

G rard Bertrand

G rard Bertrand's work brims with rich, intellectual references. Writers, philosophers, artists, jazz musicians, and film directors are all gathered together in his digital collages. It's as if these meticulous sepia photographs are a visual manifestation of what he imagines would be the ideal dinner party, bringing together the cultural luminaries whom he most admires.

When I arrive at his flat with adjoined atelier in Anjou, one of France's wine-growing regions, the affable and soft-spoken Bertrand is dressed in black from head-to-toe, with a discreet pair of glasses framing his eyes. As he shows me his various portfolios, it's evident that his artistic journey has been a colourful one. He enrolled at the Beaux-Arts in Angers in 1980 to study engraving, nurturing an interest in assembling figures such as Max Ernst and Roland Topor in fanciful situations.

One of his exquisite engravings depicts Vassili Kandinsky painting an abstract picture of his model, a giant fish, in his atelier. Years later, Bertrand made a computer scan of this engraving as well as one of a photograph of Kafka, for his most recent series entitled "The Album of Mr K".

Eager to extend his scope after his Beaux-Arts years, Bertrand at first helped artists with how they observed painting techniques in their own studios. This led to an approach that focused on producing watercolours and oil paintings that incorporated photographic portraits – of a wide range of subjects ranging from Kafka to family members. "The Adventures of Mr K" (1998-2000) features acrylic paintings blending collages of images of Kafka, projected photographs, and inky traces of removed photocopies. Meanwhile, his "The Spider in the Boiler" series (1998-2001) is comprised of copper water-colour collages.

Once Bertrand felt that he had mastered painted collages, he decided to experiment further. This time he turned his hand to digital collages. It is the possibility of achieving a seamless collage with Photoshop that motivates him. "After doing the paper collages, I've now arrived at a point where I can produce something that can be real," he explains.



Having retired from teaching French literature two years ago, Bertrand can now devote plenty of time to his passion. "I finally have the time to realise a complete project. I'm doing what I should have been doing all my life, even if I enjoyed what I was doing previously as well".

"The Album of Mr K.", which features 16 images, is like a personal, photographic rendition of Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days* as Bertrand takes Kafka from his native Prague to the moon, with stopovers in Anjou, London, Paris, the US, and other destinations en route.

He began by doing a substantial amount of research in books and magazines to find the right characters and backgrounds. Bertrand then produced the images by scanning photos that he had carefully cut

out of these books and magazines. He prefers this method to downloading images from the Internet since these cut-out photos are invariably of a higher quality. His photos of Kafka are taken from a bibliography. "There are only some 50 photos of Kafka in the world", he notes, with some affection. Bertrand works a bit like a film director by creating a *mise-en-sc ne* in which he assembles various figures in fictitious settings. The next step involved retouching the different elements, so they ended up sharing the same colours, contrasts, and lighting. This takes some two to three weeks to perfect and requires somewhere between 30 to 50 test printouts before Bertrand is satisfied with the result.

"It's about reuniting in a single frame people who have never met each other, who could never have met each other, since they were not living in the same eras or the same countries, but had the same spirit, and the same creative genius." He explains. "They're artificial constructions. It's like a surrealist's mind, meeting people who actually share no common relationship. They're cultural friendships. They're people who I like and I like finding them put together. It's true that my work is a very intellectual game".

The images dazzle with intrigue, while belying the complicated production process. One of the trickiest to orchestrate was "Mr K. On The Moon", which depicts Thelonious Monk playing the piano and Charlie Parker playing saxophone, while the entranced Kafka gazes off into space. The idea was inspired by Frank Sinatra's "Fly Me To The Moon". "The photograph of Kafka was very contrasted, because it was taken before 1920," he explains. "The photo of Thelonious Monk was on [an album cover], so it was studio lighting. The one of Charlie Parker came from a book that I had, while the colour photo of the moon came from an old advert that I had to

rework considerably on Photoshop with filters. So they were very unequal". The challenge was making the light emanate from the same direction, so the image would be harmonious. "All too often in surrealist collages you can practically see the cut of the scissors and the work," Bertrand adds.

As with several of the other images, the caption – "When the Monk and the Bird started singing 'Fly Me To The Moon', Kafka 'the Jackdaw' also took flight" – contains a humorous pun. The word "kafka" translates into French as "le choucas", or jackdaw, the idea being that Mr K. was swept away by the beautiful music. "As Charlie Parker's nickname was 'Bird', I thought it all came together quite well," Bertrand quips with a laugh.

There's often a twist to Bertrand's digital images. "Mr K. in America", which is based on Kafka's unfinished novel *America* about the young innocent Karl Rossman who is banished to America by his father, shows Mr K. standing on an umpire's chair scanning the crowd of sunbathers for young protagonist. Then there are the early-1900s skyscrapers that immigrants arriving in New York's harbour would have seen upon their arrival in New York, along with the debris of the collapsed Twin Towers, a Japanese swimming pool resembling a chalked athletic field, and Japanese bridges bearing – bizarrely enough – American flags.

