is an art-meets-science conceptual work that includes photography, installation, drawing, and sculpture—not to mention the thousands of chickens he has been breeding on farms all over the world. This exhibition, titled "Leaving Paradise," offered only a brief introduction to the project.

The centerpiece of the show was a cage containing a couple of live Red Junglefowl, near-extinct Southeast Asian birds that are likely the closest living links to the first chickens domesticated by humans more than 5,000 years ago. For Vanmechelen, the Junglefowl represent the strength and beauty of evolution by natural selection, unmediated by human meddling. Within the confines of the tall, well-appointed chicken-wire cage, they were ceaselessly active: flying, strutting, and even procreating.

If these wild chickens represent a kind of Edenic perfection, the many pedigreed (and inbred) chickens of the world, for Vanmechelen, are fowl after the Fall. His CCP crossbreeds highly prized domesticated birds, aiming ultimately to create new, superior "international" chickens with restored vitality and diversity. One wall here featured mugshot-like photographs of 17 generations of Vanmechelen's often flamboyantly beautiful birds. Since many of his chickens travel for exhibitions and breeding, the artist has also produced for them amusing faux passports, displayed in a giant grid. Though these creatures do not end up on the dining table, they do, after an apparently pleasant life and natural death, wind up on sculpture stands via taxidermy.

By fitting the fowl with passports, headshots, and



Jamie Baldrige, *The Starvation of Czar Nicholas*, 2010, archival pigment print, 40½" x 55½". Modernbook.

other humanizing elements, Vanmechelen suggests that a chicken's life is a metaphor for human existence. The unavoidable upshot is that civilization somehow produces weaker human beings—a return-to-nature notion linked to disagreeable ideas about lost racial purity. But, to borrow from Hobbes: life in nature is nasty, brutish, and short—and only an advanced and sophisticated culture offers us the possibility of esthetic, rather than culinary, delectation of these gorgeous birds.

—Rex Weil

UP NOW

Jamie Baldrige

Modernbook

San Francisco

Through November 2

Taking inspiration from Surrealism and fairy tales, photographer Jamie Baldrige depicts women in disturbing scenarios—birthing antique radios, opening their legs



Koen Vanmechelen, *Mechelse Redcap X Jersey Giant*, 2013, Lambda print on Plexiglas, diptych, 12" x 12" each. CONNERSMITH.

to locomotives, wearing birdcages over their heads—against digitally constructed backdrops of crumbling Victorian interiors. To accompany the eleven large-scale photographs in this compelling show, titled "Almost Fiction," Baldrige composed snippets of narrative that hint at the dramas unfolding in the pictures. Filled with references to virgins, unwise marriages, and carnal sin, the wall texts describe women undergoing obscure punishments or bizarre acts of God.

In *Hydrocephalus*

(2008), for instance, a woman in a white dress sits in profile, as if for a portrait. On her head, Baldrige has superimposed a vitrine filled with water, which submerges her nose and mouth. The text describes this torture by drowning as a cure for "ritualistic onychophagia" (nail biting) and "wanton self-abuse"—a pointed reference to 19th-century doctors' misguided hysteria treatments.

Compared with the critical bite of *Hydrocephalus*, many of Baldrige's images invite the viewer to exult in the distresses of his damsels. He offers them up in delectable states of vulnerability, bosoms stuffed into lacy white dresses, eyes wide and dollish, or nipples and pubic hair visible through a soaked nightie, as in the flood scene of *Into the New World* (2011).

What rescues these photos from the realm of started-up Victorian fantasy is Baldrige's production style. The artist edits studio shots of his models into rooms he builds with film-animation software, lending his prints the lurid sheen of a glossy fashion editorial or film still. The combination of these slick, digitally rendered surfaces with the models' contemporary looks—all blowouts and bangs and salon-perfect eyebrows—pushes the pictures beyond carefully constructed curiosities and gives them the feel of modern fables.

—Lamar Anderson