

**Etienne Hatt**

about *Chiens de fusil*

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# Reconciliation

Les Chiens de fusil by Léa Habourdin may seem disconcerting. This apparently disparate book combines photographs and facsimiles of double pages of notebooks in which there are small irregular printouts of readings stuck with adhesive tape, sketches and drawings of awkward style, and isolated, often enigmatic phrases. Images are repeated with different sizes or framings. According to whether they are vignettes, thumbnail images or full-page photographs, they do not have the same status. So, in addition to disparity, there is ambiguity. However, Les Chiens de fusil is a very coherent whole: the notebook double pages are from the notebook that the artist kept between 2007 and 2010, when she produced the series “Aux loups”, “Cours toujours” and “Cahier de doléances” from which the photographs were taken. Les Chiens de fusil is a time-slice taken from an artist’s works, delving into a creative process. But the book is not a reinterpretation of her work, its making-of, its documentation, or its explicit clarification. In it, the notebook pages cannot be dissociated from the photographs with which they alternate. Rather, Les Chiens de fusil affirms that the artist’s work process is research, that it must not be confined to research, but that the research must be rendered and considered as an integral part of the work process. The series “Preuves objectives 01 : notes sur l’attraction” (2011-2013) was to radicalise this affirmation by right away associating photographs, drawings and annotations.

The term “research”, which evokes the systematic approach and the objectivity of science, seems inappropriate. But Léa Habourdin asserts its use, making science a model to be approached in her own way, that is, by giving priority to intuition. For the artist has no method. Or rather, she does not consciously follow any rule or procedure.

She collects the images by multiplying the shots and prints. She lives with them, surrounds herself with them, tests their resistance to the eyes, and approaches them by arranging them on the wall or in her notebook. Her shots are not guided by a specific plan, but just by a state of mind, a thought or a word that she came across and which she noted. There are many of them in *Les Chiens de fusil*, such as “Essaims et Nuées” (“Swarms and hordes”), “Effa roucher” (“Scare away”). In a second stage, the images accumulate around a theme to form a series. But, as soon as the shot is taken, there are recurrent motifs.

The animal is one such motif. Wolf, bear, or grey crowned crane, it is above all wild. Léa Habourdin never photographs it in its original environment. Instead of nature, she prefers the artificiality of dioramas and zoos. If she works in these places, which are a means for viewing a world that is naturally hidden, it is not out of interest in their capacity to create fiction. In this respect, one must distinguish her from Hiroshi Sugimoto, who sees photography as a means to complete the illusionism of the diorama (“Dioramas”, a series started in 1976), or from Manit Sriwanichpoom who, on the contrary, wants to reveal the fiction of this device by highlighting showcases, their edges and their reflections (“Safari”, 2005). Not to mention Richard Billingham, some of whose wide views, which highlight the solitude of animals, also describe the architecture of zoos (“Zoo”, 2005). As opposed to these three artists, Léa Habourdin works indistinctly in one or other of these places. But it is not so much because she is attracted to the indetermination between the living and the dead that her close-ups create as to the representation, or, more precisely, the fantasy vision of wildlife conveyed by dioramas and zoos. In fact, having arisen as a reaction to the animal cages favoured in the 19th century, dioramas, soon followed by zoos with their “natural” islets that can still be seen today, aim to evoke the animals’ original environment in order to return to a wildness that 19th century scientific classification had standardized. If one believes Léa Habourdin’s photographs taken in the dioramas, returning to the wild also entailed multiplying predation scenes. Perhaps this was a way to keep the animals’ bestiality at a dis-

tance in order to assert humankind's civility and to extend an age-old opposition sustained by Christianity and its representations, in which human-animal hybrids that break with this dualism are seen as negative figures.

