

Rut Blees Luxemburg's visions of decades

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By **Catherine Croft**

Photographer Rut Blees Luxemburg is diversifying from the images for which she's best known

Commonsensual: The works of Rut Blees Luxemburg

Rut Blees
Black Dog £24.95
208pp
3/5 stars

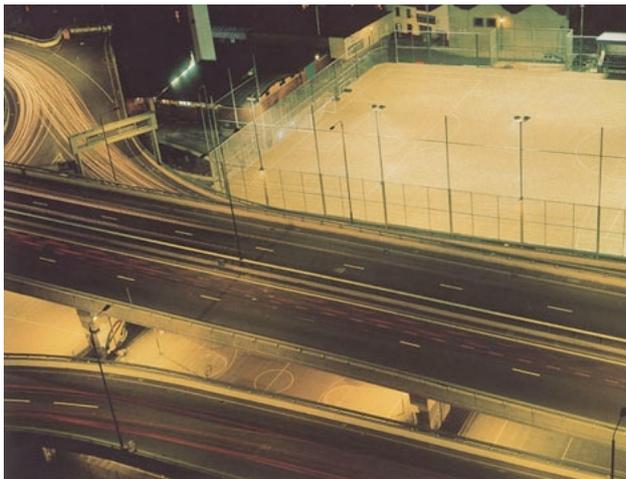
Yellow lights reflect in a dark puddle, a cracked concrete gains a luminous beauty. Simultaneously disturbing and seductive, German-born photographer Rut Blees Luxemburg's haunting and beautiful work has infiltrated our urban visual culture steadily over the past decade.

While one of her photographs provided the cover image for The Streets' debut album, another was used by Bloc Party for their second album, A Weekend in the City. An angled slice of glistening pavement entitled The Veins appeared on a London Transport poster, while a set of her images, Piccadilly's Peccadilloes, formed a public art installation in the tube station at Heathrow Terminal 4.

She has collaborated on an opera, and the design team for Channel 4's recent Red Riding trilogy also seems to have been sucked into her universe — there is no explicit acknowledgment but the influence seems undeniable.

Luxemburg has a new book out, and a small exhibition of images taken from it are at her publisher's Black Dog Gallery; another selection is at the Union Gallery.

These show a more diverse range of subject matter and mood, with large black and white images and black and white polaroids, in addition to the saturated colour images for which she is best known. She has photographed vandalised sculpture at churches in England and France, as well matter eaten away by natural forces — a porous wall carved away by the unrelenting action of wind and sea.



A Modern Project by Rut Blees Luxemburg

Mosque shows the blotched forms of skeletal concrete minarets, designed to be overclad but with a surprisingly pleasing aesthetic. They appear roughly taped together with their own very emotive poetry. Teufelsberg is German for Devil's Mountain, and the image was taken on the artificial hill in former West Berlin built by the allies from the rubble of the city, submerging a Nazi military technical college designed by Albert Speer.

For a while, this was topped by a small skiing centre. It then became a US National Security Agency listening station. Luxemburg has photographed inside the radar domes that still remain and which are being proposed as the location for a spy museum. A contrast in scale, the polaroids, each annotated with exposure details, are displayed unmatted as precise found objects.

Luxemburg studied at the London College of Printing (1990-93) and the University of Westminster (1994-96), and now lives in London, teaching at the Royal College of Art. She describes her work as an exploration of "the continuing significance of the modern project on the city" through which "its ambitions and its poetic and real failures are recast as potential".

She has expressed a particular interest in "revealing moments where history appears in dense yet coded layers", and the book groups images drawn from different past series into chapters which suggest overlapping narratives. For instance, The Pattern of the Plans juxtaposes the Teufelberg pictures with one of Rayners Lane in Harrow from the series shown at Heathrow.

"She has expressed an interest in moments where history appears in dense yet coded layers"

Creative writer Douglas Park provides a reflective commentary with its own beauty: "ethereal gaseous liquid pavements and roads/that sometimes stir, flow and gush forwards" and "particular light, a light of golden flares and darker gleaming, reflections, puddles, shadowed corners"; while Régis Durand's essay succinctly points to an "element of repressed lyricism" that defies sentiment and drama.

However without more literal explanatory text (for instance, there is no information about Teufelberg for those not in the know), the stories that seem to haunt the book remain elusive.



Towering Inferno by Rut Blees Luxemburg

Does this matter? At the book launch, Richard Sennett drew attention to the "publicness" of Luxemburg's images. Despite being devoid of people and without background information, the photographs "take people outside themselves into a world that is non-representational", Sennett says.

And they are all the more powerful for retaining their mystery and a sense of stillness that comes with the absence of narrative.

The accompanying exhibition is at Black Dog Publishing, 10a Acton Street, London WC1 until June 5.

- Orificity: Rut Blees Luxemburg is at the Union Gallery, London E2, until April 26

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