

CARLO VAN DE ROER's practice is a restless quest after the unseen aspects of reality. Scientific techniques and traditional photographic illusion combine to create a supernatural visual world that invites both scepticism and credulity on the part of the viewer.

## (MIS)TRUSTING PHOTOGRAPHY

By Margherita Dessanay

### Series 1: *Blinded by the Light*

*Inspiration* For years after arriving in NY I would go up to the natural history museum on the morning of my birthday and take photographs of the diorama landscapes. It became a habit, a way of escaping from the city without having to catch another Greyhound bus. Coming from New Zealand, where we are in pretty constant contact with nature, maybe I was getting to know a different, more removed relationship to the natural landscape, one where hyenas, jackals and vultures congregate around the same tree on Central Park West.

*Process* Taking each photo took a while. I was shooting them large-format to include all the little details, using a tripod and a flash gripped on an arm. The museum doesn't really like photographers setting up equipment like that in their halls so I often had to leave and return in a new disguise, lurk in the shadows for a while, then work as fast as possible when the coast was clear...

The series developed organically. I had been photographing the dioramas and found that, without clues like perspective, the flat photographs looked more real than the dioramas did in person. I started using large-format to record the subtle clues that it is an illusion, those things usually not noticeable because the dioramas were made to be viewed from a distance, like the brushstrokes in the painted backgrounds or the cracks and seams in the construction. This is what the flash reflections on the windows did. The flares remind me of that almost magical quality that photography has of enabling us to use illusion to articulate the way we see the world. I'm attracted to that intersection of science and illusion.

### Series 2: *Orbs*

*Inspiration* I was looking for ways in which photography has been used to reveal things that are otherwise unseen, and came across orb photographs. If you Google that term

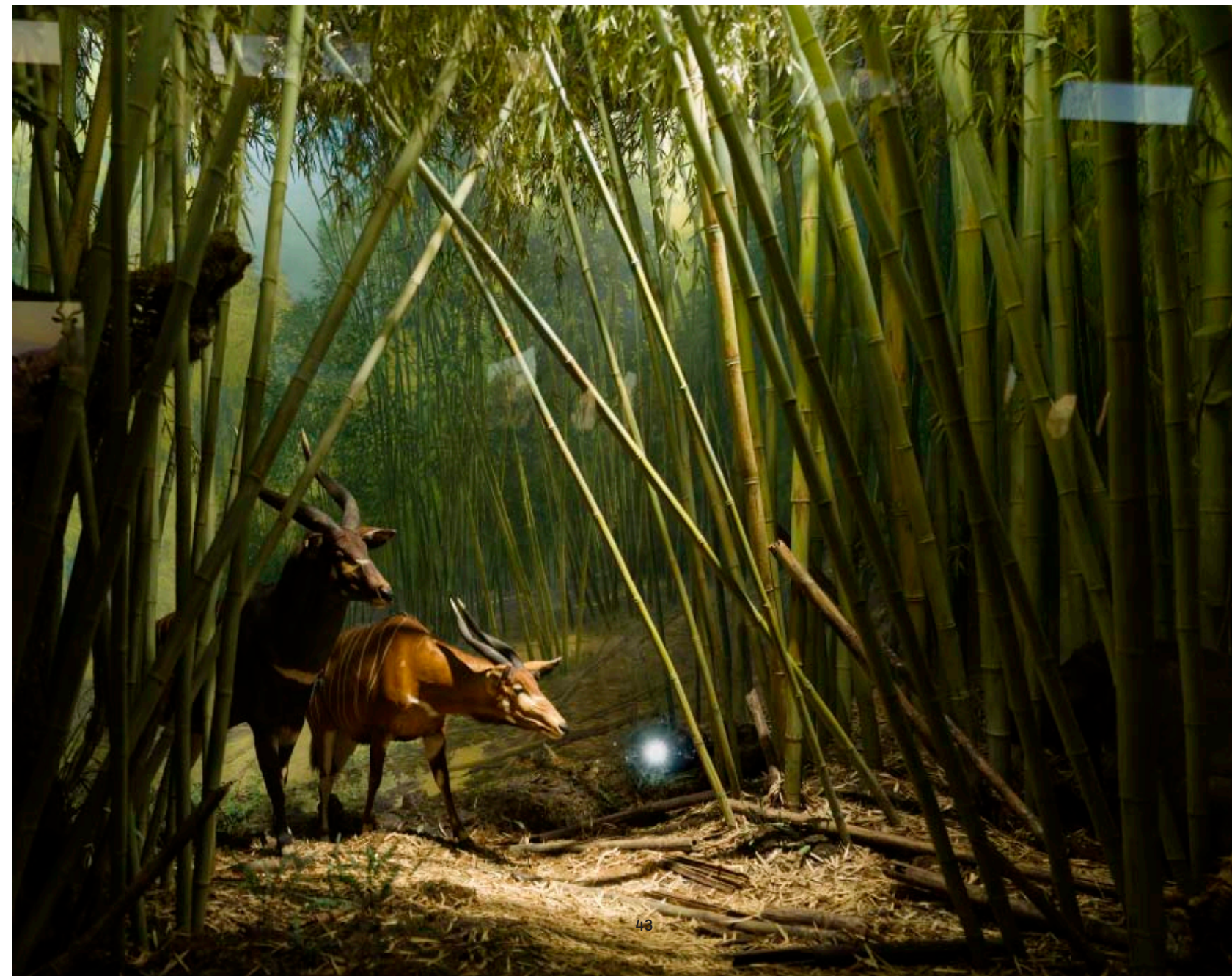
you'll find a lot of photographs with circular artefacts in them, most commonly caused by backscatter from a flash hitting moisture or dust. There's a surprisingly widespread belief that these artefacts are supernatural. There are orb conferences and organizations, orb hunts and orb experts with orb detectors.