Similarly, "Mr K. and Gregor" pays tribute to "Metamorphosis", Kafka's short story about Gregor Samsa who awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a giant insect. Bertrand made a cameo appearance here by adding his face and hands to the body of the cockroach lying on the bed. There's a baby cockroach in a cot, and a happy-looking K. surveying the scene. The caption beseeches Ottla – Kafka's beloved sister – to accommodate Gregor Samsa's new family. "I had fun with this because it reminded me of Alfred Hitchcock's cameos".

Another work alludes to Kafka's personal life, it portrays Mr K. on the streets of Anjou, with a photo of his girlfriend, Milena, on the wall of a building, implying that he was thinking about her during his trip. Other images also directly recall details from Kafka's life, such as one of him reclining on a sofa in Sigmund Freud's original cabinet, his body resting on his mountain of newspapers, with faces of his father staring down at him. The photo of Freud taken after the First World War provided the raw material. Bertrand introduced the telephone, placing it on Freud's desk, and put a framed multiple-photo of Kafka's father, Hermann, who Kafka did not get on with, above the sofa. "Kafka knew Freud's work", Bertrand notes. "Even if Freud was a scientist and Kafka was a literary man, they shared the same level

of depth and crossed each other's path in the same direction".

Bertrand also chose to insert K. – who is always cast as the outsider or onlooker – in well-known works of art. We see him standing on the edge of the terrace in Edward Hopper's painting "People in the Sun" (1960), with the caption making it clear that although he had been invited, K. had the disagreeable sensation of not being welcome in the Hopper home. Similarly, we also see Mr K. visiting Gérard Garouste's installation "Ellipse" at Fondation Cartier in Paris, 2001, which featured a huge, disturbing painting of mutants. "I thought it corresponded well with Kafka's tormented world. The environment seems nightmarish", Bertrand observes.

But the photograph that Bertrand regards as the most crucial is the one of Mr K. naively asking a policeman for directions in Beaune-la-Rolande, France. Dominating the background is a Nazi concentration camp – the fact that these camps existed is still an embarrassment to the French today. The image featured in Alain Resnais' documentary *Night and Fog* (1955), but was censored out of the final cut. "When I did this series I wanted to include this photo and couldn't find it on the Internet. Two months after I had finished my series, and just before my exhibition, I went to the FNAC in Les Halles [a shopping centre in





the centre of Paris] and found the photo in a book on the Nazi occupation of France," Bertrand explains. Mr K.'s enquiry has a double significance. Kafka's family was exterminated during the Second World War, and it's almost as if Kafka, who died in 1924, had come back to inquire about the whereabouts of his Jewish relatives.

Other film references crop up such as in the image that recalls Jacques Tati's *Play Time*. It shows countless office cubicles with posters of Mr K. on the walls, and many men – all versions of Tati's character Mr Hulot – who appear in the aisles, bumping into each other, smoking a pipe and carrying an umbrella. The image also recalls the unhappy years Kafka spent working for an insurance company and the image seems to imply that his memory continued to pervade the premises after his departure.

But I wondered if Bertrand was at all concerned about the copyrights of these appropriated images? "No, I'm of the opinion that it's just a starting-point, that they're assembled with so many other things that you can't recognise the original photo. For Garouste I asked for authorisation, but he didn't reply. I also asked permission from Julien Gracq [a French author], but he didn't reply either. But he's 91 now."

Although Bertrand produced his sepia photos in an A3 format for his private exhibition last year, he is considering using black-and-white next time to see what kind of contrasting result this might offer. In reference to questions about how printing has had an impact on colour reproduction, he notes: "To begin with they were in sepia and then they turned slightly green. It wasn't bad. It gives a different effect. I like chance in photography and art because it's interesting".

Bertrand's future projects include producing a series similar to "The Album of Mr K.", this time using Marcel Proust as the hero. "It will be the same sort of work and perhaps Mr K. will make an appearance". If his Proust series is anything like this one, it will be a delight to behold.

TEXT BY: ANNA SANSON

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I. Long after he had left, Tati Assicurazioni kept K.'s memory alive.

II. When the Monk and the Bird started singing "Flying Me to the Moon, (Kafka" the Jackdaw") also took flight.

III. K. was able to persuade Ottla that, in spite of her cramped legs, she owed it to herself accommodate Gregor samsa and his new family.

IV. On Sundays, K. and his brothers loved to linger in front of number 33, Gold Street.

V. Invited to lie on the couch, K. refused to give up his diaries and kept his mouth shut.

VI. Even when he was travelling abroad, the memory of Milena pursued K.

VII. Even when she used the sewing machine, the boss K. was never jealous of Father Jules.

VIII. Eager to discover the World, K. joined the High Hat club, only to resign shortly thereafter

IX. At Beaune-la-Rolande, K. innocently asked a policeman for directions.

X. Monsieur K. only five years old when he saw Jorge Luis, Andrea, Julian and George's with the cordpeddlers

XI. The old castle often loomed in K's dream

XII. One evening in the streets of the old town, K. meets the President who was singing a dawn serenade to his Lady friend.