**INTERVIEW**

July 23, 2021

# VISUAL AMBIGUITIES

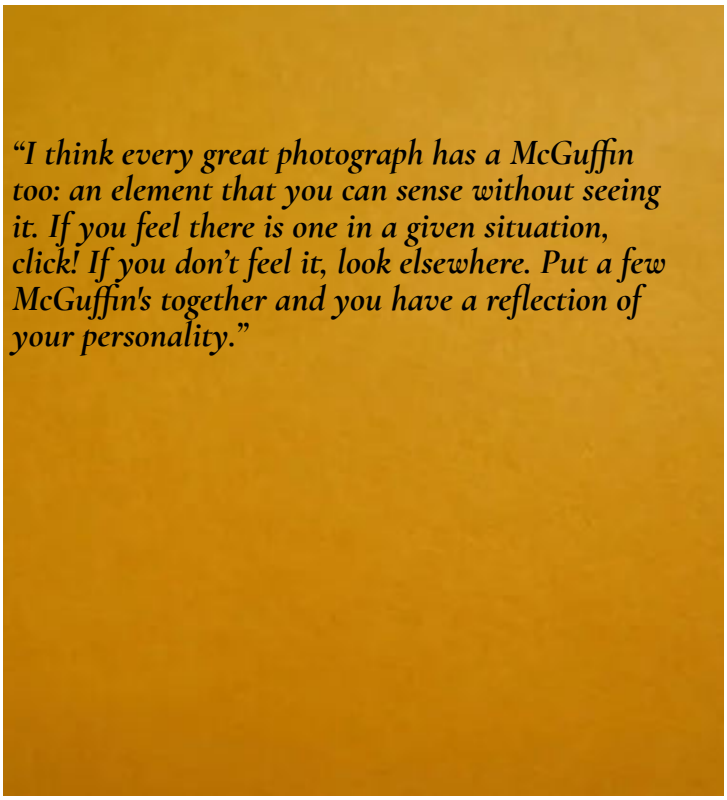
Photography by Marc Pennartz
Interview by Melanie Meggs

As a society, we often can be drawn to what is beautiful and perfect. However, Belgian street photographer Marc Pennartz has a different eye. He delights in the strange, the forgotten, the imperfect – the scenes that, on first glance, may seem meaningless. He revels in the chaos of daily life and enjoys surrendering to chance. His photographs can be mysterious and ambiguous – he captures a moment and leaves it to the viewer to interpret.

Marc was born in the Netherlands, lived in Sweden, and is now based in the Antwerp region of Belgium. He initially picked

up a camera to illustrate articles he wrote as a journalist. Over time, however, he has devoted himself to his own interpretation of street photography. He uses a simple and lightweight digital camera to take shots in public spaces, often featuring people but rarely making them the focus of the photograph.

The images Marc produces tend to lean towards the abstract. He wants to evoke an emotion but leaves it all up to the viewer's imagination. He often lectures and conducts workshops on street photography, sharing his distinct vision with [redacted]. Marc is a passionate photographer who believes that the best photographs are those that are not fully understood and instead require examination and contemplation. For him, the beauty lies in the unknown.



*"I think every great photograph has a McGuffin too: an element that you can sense without seeing it. If you feel there is one in a given situation, click! If you don't feel it, look elsewhere. Put a few McGuffin's together and you have a reflection of your personality."*

# IN CONVERSATION WITH MARC PENNARTZ

**THE PICTORIAL LIST: Marc please tell us about yourself. How did you become interested in photography?**

*MARC PENNARTZ: I was born in the Netherlands, spent some time in Sweden and now live in Belgium. I'm a photographer, copywriter, journalist, website creator, content manager, writer of fiction and nonfiction, musician, blogger and also give street photography workshops when the coronavirus allows.*

*My father was a hobby photographer and my first camera was a Kodak Instamatic which I got in my early teens from my older brother. I immediately liked it but it wasn't until I worked as a magazine editor before photography became more important. When living in Sweden I never left home without a*

*point and shoot, taking snapshots in the forest, and about five years ago, street photography came into my life.*

**TPL: Your work has been best described as 'glimpses' of reality. Tiny fragments of what is around us. Artists often build up and experiment towards a method of working. Has your imagery become more abstract over time, or did you know exactly what you wanted from the beginning? What has been the inspiration for your street photography?**

*MP: In my street photography, I initially took the traditional approach, trying to document human life in the city, but I quickly felt something lacking. I didn't feel any magic in randomly taking pics of people on the street. Duane Michals once said that photos shouldn't tell you something you already know, and I agree. So gradually I began to pay more attention to architectural elements, colors, reflections, trash and lots of dirty windows, to make my images more interesting and add a little bit of mystery or wonder.*