*The science of illusion* Discovering that I could use photography to document or search for the unseen was the beginning of that work. I started photographing people in environments where orbs often appear in photographs, where the scenes are partly obscured by precipitation. Grouping these images draws attention to the use and arrangement of the Pop-coloured dots and the common atmospheric conditions and natural elements in the landscapes.

### Series 3: *The Portrait Machine Project*

*Inspiration* I was making portraits and getting preoccupied with people's expectations of what a portrait could offer. I was interested in the relationship between myself, the camera, the subject and the viewer. It was a more complex dynamic than the landscape work I was used to and I felt like there was a lot I wanted to explore there. I had read about the Coggins aura camera when researching spirit photography and I liked the idea of a camera that promised to reveal the subject as a psychic might see them.

The camera gets attached directly to the subject by sensors which read biofeedback. This is converted into information about the sitter which is printed out as a colour diagram and a personality description of the subject in the polaroid, according to aura theories. Eventually I got hold of one of those cameras and found that it promised to provide information about the sitter's character, as well as how they are seen by others. I was attracted to the role of this camera, the suggestion that it can provide an insight into part of this relationship I was interested in. It is an excessive example of



Bongo (from the series *Blinded by the Light*), 2009, C-print

the familiar idea that a camera can provide an insight into the unseen. It was a great tool with which to explore the relationships and contradictions of portrait photography.

Part of why I wanted to use this camera to explore the portrait-making process (and the camera's role in that) is what the aura camera promises. It is marketed as an accurate and precise machine for providing an insight into a subject's character and personality. It is a pseudoscience that borrows authority from medical and scientific imaging devices that sought to objectively measure and document unseen aspects of the human body; it was popular around the time the term 'x-ray' was coined.

*James Frey and the others* I chose to photograph people who would be familiar to a viewer as well as myself to give people access to the tension or harmony between the camera's interpretation and their expectations. The viewer is obviously a part of the relationship I'm interested in and whenever possible I like to present the viewer also with the camera-generated description, like a caption directly from the camera. James Frey was a great subject not only because he's a really interesting guy, but because his public personality has to do with identity, as does his work.

[Note: novelist James Frey became popular with *A Million Little Pieces*, a supposedly autobiographical memoir about his fall into drugs and salvation. In 2006 he created controversy when, interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, he admitted that many of the anecdotes in the book were made up.]

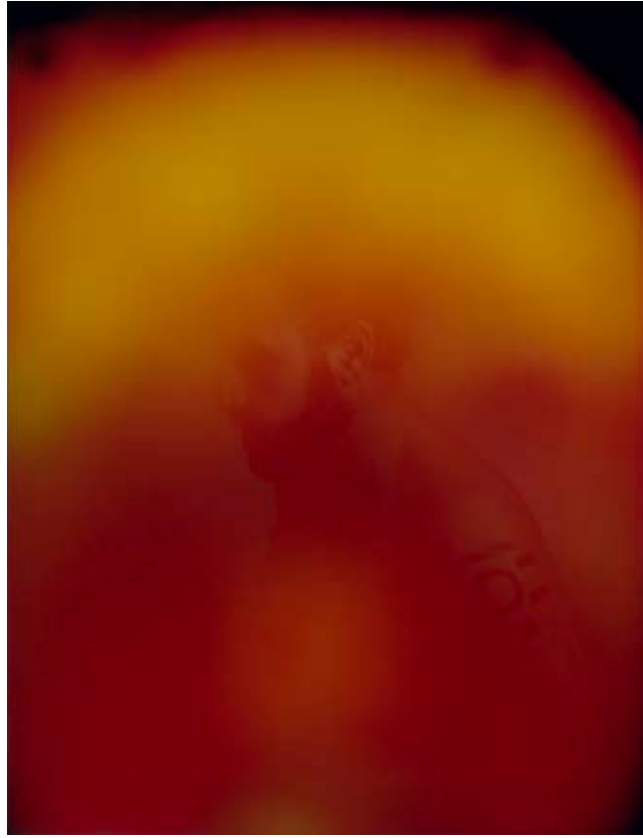
*Present & future* For the last year or so, I've been working on work that continues in a similar vein to my previous projects, in that it makes visible otherwise unseen photographic processes. Previously disparate images are arranged around overlapping threads relating to my personal history, my Dutch and Danish ancestry intersecting with the New World (New York/New Zealand), a search for the meaning of my family name and other interweaving subject matter. The source images come from personal projects, assignments, Google Maps, family albums and newspapers. These are put through a process that places them in a new context. It is a kind of storytelling emerging from the sum of these underlying threads. It's been a very hands-on, involved process that has taken me back to the days of building a darkroom under the stairs at my parents' house as a kid.

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Orb Eight (Rotorua, New Zealand), (from the series Orb) 2008, C-print and screen print

From above left, and clockwise, all the images from The Portrait Machine Project  
James Frey, 2010, C-print / Wais Ahluwalia, 2011, C-print / Terence Koh, 2008, C-print / Christelle Imperial De Castro, 2008, C-print



Cnidaria, 2012, C-type

