

Centre
de la photographie
de Mougins



Bertien

van Manen



Press kit

Bertien van Manen
Echoes of the Ordinary

4.07 –
4.10
2026

Curators
of the exhibition:

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Opening
Friday 3.07.2026
18:30

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Bertien van Manen

Echoes of the Ordinary

The photographs of Bertien van Manen (1935-2024) are neither a private diary nor a family picture book. While some of the visual codes here might evoke aspects of either genre, the photographs meet none of the prerequisites. They are not about her, or about rituals, or about events, or about staged scenes. They correspond neither to the conventions of spectacle nor to the commonplaces of photojournalism; historical and political events are absent from the center of these images. One might characterize her work as an intimate, subjective chronicle of the lives of ordinary people who, tossed about by the course of history that is written without them and that sometimes overwhelms and crushes them, try to get by, as best they can – and this is often far more heroic than one might think. A chance self-portrait shows us the photographer, a daring woman, tousled hair, sleeves rolled up: she looks proud, strong, rebellious, determined. A brief career as a model led Bertien van Manen to cross over to the other side of the lens and begin a life as a magazine photographer. And yet she quickly showed a social acuity and engagement by shooting several stories on migrant women – from Turkey, Morocco, and Yugoslavia – who had come to the Netherlands to work and to escape the determinism of their past conditions. It was in flipping through *The Americans* (1958), by Robert Frank, that Bertien van Manen had the sudden vision of the photographs she truly wanted to make and the world whose story she wanted to tell. Here was the distance and proximity in which her work would be rooted from now on. She no longer sought to illustrate the world, but to experience it, as close as possible to the people, things, and communities that fascinated her. The daughter of a Dutch coal-mine engineer, she set out for the United States in 1985, bound for Appalachia to seek out women working in the mines. These coal workers lived in small houses, or sometimes piled in trailers, mobile homes, and makeshift shacks in the woods. Bertien van Manen set her professional photography equipment aside and took up a little amateur 35 mm camera. Goodbye magazine and fashion commissions: a new space of time opened the way to an intense intimacy, without artifice, which led her to participate in the life of this community for more than thirty years, over the course of many trips. Never cynical, her images oscillate between beauty and chaos; in them, one can follow the daily lives of these families through several generations, in their hardships and their laughter. She gives shape to a subjective documentary style that she would express more fully through books than through exhibitions. She also kept, from Robert Frank's work, an insatiable thirst for journeys and encounters. "I never sleep so deeply as

Bertien van Manen

when I'm on the road, in an anonymous bed, in a strange place, where I wake up not knowing where I am, and thinking no one else knows either," she wrote in her journal. It is no accident that beds, as a furnishing element, appear repeatedly throughout her work. This is the most private space of all, where the inner world unfolds in sleep, in dreams and embracings. Bertien van Manen was one of the first to slip past the Iron Curtain and document post-Soviet life in Russia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine, through dozens of trips between 1991 and 2009. She is not a street photographer; the relationships she weaves are more intimate: she brings us inside the apartments, into the kitchens, the living rooms, and the bedrooms, in the wee hours of night or morning. "I have to like the people I photograph," she says. "I have to feel an attraction, a fascination."

This exhibition presents, for the first time in France, a profoundly feminist and committed artist. As a spectacle of ordinary and humble lives, Bertien van Manen's photography, far from the pull of sensationalism and dominant narratives, builds a remarkable documentary oeuvre carried by her empathy with each instant: the chronicles of disorder.

The exhibition is organized in partnership with the Stichting Bertien van Manen, Amsterdam, in coproduction with the Centre d'art GwinZegal, Guingamp. With the support of the Embassy of the Netherlands, Paris. This exhibition takes part of the Rencontres d'Arles program as part of the Grand Arles Express manifestation.