*Do you know what a McGuffin is?*

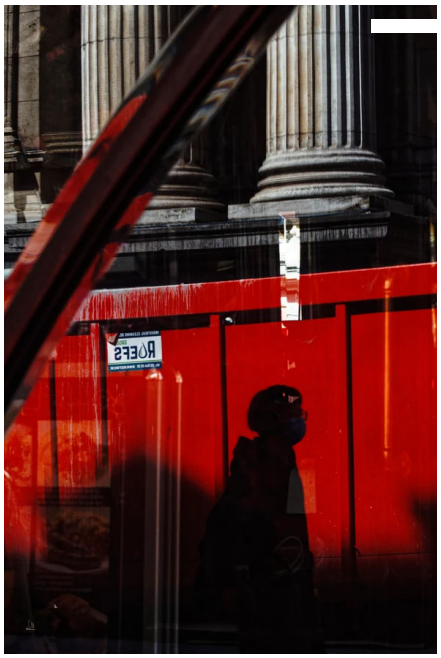
*Alfred Hitchcock used the term for a device or driving force for a movie that more often than not is invisible. I think every great photograph has a McGuffin too: an element that you can sense without seeing it. If you feel there is one in a given situation, click! If you don't feel it, look elsewhere. Put a few McGuffins together and you have a reflection of your personality.*

**TPL: Talk to us about your stunning virtual 3D exhibition and book "Searching For Quiet". You also stated, "I could have jumped in front of a train, but went out on the street instead and frantically started shooting in a desire for peace and quiet. I have not yet returned from that trip." Could you explain to us what you mean by this?**

*MP: Street photography came into my life at a time when I was confronted with a terrible series of setbacks in my personal life. Going out on the streets enabled me to forget about all the misery. I guess making art, in whatever form, always is a way of coping with the darker side of life. Call it self-therapy or escapism. You create your own little universe in which you are in control, and nothing from the real world can interfere without your involvement. In a way, artists are people who love to play God* 😊

*The exhibition gave me the chance to see if my pictures of scratches, broken glass, graffiti, containers, torn plastic and lonely people would work in the sterile environment of an art gallery, be it a virtual one. It's funny how photos feel different when you change the context. Normally, when I look at one of my street photos, I still hear the traffic or smell the diesel from a passing van, but when presented on a clean white wall and*

*with civilized piano music, it suddenly becomes an almost pastoral thing. Weird.*



**TPL: Do you think this is the way of the future having 3D virtual exhibitions? Some prefer them, as it gives them the opportunity to be able to reach that global audience. What are your thoughts? What was it like curating your own exhibition?**

*MP: I think virtual exhibitions are more like alternatives for slideshows and online portfolios, rather than a replacement for real exhibitions. The problem is that in art, size matters. People will always want to see the real thing at a proper size. It's also fair to say that images that are rich in detail simply work better when they're big. Besides, exhibitions are also social gatherings that many of us don't want to give up. Nevertheless, 3D versions make a valuable addition and I've reached people that otherwise would not have seen my work.*

*Choosing photos is of course never easy, especially if you first go through all your work, and then narrow it down to 40. I didn't do that. Instead I chose to pick the ones that just came to my mind, based on the idea that you will always remember what's really good. That way I got 60 or 70, and then I got down to 40 and turned it into a consistent collection.*

**TPL: Do you have any favourite artists or photographers you would like to share with us, and the reason for their significance?**

*MP: Just to name a few…Guy Bourdin for his provocative style*

*and twisted humour. Ernst Haas for his incredible versatility. Sarah Moon for her otherworldly aesthetic. André Kertész for his humanity, Harry Gruyaert for his use of color, Edward Steichen for his romantic imagery. People keep telling me they see traces of Saul Leiter in my more abstract street work. He was a bit of an introverted outsider, and I guess, the same applies to me. I believe that your personality inevitably shines through in your choice of subjects and the way you approach them.*

**TPL: Do you have a favourite place to photograph?**

*MP: I almost exclusively shoot in Antwerp and Brussels, partly because they're so close to where I live, and partly because I like the visual qualities of the urban chaos of Belgian cities. I love things that are "not right" and a bit ugly. However, if I would still live in a rural area, I would probably be a landscape photographer. Essentially, photography is not about trees or houses, animals or people, but about conveying emotion through shapes, contrasts, colors. You can find anything of that within few square kilometres around your home, wherever you are.*

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**TPL: When you take pictures, do you usually have a concept in mind of what you want to shoot, or do you let the images just "come to you", or is it both?**

*MP: I very much rely on instinct. Concepts sometimes emerge from the work I have done, instead of the other way round, and then I sometimes use them to build upon. Normally, I leave much to chance and what happens to meet my eye. When I walk in the city, I focus on light, shadow, textures, structures, glass or color. When I see something interesting, I compose the image and then often wait to incorporate some human element. A hand, shade or the back of a head is enough to add life and a sense of proportion. But people are not a must. It really depends on the situation.*

