

ATELIER

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STEPHAN VANFLETEREN

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TEXT

Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer

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Old Light

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One of the earliest artists we know by name is Pheidias, son of Charmides, from Athens. He is the creator of the Parthenon Sculptures on the Acropolis. For centuries, the reliefs he sculpted for the metopes and the frieze were regarded as the sparkling white pinnacle of the grand bareness and powerful simplicity that men spoke of, in tones of awe, as Classical and held up to humankind as an unattainable example until, around the middle of the 19th century, a disconcerting discovery was made. Traces of paint were found on the white marble which, after the careful research of similar traces of paint on comparable Ancient Greek sculptures, led to the highly uncomfortable but inescapable conclusion that the avidly admired and widely imitated muteness of the white reliefs was, in actual fact, the undercoat for exuberant and brightly painted decorations. The assumption of virginity of the unassailable white classicism of Winkelmann and Canova turns out to be what is left after a colourful carnival of raucous religiosity is washed away by time. The Neoclassical painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema was among the first who dared to give this rediscovered kaleidoscope pride of place in his wet dream of the past. In his painting *Pheidias and the Frieze of the Parthenon* (1868), he shows Pheidias presenting his shockingly polychrome creation to the Athenian elite.

The finds of colour on Pheidias' sculptures invite us to enter a different frame of mind. We may indeed wonder why the reliefs were painted. But a more interesting question is why they went to all the trouble to provide the paintings with a relief underground. These images could have been realised much more quickly and at considerably lower cost by applying the paint to a flat surface. Instead of asking ourselves why the paintbrush was used in the creation of sculptures, we should ask ourselves why people worked up a sweat chiselling and drilling the hard rock to underpin a painting. To ask the question is to answer it. The relief adds shadows to the painting; not the static, painterly hues of darkness that pretend to be shadows, but living shadows that will creep across the painting measuring the changing light of the hours and the seasons. Pheidias, one of the first artists we know by name, was an artist of light.

It could be used as a definition of photography: the art of light. Photons react with the sensitive plate and manifest themselves as matter. The brevity of the shutter speed, which is measured in fractions of a second, solidifies into a tangible reproduction of the light as it is cast in the moment. It has all been said before and by many. “Wherever there is light, one can photograph,” so goes Alfred Stieglitz’s pithy summary. John Berger called light and time the two primary raw materials of photography. “Light makes photography,” George Eastman said, “Embrace light. Admire it. Love it. But above all, know light. Know it for all you are worth, and you will know the key to photography.”

This book, so appropriately entitled *Atelier* as it only features atelier photography, offers an overview of the intensive artistic research the much-celebrated Belgian photographer Stephan Vanfleteren has been carrying out in the daylight atelier of his home over the past twelve years. This book tells a story about light. Although all the photographs in the world are about light, they are rarely as clearly and emphatically about light as these atelier photographs, which sometimes have no other subject than the light. Every time a human, animal or object is captured in the frame, the apparent subject of the photograph is actually just a focal point for the incoming light. Almost all the photographs in the world contain too much, making them as meaningless as reality. The reality of the everyday is made up of distractions, and photos that try to capture a snapshot of that reality in fact replicate the façade of meaninglessness that we mistake for reality. Distraction is blind. This photographic storybook about light is the result of a twelve-year quest for the silent truth that is hidden from view by the chattering reality.

“Photography is a means by which we learn to see the ordinary,” said David Bailey. Dorothea Lange put it even better, “The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.” Stephan Vanfleteren’s photographs collected here in this book go one step further. They teach us to see reality by accurately reconstructing reality from light, shaped and sculpted with concentration and precision. All the distractions are eliminated to create space for the silence. If we listen carefully, we can hear the light softly singing.

Vanfleteren himself always says “old light” when he wants to describe the light that takes possession of his atelier on a cloudy day. “I call it old because, unlike the artificial light of a flash, it comes from the Sun and has already been on its way for 500 seconds. Due to refracting and bending while it travels, the light is ‘tired’ when it reaches my atelier. And then the light was also seen and recorded by the Old Masters,” he tells me. “It’s the same light that once entered artists’ studios in Italy, Holland or Spain. Centuries later, that light is still spellbinding.”

“The more pictures you see, the better you are as a photographer,” Robert Mapplethorpe said. Vanfleteren’s love for the old light is a sign of his deep knowledge of tradition. He is engaging in conversation with the masters of times gone by. Each of the photographs you’ll see in this book is a reflection of truths found in the past and an answer to questions that have been pondered for centuries. Truth manifests itself as control over form. “Composition is the strongest way of seeing,” dixit Edward Weston. By means of total control over the composition of his light sculptures, Vanfleteren continues on the expedition launched centuries ago by the greatest painters.

