



Original article

Photographer Joost Vandeburg crawls into the deepest caverns of human emotions with his series 'Pillow Book' – with the Danube as inspiration.

Joost Vandeburg presents his new series *Pillow Book* at Unseen. He photographed the Danube, but more so his own memories.

The darkroom is in his DNA and he can best illustrate this with an anecdote from his childhood. Joost Vandeburg (42) grew up in Friesland as the son of a photographer who made beautiful portraits. Every time Joost was sick, it happened. "Nowadays you put a thermometer like that in your ear but it used to go in from the back. My father would come straight out of the darkroom with the thermometer, rub it twice on his sleeve and plop it right in with me, with the developer still attached. I can still hear my mother say: "Yes, can't you hold it under the tap? But my father didn't think that was necessary. The developer is in my blood."

Furthermore, he has fond memories of the darkroom. "That moment when I stood there with my father and saw a gray image emerging on paper that slowly became a perfect black-and-white print. I remember being about 12 years old. Magical. We had just seen an exhibition by Anton Corbijn, with photographs on a special barite paper that you couldn't get in Holland. So we had to import that from London and had to wait two weeks for it. Then we also had to get special developer for it and then we went into the darkroom to try that."

Antwerp

His father encouraged him to experiment a lot in the darkroom, and eventually Vandeburg went to Amsterdam, where he attended the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and became an assistant to Erwin Olaf. He made his debut as an artist in 2008 with an exhibition at Foam.

"As a result of that exhibition, ironically, I was offered a lot of commercial work. I was a student

and had no money, so that offer beckoned. I quit the Rietveld and moved to London, got an agent in New York and started working commercially for ten years."

Vandeburg photographed a lot for campaigns for major fashion and sports brands such as Nike and Adidas. "It was going really well and I was earning well, but I felt it wasn't quite going in the direction I wanted. At one point, money was no longer a motivation. That's when I pulled the plug and started doing what I really should have done a long time ago."

Bruce Lee

Meanwhile, Vandeburg was already working on the documentary *Bruce Lee and the Outlaw*, which came out in 2018. The film shows a raw picture of homeless people and street youth living in tunnels under Bucharest. It became a success and the documentary received five stars in *The Guardian*. But Vandeburg wanted more. He moved to Antwerp and set out to experiment, fail and discover every day.

At Unseen, Vandeburg shows a photo series titled Pillow Book. "*The Pillow Book Of Cordelia Kenn* was written by Aidan Chambers. He's almost ninety now and I'm in touch with him from time to time. The other day I irritated myself a little; I felt I had lost a lot of creativity. He said: your job as an artist is to go back to the purity of your creativity as a child, only in a way that you can repeat. Children can't do that. I liked that."

"A *pillow book* is like a diary, but it goes much further. The idea is that you go into the deepest recesses of human emotions and put pure, raw things down on paper. That's why it's something you put under your pillow."

All the works in the series were photographed along the Danube River over the past decade. Vandebreg began walking there when he was working on *Bruce Lee and the Outlaw*. The Danube runs through 10 countries and sometimes forms a national border. "At that time I was thinking about my commercial work, which was starting to go in a direction that was not so positive. Walking helps a lot and a river is very surveyable. You can't actually get lost. So I started walking and it didn't stop."

Vandebreg describes the river as a handle he has seized. "You start reading about it, too. Heraclitus said, 'You can never step in the same river twice, because everything is changeable.' Those are those little magical things that come into your life at the right time. Just someone saying that everything is constantly changing. The river became more and more important and I began to get attached."

Chemicals

For him, photography does not stop at the shot. "The photograph may capture a moment, but that doesn't mean that is the memory of the moment –

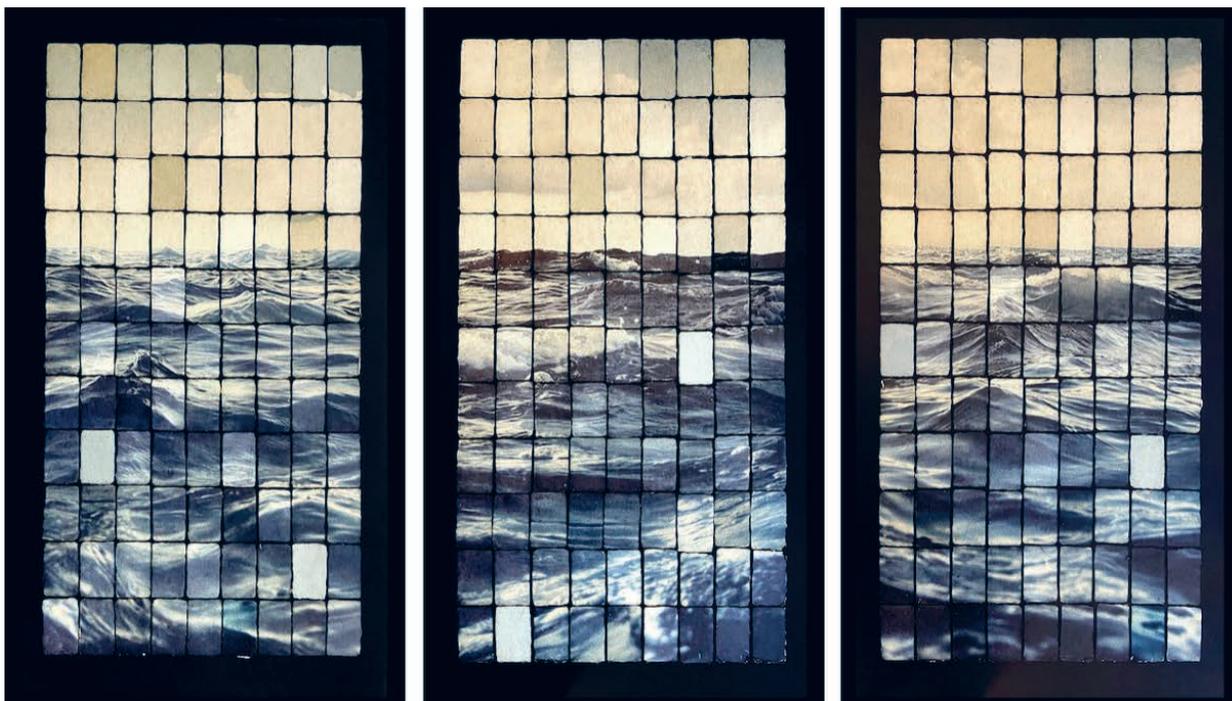
the memory can be completely different. I change the photos I've taken until the photo actually reflects the memory better."

For that method, Vandebreg prints the photos on small cards that are handmade in Japan. The result is somewhat reminiscent of a puzzle or a huge stained-glass window, where the image is crumbled into small pieces.

"I never use one shot; I create new landscapes from different shots. All the cards are different. The chemicals also react differently all the time, so sometimes they are lighter and sometimes they are darker."

So Vandebreg's photographs are full of small differences and imperfections. They are clearly the result of handwork. Remarkably, he doesn't think the making of a photograph is very important at all. "Maybe it's an unconventional thought, but I don't really believe in it anymore. All images have already been made. Still, the medium of photography remains magical. I love it when the artist has had another moment with it."

Joost Vandebreg, Pillow Book, Bildhalle, booth 34. His video installation Moment/Time with eight screens totaling 6 meters wide can be seen at Unbound.



Joost Vandebreg's "Pillow Book" series looks like a large stained-glass window, but composed of dozens of photographs of the Danube. Image: Joost Vandebreg