

Les Intimes

Diane Smyth, 2021

In 2014 the Wiels Art Center invited Vincen Beeckman to make new work in Mons, for a group show celebrating the Belgian city's year as European Capital of Culture in 2015. A photographer known for his long-term, collaborative projects, Beeckman decided to work with families with four or five children, and asked a local organisation supporting such households to help find some. His idea was to supply a service, coming to make pictures when the families asked him, like a doctor making house calls.

Three families volunteered but, five minutes after meeting the Ansquers, Beeckman had decided to focus on them. Including four kids plus cats, rats, dogs, and turtles, this household was lively, warm, and creative, and though Beeckman felt a little awkward at first, he also felt immediately at home. The feeling was mutual so the Ansquers started to invite him to special occasions – the kind of events that make up any family album, and the kind of images that tap into “a long tradition of families being photographed at holiday time in their holiday best”, as Maggie Nelson puts it in her book *The Argonauts*. Beeckman showed a selection of his images at Mons in 2015, at the Atopolis group show which also featured artists such as Francis Aljys, Yto Barrada, and Thomas Hirschhorn.

Wary of exposing the family to criticism, Beeckman only showed images “of joy and happiness”; the Ansquers went to the opening and felt proud, he says, amused that of all the “fancy people” at the event, they were the stars. But even so his photographs attracted criticism, from those who felt they didn't put Mons in a good light. Mons is a former industrial town and unemployment runs at 20%; the Ansquer family was headed at the time by a single mother and her mother, neither of whom worked in paid employment. The four kids all have different fathers, none of whom are around, and the family lives on very little. They're not the stereotypical, aspirational image of a nuclear family, and the mother and her mother weren't the “Hallmark-sacrosanct” parents, as Nelson puts it in *The Argonauts*.

“I beheld and still behold in anger and agony the eagerness of the world to throw piles of shit on those of us who want to savage or simply cannot help but savage the norms that so desperately need savaging,” Nelson writes, and she's speaking from experience. *The Argonauts*, a book of auto-theory published just before Atopolis opened, describes Nelson's own family, her son, stepson and partner, the artist Harry Dodge, who transitioned to become a man while Nelson was pregnant. Later in *The Argonauts* Nelson references Julia Kristeva's idea that single or lesbian motherhood “cannot help but trouble an entire legal and moral order”, though she adds that, given that one-third of American families are now headed by single mothers, “you'd think the symbolic order would be showing a few more dents”.

It's a similar story in Belgium. The critics in Mons may have felt single-parent families are atypical, but statistically they aren't. In 2020 the most common household in Belgium was single person (1,744,620); married or unmarried couples with a child or children living at home made up 1,388,235 households, and 491,825 households with a child or children were headed by a single parent. Not only that, rather than being undesirable, single parents can be considered exemplars of filial commitment, the ones who stuck around for the kids. The critics in Mons missed all this, says Beeckman, and they missed the “good energy” of the Ansquers family.

His images focus in on the people, including the children and the many friends who, like him, are welcomed into the fold. His images don't show the material facts of the family's existence

and rarely zoom out to give a wider perspective, instead honing in on the creative, messy reality of life with kids, eccentric home-made cakes and toys, the caring respect for the many animals in their lives. They show what Nelson tags a “joyswirl” in *The Argonauts*, when describing A.L. Steiner’s photo series *Puppies & Babies*; life with the Ansquers looks chaotic, loving, and fun.

Nelson references other photographers in her book, image-makers such as Nan Goldin “or Ryan McGinley, or Richard Billingham, or Larry Clark, or Peter Hujar, or Zoe Strauss”, who she believes offer a glimpse of something “radically intimate” with their close-quarters shots of family and friends. Perhaps photography by its nature echoes Nelson’s desired approach, her stated aim of “always trying to get out of ‘totalizing’ language, i.e., language that rides roughshod over specificity”, her interest in “offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking”. Photography as a medium is specific even when it’s clichéd; even if you’re looking at a typical holiday snap, showing a family “in their holiday best”, you’re looking at particular people.

Either way, there’s something radically intimate in Beeckman’s work with the Ansquers, in his willingness to enter into the family’s world. He’s named his photographs of them *Les Intimes*, and if it’s an intimate circle, he’s part of it. The family asked Beeckman to keep going after the *Mons* exhibition, and he’s now been photographing them for seven years; they’ve become part of his life and equally, he’s become part of theirs, a kind of surrogate uncle and the constant man in the kids’ lives. When the mother found a new boyfriend and the family moved house he helped them pack; when she got together with another guy, who lives in the south of France, he visited and photographed the kids in his swimming pool.

Beeckman doesn’t just photograph the special occasions now, though the family still entrusts him with those events too. When the grandmother died, the mother asked him to photograph the funeral, which was otherwise only attended by close family. When the mother married again, she asked Beeckman to shoot the wedding; everyone wore fancy dress, adding a Carnavalesque touch that undercut the day while marking it. “When or how do new kinship systems mime older nuclear-family arrangements, and when or how do they radically recontextualize them in a way that constitutes a rethinking of kinship?” writes Nelson.

And Beeckman’s images suggest another phrase Nelson references, “The personal is political”, the old rallying cry of students and feminists, because by opening the door to a private world, Beeckman shows that the Ansquers’ life is both unusual and acutely normal, specific and universal. Tolstoy famously stated that “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”; by looking at particular examples, Beeckman and Nelson suggest that actually, all families are both alike and very different. “Nothing we do in this life need have a lid crammed on it,” writes Nelson. “No one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative.”