If you walk through Veurne market on a Saturday afternoon and stick a furry microphone under the nose of random passers-by to ask their opinion on the nature of photography, the overwhelming majority of those interviewed will answer that a photograph is a representation of reality, that freezes a fleeting moment and registers it for eternity. It is impossible to imagine a more definitive rebuttal of this generally held opinion than this book’s collection of studio photographs by Vanfleteren. Nothing could be further removed from the frozen spontaneity of a snapshot of a fleeting moment than these thoughtfully composed – right down to the last detail – mirrors of the old light of the Old Masters.

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I have had the honour of being portrayed by Stephan Vanfleteren more than once. For him I stood amongst tree roots in Leiden and in front of a door with peeling paint in Genoa. Once I was welcomed to his studio in Veurne, opposite the Sint-Niklaaskerk. This was on Christmas Day in 2015, when I happened to be in the area because I was scheduled to perform at the Koksijde Casino Cultural Centre in the Behoud de Begeerte programme “The Pursuit of Happiness” that evening. My partner Stella accompanied me. For months she had been looking forward to seeing me perform, and especially to seeing the famous photographer, whose work she admired, at work.

“My house started life as a ‘sterfhuyse’ (death house),” Stephan told us, “and my atelier has been in turns a printing firm, a bank building and a sports hall. It faces south, while actually artists’ studios tend to be north-facing for good reason. So it was never intended as a studio. In the sunlight of summer it’s virtually useless. But in the other seasons I experience the southern orientation as a gift because the light is alive, it dances, surprises me and challenges me. In my atelier I see how, with every hour, the year is passing. The light shifts continuously. Looking at

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A photograph of a person with long, dark, wavy hair lying face down on a grey, textured surface. The person's back is to the camera, and their head is resting on the surface. The lighting is soft, highlighting the contours of the back and the texture of the hair. The background is a dark, solid color.