Exhibited Series:

I Am the Only Woman There

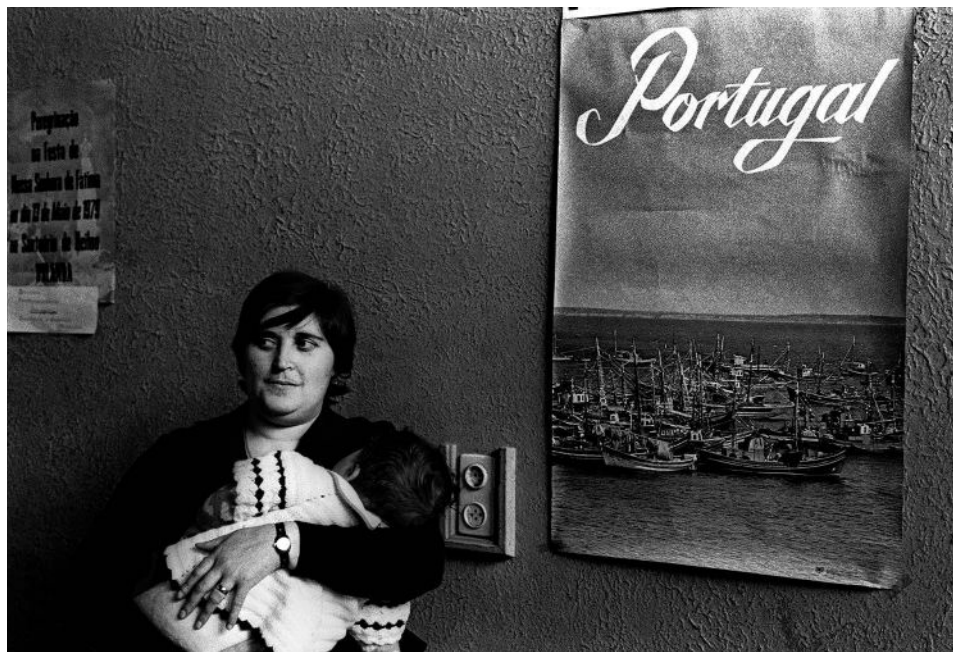
'I Am the Only Woman There' is Bertien van Manen's first long-term, self-initiated documentary project that also resulted in her first photobook in 1979, entitled 'Vrouwen te gast' ['Women as Guests'].

'No one had devoted any attention to the first generation of women migrant workers in Europe, from Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Yugoslavia, and Greece. I decided to focus on the Netherlands. No one had looked into their position on the job market or dependence on their husbands. In fact, no one even knew of their existence because you barely saw them. They stayed in their rooms and were not allowed to do much. I shined some light on them with that book and that is something I am proud of. I photographed them in their homes, at work and during celebrations. All in black and white. And I took photos at a demonstration by Turkish women migrant workers at a poultry plant in Almelo. Most of the women in the portraits I took were originally from the countryside, had followed their husbands here and suddenly sat holed up in a small back apartment three floors up. I photographed some single women, too, who had come to the Netherlands on their own to find work.

(...)

The book was published by the feminist publishing house Sara in Amsterdam. I did have a bone to pick with the Dutch

© Bertien van Manen Works
Amsterdam,
1979
Série: I Am the Only Woman There
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



Exhibited Series:

women's movement, though, because I felt they were not doing anything to raise awareness about these migrant women. I am not a very political animal but I happened to stumble across this topic and I felt deep in my soul that I needed to portrait these invisible women in my own way. The book was a success in terms of setting a number of things in motion. It had an impact. Dutch language courses started being offered. Neighbours started reaching out to the women, so that some of them became less isolated. The media took notice.¹

Dienstmaagd des heren? (Handmaiden of the Lord?)

Bertien van Manen grew up in a country where firmly structured Catholicism shaped social life as much as faith. In the Netherlands, religious affiliation went beyond personal belief: it marked childhood, guided schooling, and defined relationships. Dutch Catholicism formed a distinct world – a minority yet powerful, united against the dominant Protestantism.

© Bertien van Manen Works
Clarissen Colentinen,
1982
Series: Dienstmaagd des heren?
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



1.
Excerpts from
Bertien van Manen,
I Am the Only Woman There,
Amsterdam, Fw:Books, 2024
(new edition), p. 158-159.

Exhibited Series:

Boarding schools, teaching congregations, repeated rituals: Bertien van Manen navigated a pedagogy of structure and silence that shaped bodies, regulated movements, and instilled a subtle discipline. It was within this orderly, constraining, often repressive environment that her sharp, incisive gaze was formed.

Years later, when the photographer encounters the Carmelite convent, a self-assured, serene, and feminist perspective prevails. She turns her attention to the ordinary lives of these women, their modest behaviour, and the private sphere they maintain, held at a distance from the noise of the world. Dogma and rules fall away in front of the camera. The series, in black-and-white and small-format prints, remains entirely restrained. Women at work, members of the same group, are captured without emphasis or cynicism. The Carmelite nuns are present and absorbed in their tasks, as part of a community that protects as much as it defines them. Their simple existence, the quiet dignity of their gestures, and the ordinariness of their days shift the centre of gravity in the photographs. This is not a portrait of an institution, but – as throughout Bertien van Manen's work – a way of entering rooms, kitchens, workshops, and prayer halls, quietly encountering everyday lives.