**TPL: You said that "brands don't shoot, eyes do!" Does the equipment you use help you in achieving your vision in your photography? Do you have a preferred lens/focal length?**

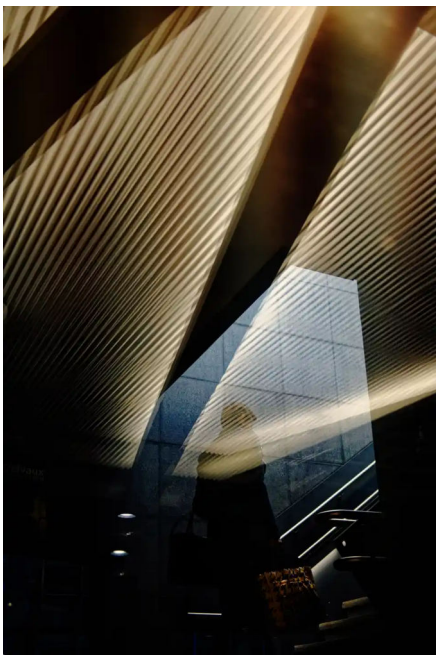
*MP: Many websites, youtubers and writers put a lot of emphasis on gear and settings. As a result, they create the idea that fancy cameras and certain settings make good pictures, but that's not true. It all depends on who operates the tool. Michael Kenna made awesome work with a 50-dollar plastic Holga, André Kertész created magic with a Polaroid, and there are so many great images that are unsharp, or underexposed or overexposed according to the unwritten rules of photography. This is art. There's no beauty in a histogram.*

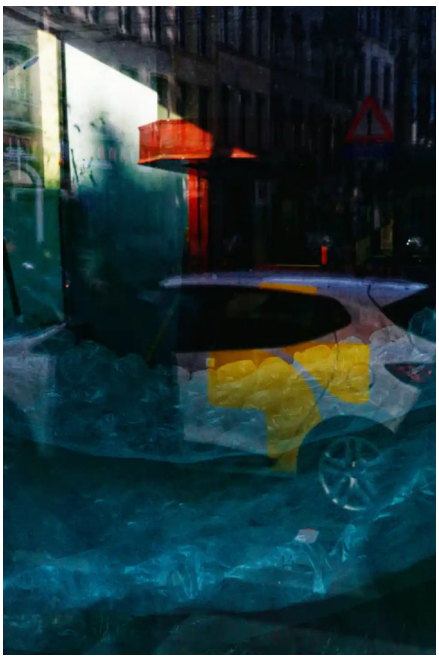
*The last few years I have been using two mirrorless cameras and a few prime lenses. I mainly shoot with a 50mm full frame for regular street photos and a 112mm for more abstract work. They are all budget models of different brands, yet fast and sharp enough for my needs. When I want some special effects, I play with my shutter speed or try double exposure. Or I put*

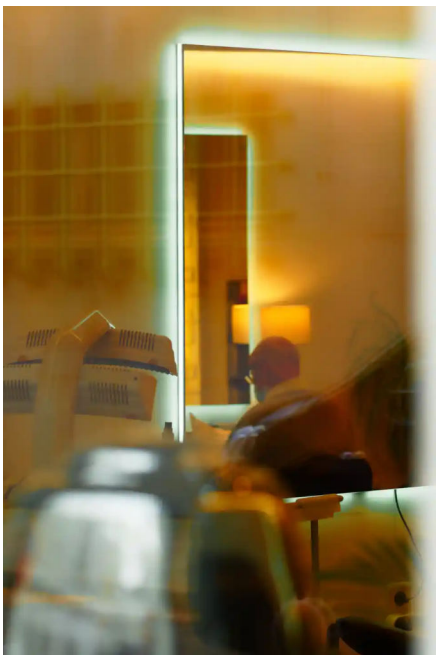
*some olive oil on a UV filter, move the camera intentionally or shoot through plastic foil. It's way more fun to find such solutions than to focus on new gear.*

**TPL: What are some of your goals as an artist or photographer? Where do you hope to see yourself in five years?**

*MP: Toughest question of the day. I never think in terms of career or goals, but as long as there's still a McGuffin in my work, I'll be good. I also have some wild, secret dreams of exhibitions in unusual places, but I'm pretty sure they will remain a secret forever.*







**TPL: Are there any special projects you are currently working on that you would like to let everyone know about?**

*MP: Recently I started doing black & white photography again, to create dark and moody work with a slightly nostalgic feel. It also includes landscapes and nature. Feels like there's potential there. I'm not quitting color photography though, nor will I quit street photography. I'm just searching for quiet with a broader horizon.*

**TPL: When I am not out photographing, I (like to)...**

*MP: Edit?*