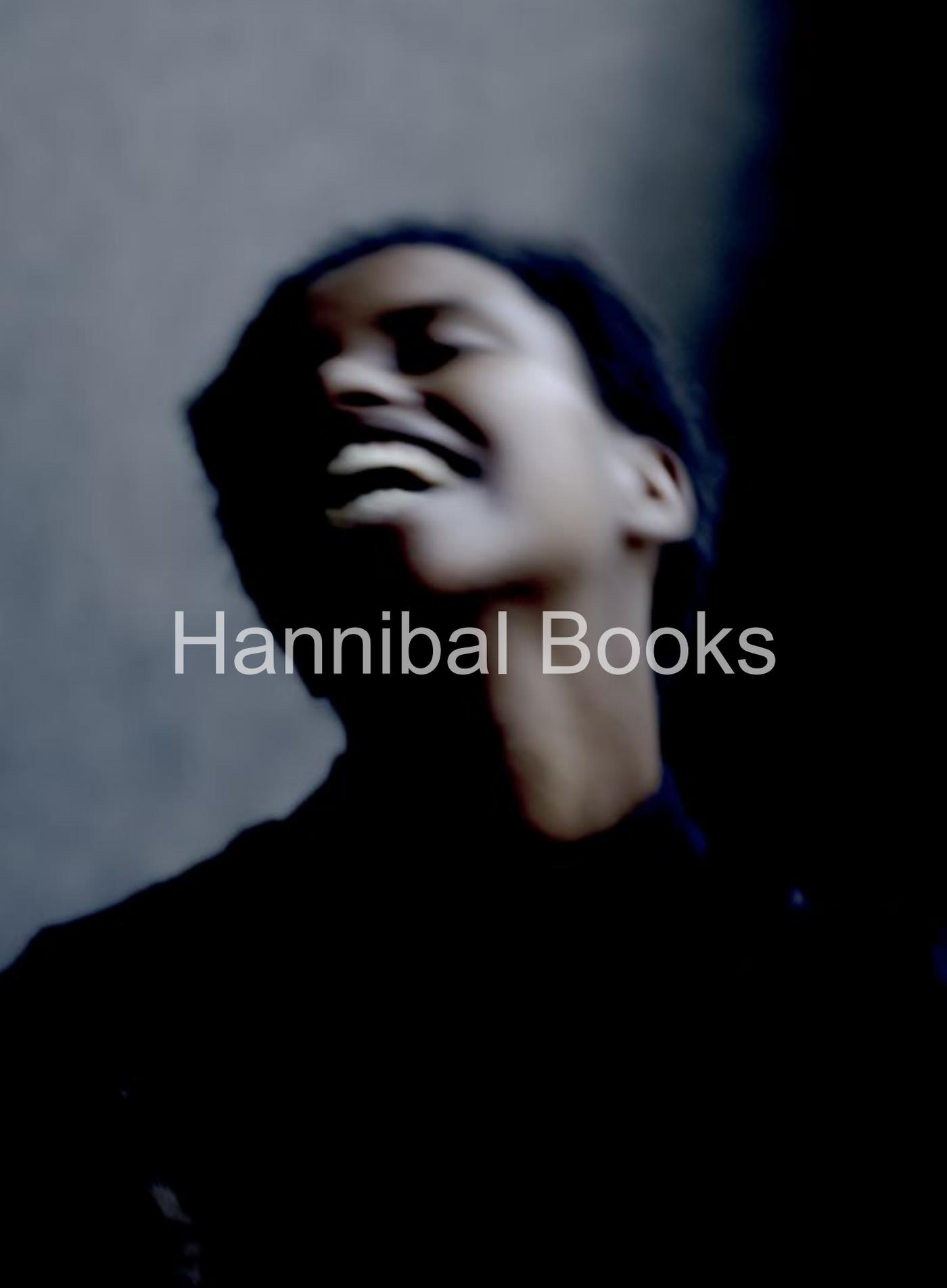
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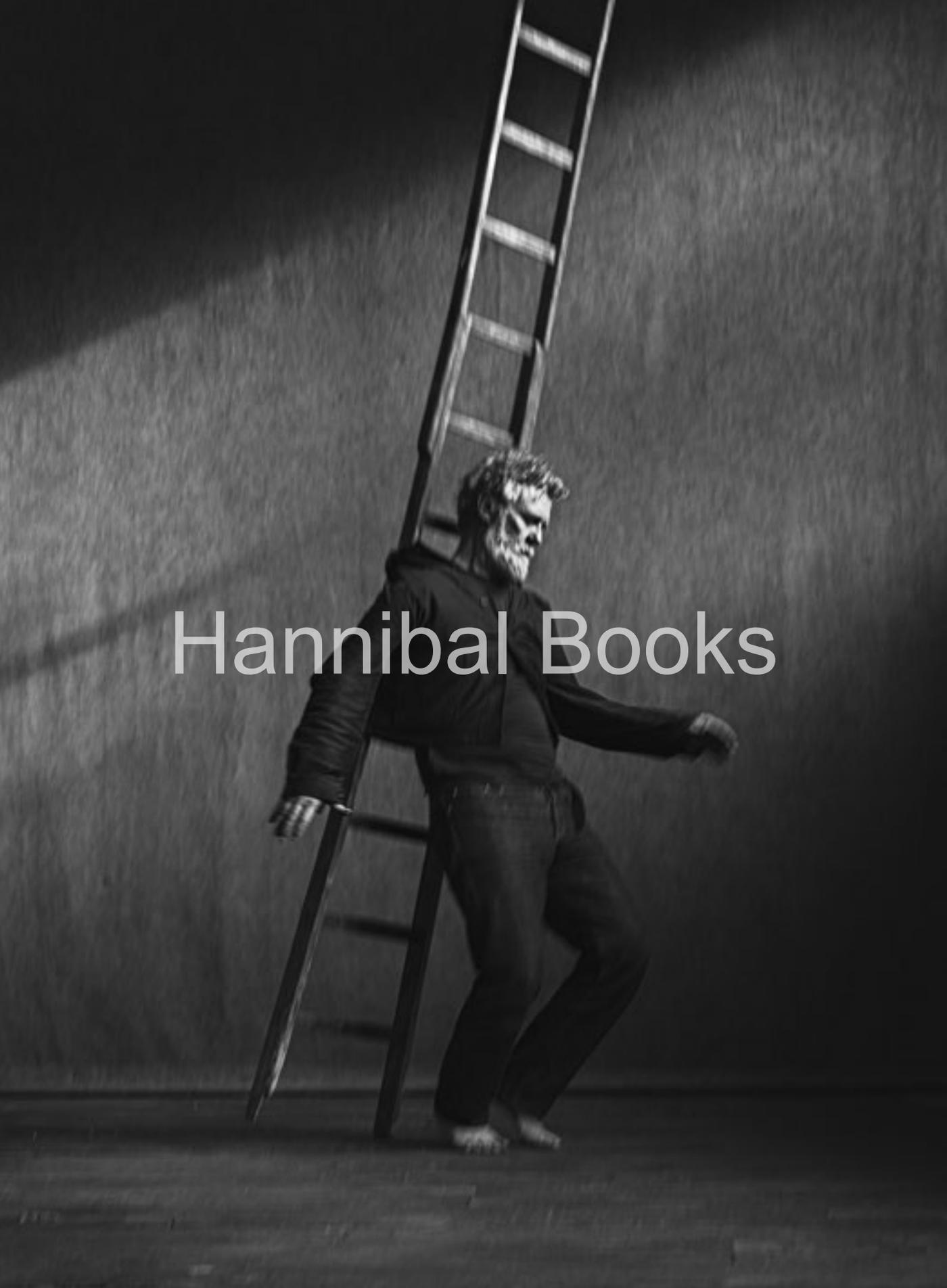
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A blurred, low-angle photograph of a person's face looking upwards, with the text "Hannibal Books" overlaid in white. The image is dark and moody, with the person's face and neck highlighted against a dark background. The text is centered and reads "Hannibal Books".