Léa Habourdin does not subscribe to this opposition. This is less by sympathy for the animal world than to understand humans who, according to her, also have a form of relationship based on parading and predation, which are often combined in a same erotic tension. Devoid of sensuality, this tension is made of violence and suffering and refers to Georges Bataille's *Érotisme*, which is one of the artist's sources. In this respect, the opening plate of *Les Chiens de fusil* does more than just set the stage. It plunges us into the heart of the matter. It brings together images taken within a few hours in Lithuania in the summer of 2008. Léa Habourdin meets two women friends, photographs one applying her make-up, the other showing off a tattoo –significantly, an eye– and captures the ambiguous gesture of affectionate strangling. Then she goes to the local zoological museum and she photographs dioramas: a bird of prey seizing a hare, or three wolves competing for the body of a deer. The artist has laid the foundations of work which, for several years, will consist in analysing people's behaviour in the mirror of animal behaviour, to highlight our animal side or, more precisely, what animals and people have in common, until there is no distinction between the two kingdoms or worlds. This lack of distinction is also reflected humourously by the peep board through which people can place their heads and pose to be photographed as gorillas, or by the expressions that the artist devises, such as “Ne pas oublier d'être bête” (“Don't forget to be dumb”) or “N'oublie pas tes cornes chéri” (“Don't forget your horns, dear”). Conveying this tension between beings implies turning towards bodies or, more precisely, being interested in apparently banal gestures, whether they involve touching, catching or uncovering flesh. This is why Léa Habourdin hides most of the faces, which would introduce psychological considerations, and keeps only the bodies, often fragmenting them in order to stress the gesture. A double page of the notebook reveals this attention. On the left is a vignette showing two boys holding each

other by the forehead. They seem to be both attracting and repelling each other. One is seen in three-quarter profile, while the other's face is hidden by his arm. Especially, Léa Habourdin has coloured in red all the parts of the image that are not related to the gesture that she shows in negative in pencil on the right-hand page. One must probably relate these opposing approaching and removal movements to several diagrams of arrows that punctuate the book. The vignette subtitled "FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELT WHILE SEATED" explains briefly how to buckle and unbuckle a seatbelt. Another, bearing the annotation "the war continues", is a diagram of emergency exits. When compared with the predation scenes, it takes on special meaning. For it is in the montage of disparate elements that the diffuse meaning of Léa Habourdin's images, sketches and annotations becomes defined. It stimulates to associations of ideas, highlights analogies and creates metaphors. It gives her work a documentary value which is lacking in each of the elements when they are taken separately. This is because the artist belongs to a generation for which the documentary, after being too often reduced to an apparently neutral style, implies in fact neither literality nor transparency and even finds fulfilment in artifice and construction, whether it is a matter of staging, or, as with Léa Habourdin, of montage.

With the latter, the artist outlines an empirical ethology, an intuitive study of her congeners' behaviour and also her own. Her participative manner of observation gives her work an autobiographic character. The artist appears several times. In one case, she is at one with an inflatable crocodile, a playful representation of the wild animal. In another, she sitting alone on a bed. This last image is associated with a photograph of bombardments of Arles (the city where she studied) and, at the very bottom of the page, the words "casi un abrazo". When asked, Léa Habourdin reveals the tragic dimension that links together these disparate elements. The documentary's would-be objectivity has given way to a very subjective approach which however goes beyond the ordinary personal diary and, in a way, aims at the universality of science.

Nevertheless, this documentary ambition does not exhaust the montage by Léa Habourdin, in which the connections are also based on the images themselves, and on the feelings, impressions and energies that they create. Far from being random, the artist likes to create oppositions between aggressiveness and gentleness, and between the archaic and the contemporary. She also contrasts the flows that bring the photographs to life. Thus, in the double page that has five vignettes on the right and five arrows on the left, the arrows indicate the movements of the eyes induced by the images. If we stop to take a close look at these arrows, we can make out, by transparency, the back of the page of the original notebook. This is the negative drawing mentioned above, which the artist produced from the photograph of a gesture. For the moment, it is a potential future image. A few pages later, it will already be an updated past memory.

Léa Habourdin's art calls into play our imagination and our memory. Both literally and figuratively, it unfolds between and also behind the images. This characteristic probably explains why everything is coherent in *Les Chiens de fusil*, especially the irreconcilable.

Translation Peter McCavana