

# *L'amour Noir et Blanc*



Eiffel Tower

Damien Vassart's black and white Parisian perspectives are rich in depth and beauty and are inspired by a lingering courtship with the world's most romantic city



Île de la Cité



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The city of Paris is steeped in the language of love; from its buildings to the smell of freshly baked baguettes. It's hard not to want to capture the essence of a place that whispers 'l'amour'. Black and white photographer Damien Vassart has done just that in his latest, beautifully rich series of images. He spoke to Jade Price about capturing the city of love in one of the most romantic photographic genres.

**Why did you choose to visit Paris?**

It was quite an easy decision. I came to Paris to follow my studies 10 years ago, then I just chose to stay there. I began photography three years later, in 2007. I must say, I was very lucky to live in such a magnificent city, since it offers a large amount of beautiful places and buildings to shoot.

**Why did you decide to shoot the entire series in black and white?**

Black and white has something timeless about it; generally we are not able to put a date to the shot for when it was taken. That is what inspires me about Paris, it's a timeless place. For that reason, I chose to shoot the series in monotone.

**What did you want your project to convey as a whole?**

I love to contemplate a place for hours, to impregnate myself with the atmosphere and to start meditating when the mood is propitious. When I realise a picture, which is the goal I try to achieve, I want to make the observer contemplate and meditate on the image too. I want them to feel like they were there for real, in my stead. This is true for all of my work, not just the Paris series.

**Why did you decide to shoot long exposures?**

My work is also driven by my obsession with time passing. Time has irreversible effects on our environment, and on us human beings. Long exposures allow me to incorporate that with an art that usually stands for instantaneity; seeing the buildings and monuments perfectly still against the fast-moving clouds seems to make them more resistant. Another, and more technical, reason is that cities are never deserted by people. And since I want the observer to be able to concentrate on the scenery, and to forget the usual agitation that characterises them, long exposure is the only way to make people disappear.

**What does black and white offer you that colour doesn't?**

What fascinates me the most, when I am standing in a place, is the mood and the light. It can give me very strong emotions that I want to transcribe. Black and white is the only way for me to achieve that, because it reveals the light much more than in a colour image. I also love to reduce complex sceneries into simple shapes and, again, I can perform it in a better way with black and white.

**Were there any shots that didn't work in this format?**

Not for the Paris series. I have always managed to take my shots at the right moment and at the right place, and consequently the images I got were all suitable for black and white.

**What were your favourite features in Paris?**

I must say that the River Seine borders were particularly exciting to photograph – the presence of water really >>



The Louvre



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La Samaritaine - Pont Neuf

enhances the quality of light. The mood is also more intimate, more romantic in these places, and that is an important factor for me when I shoot.

#### **Who or what inspires you?**

Almost anything can bring me inspiration. I look everywhere around me, wherever I am. Looking at the work of other photographers is also a constant supply of motivation for me. I especially love the work of Michael Kenna, Josef Hoflehner, Jean-Michel Berts, Michael Levin, Eugène Atget and many more.

#### **What kit do you use?**

I've been using the same reliable kit for the past few years, which consists of a Nikon D300 and a Sigma 10-20mm.

#### **If you were to do the project again, would you consider shooting it on film?**

I have already considered film a few times. I would say that the medium can offer a certain charm, in some ways. But, to be honest, I am not sure that this will continue to be an option in the future; how long are the manufacturers going to keep producing rolls?

Moreover – and I do not feel ashamed at all to say this – I am a digital generation photographer. I started photography with digital gear, I learned and grew my skills with digital gear, and I am happy with that. After all, the equipment we use is nothing more than a tool and all that matters is to feel happy and in harmony with it, to produce the most beautiful artworks that we can. I also realised that many photographers switched from digital to film only to follow a fashion. If I had to switch to film, I certainly wouldn't want to do it for the same reasons – I hate fashion.

#### **If you could own any piece of black and white film kit, what would it be?**

Definitely a Hasselblad 500 series with one or two Distagon lenses. This legendary camera has nothing more to prove, either on quality or reliability.

#### **What sort of post-production work did you do for this series?**

Besides the black and white conversion and local contrast enhancement work, which were almost the same on all of the pictures, some other improvements were occasionally necessary, such as removing unwanted objects or blemishes or at times some distortion corrections. All in all, I have not had to perform any strong retouching work on this series, only minor stuff.

#### **If you were to shoot the series again, how would you do it differently?**

I don't think I would do it differently. The timeless side of the series, which was important for me, works pretty well in my opinion. And moreover, people seem to like it that way, so far.

#### **Do you have any other projects on the cards?**

London is not so far from Paris... I am considering going there several times to realise some other great takes, although I don't yet know if they will be in colour or black and white. But overall, I'm thinking of planning some trips to various European cities to broaden my horizons. **[PM]**

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