Yorkshire, New Sharlston

Bertien's fascination with mining life led her to New Sharleston, West Yorkshire, in 1979 after a tip from a mining professor friend from Leeds. It was one of the first autonomous photo series she made. The photographs are for the most part very personal portraits of men, women, children, family members, friends or fellow villagers. Tentatively posed or casually captured during an everyday activity, mostly in their home environment or on the streets. But also in a picket line during a strike. Bertien spoke to miners and miners'wives about their lives; her photographs and the interviews appeared in an article in the magazine *Vrij Nederland* [16 February 1980].

Exhibited Series:

© Bertien van Manen Works
Sans titre
1979-1980
Series: Yorkshire, New Sharlston
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



© Bertien van Manen Works
Sans titre
1979-1980
Series: Yorkshire, New Sharlston
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



Exhibited Series:

Moonshine

Between 1980 and 1985, Bertien van Manen continued working for magazines that sent her to conflict zones, including Western Sahara and Nicaragua. It was by chance, while on assignment, that she encountered the subject of women working in the mines of the Appalachian Mountains in the United States – a theme that would become her second major personal project after her work on migrant women. The subject struck a personal chord, echoing her own childhood near coal mines where her father worked as an engineer. In 1985, she spent three weeks traveling the roads of Tennessee, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, and it was in Cumberland, Kentucky, that she had a decisive encounter with Mavis, a coal miner, and her husband Junior. They became friends, and very quickly the photographer felt at home in their trailer. She photographed the intimacy of their family life, as well as that of several other related families. Between 1985 and 1993, she travelled eight times to Appalachia, sometimes staying for up to four consecutive months, living in a small trailer next to that of Mavis and Junior. She photographed their children and met their neighbours: Billy, Junior's son, who lived nearby with his wife Sue; the Boggs family and their ten shy, red-haired children, who lived in a cabin in the woods. Further afield, she met other miners, including Dorothy in Tennessee, and Libby and Pam in West Virginia. As mining activity declined and Junior died of cancer, Bertien van Manen's visits became less frequent, yet she continued photographing them until 2013.

© Bertien van Manen Works
David on swing, Vam,
West Virginia,
1987
Series: Moonshine
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



Exhibited Series:

© Bertien van Manen Works
Helen and Camy with dog,
1987
Series: Moonshine
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



The book *Moonshine* – its title referring less to the moon than to the illegally distilled alcohol produced in Appalachia – was published in 2014, thirty-four years after the first images were made.

A Hundred Summers, a Hundred Winters and Let's Sit Down Before We Go

In the late 1980s, Bertien van Manen learned Russian and set out to meet a mining community in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. However, it was only after Glasnost and Perestroika gradually opened up the former Soviet republics that she was able to undertake, over the course of some fifteen years, an impressive series of journeys that took her to Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Odessa, Rostov, Tomsk, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Moldova, Georgia, and Siberia. It was neither the street nor major historical events that interested her, but people's lives at home, in their small apartments where the sofa turns into a bed and the kitchen table into a desk. Once again, she settled in for long periods, forming friendships in order to learn about and document the daily lives of ordinary people – far removed from the clichés of reportage and the picturesque portrayal of poverty.

Exhibited Series:

© Bertien van Manen Works
Tbilissi,
1993
Series: A Hundred Summers,
a Hundred Winters
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



© Bertien van Manen Works
Kazan, Vlada in the kitchen,
1992
Series: Let's Sit Down Before We Go
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



Exhibited Series:

© Bertien van Manen Works
Lake Baikal, Camping site,
1993
Series: Let's Sit Down Before We Go
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



© Bertien van Manen Works
Ljalja, Odessa,
1991
Series: Let's Sit Down Before We Go
Courtesy of Stichting
Bertien van Manen



Publication:**Les échos de l'ordinaire****Bertien van Manen****Authors:**

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Informations

Open

**4.07 → 30.09.2025
11:00 → 19:00
Closed on Tuesdays**

**1st.10 → 5.10.2025
13:00 → 18:00**

Admission

**Adult → 6 €
Student → 3 €
Group (10 or +) → 4 € / pers.
Guided tours → 10 € / pers.**

Free

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