

ART



"THE FALCON'S HIDING PLACE, DUBAI, 2009"



"DARTH VADER, PARIS, 2005"

An Earth Where the Droids Feel at Home

By DANA JENNINGS

THE images simmering in the French photographer Cédric Delsaux's "Dark Lens" series are an unsettling confluence of hyper-real cityscapes, a post-postmodern sense of humor . . . and characters from "Star Wars."

There's Darth Vader, in his dark and terrible glory, stalking Paris and Dubai; Jabba the Hutt lurking in some Parisian ruin; and the Millennium Falcon rocked by a sandstorm above Dubai. One of the many questions raised by these bewitching photographs is this: George Lucas's science-fiction fantasy long ago colonized our cultural imagination, so why not our actual physical world?

But Mr. Delsaux swears that "Dark Lens" wasn't born to pay homage to R2-D2, Luke Skywalker and their buddies. "My first intention wasn't to produce a series on 'Star Wars,' but to photograph locations that are the makeup of our modernity: parking lots, peripheral zones, wastelands, forgotten places, of both beauty and ugliness, common and mad," Mr. Delsaux said by e-mail. "Nevertheless, something was missing, my images were flat, déjà vu. I then had the idea to add these sci-fi characters, with the immediate effect of making my primal sensations stand out, the fantastical nature of the characters invading the whole frame, both universes harmoniously coming together."

Much of Mr. Delsaux's "Star Wars" work has been collected in "Cédric Delsaux: Dark Lens," just published by Éditions Xavier Barral of Paris and distributed in the United States by D.A.P. The photographs are also scheduled to be shown next year in the Netherlands, Russia, Hong Kong and France; they also can be seen on Mr. Delsaux's Web site, cedricdelsaux.com.

The "Dark Lens" series has been well received by critics, and the first part, set in Paris, received a French photography award, a Bourse du Talent, in 2005. "Star Wars" fans too have reacted positively, including the movies' No. 1 fan, Mr. Lucas himself. "One of the most unique and intriguing interpretations that I have seen is in the work of Cédric Delsaux, who has cleverly integrated 'Star Wars' characters and vehicles into stark urban, in-



"THE BUICK, DUBAI, 2009"

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CÉDRIC DELSAUX/3D DROIDS: PIERRICK GUENNEUGUES



"THREE AT-ATS, LILLE & SURROUNDING WASTELANDS, 2007"



"TUSKEN RAIDER, LILLE & SURROUNDING WASTELANDS, 2011"



"C-3PO AND THE WHITE VISA, PARIS, 2005"

dustrial — but unmistakably earthbound — environments," Mr. Lucas writes in a brief introduction to the "Dark Lens" book.

One crucial point these photos make is how little meaning the words "real" and "virtual" own these days. As unexpected as Mr. Delsaux's digitally enhanced photos are, it (almost) feels natural to see a probe droid going about its business on a snowy and deserted road in Chernobyl, or a droid army poised outside gleaming Dubai, which itself rises from the desert like some Hollywood dream. And yet another paradox: a purposely ultra-retro science fiction franchise catches up with the present to become in "Dark Lens," of all things, the future — even as its creator is still smitten with his childhood past.

"I still remember how blown away I was by its visual power," Mr. Delsaux wrote of "Star Wars." "But more important was the feeling of the absolute freedom, creative extravagance even, hundreds of ships, creatures, parallel worlds, a complete cosmogony."

Referring to "Dark Lens" Mr. Delsaux wrote: "I felt the 'Star Wars' characters were allowing me to render the reality of our world in more ways than any so-called objective shot ever could. Expressing reality through fiction could actually be my photographic credo."

Mr. Delsaux, who is 37, studied literature and cinema in Paris before turning to photography. His other series include "1784," fantasies of a past that never was and whose images ooze fairy-tale perversity, and "Here to



"GENERAL GRIEVOUS, LILLE & SURROUNDING WASTELANDS, 2007"

Stay," traditional photography with subjects like factories and ruins. He is also a commercial photographer — Volkswagen, Nissan — and he cites among his influences the filmmaker David Lynch and the photographers William Eggleston and Stephen Shore.

On his working methods for "Dark Lens" he wrote: "The process is always the same, although the modus operandi can differ. Finding a location filled with real poetic potential is essential. Once I have the location, I pick a figurine or model (sometimes toys) and shoot it in my studio with the correct light, angle, etc., to be later added to the chosen background."

The most uncanny images in "Dark Lens" evoke the essayist Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg's observation that "fantasy is more powerful than reality, because it answers more adequately to the infinite demands of the spirit."

One of the most charming and persuasive images in "Lens" is "The Buick, Dubai, 2009": A gang of battle droids, bused after a hard day in the sun and heat, are hanging out around a vintage dust-encrusted Buick, maybe looking to pound a can of oil or two. It almost seems as if you can hear "Star Wars" cantina music burbling from just around the corner.

Of his reaction to seeing "Star Wars" as a child Mr. Delsaux wrote, "Everything seemed possible," because it was "an open door onto the unknown." But when asked whether more "Star Wars" photos were in the offing, he responded: "I have left 'Dark Lens' for new horizons . . . always dark . . . it's second nature."