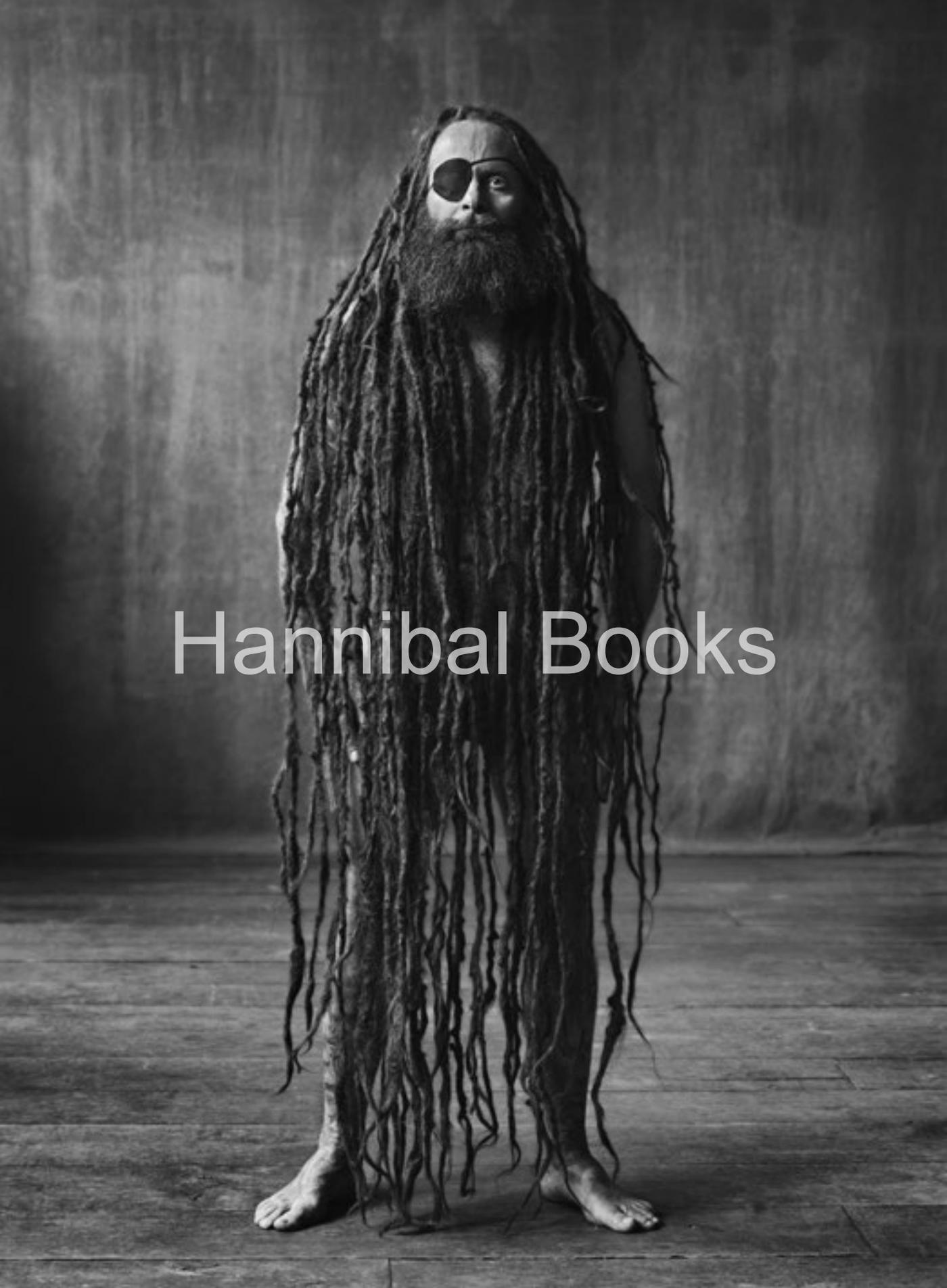
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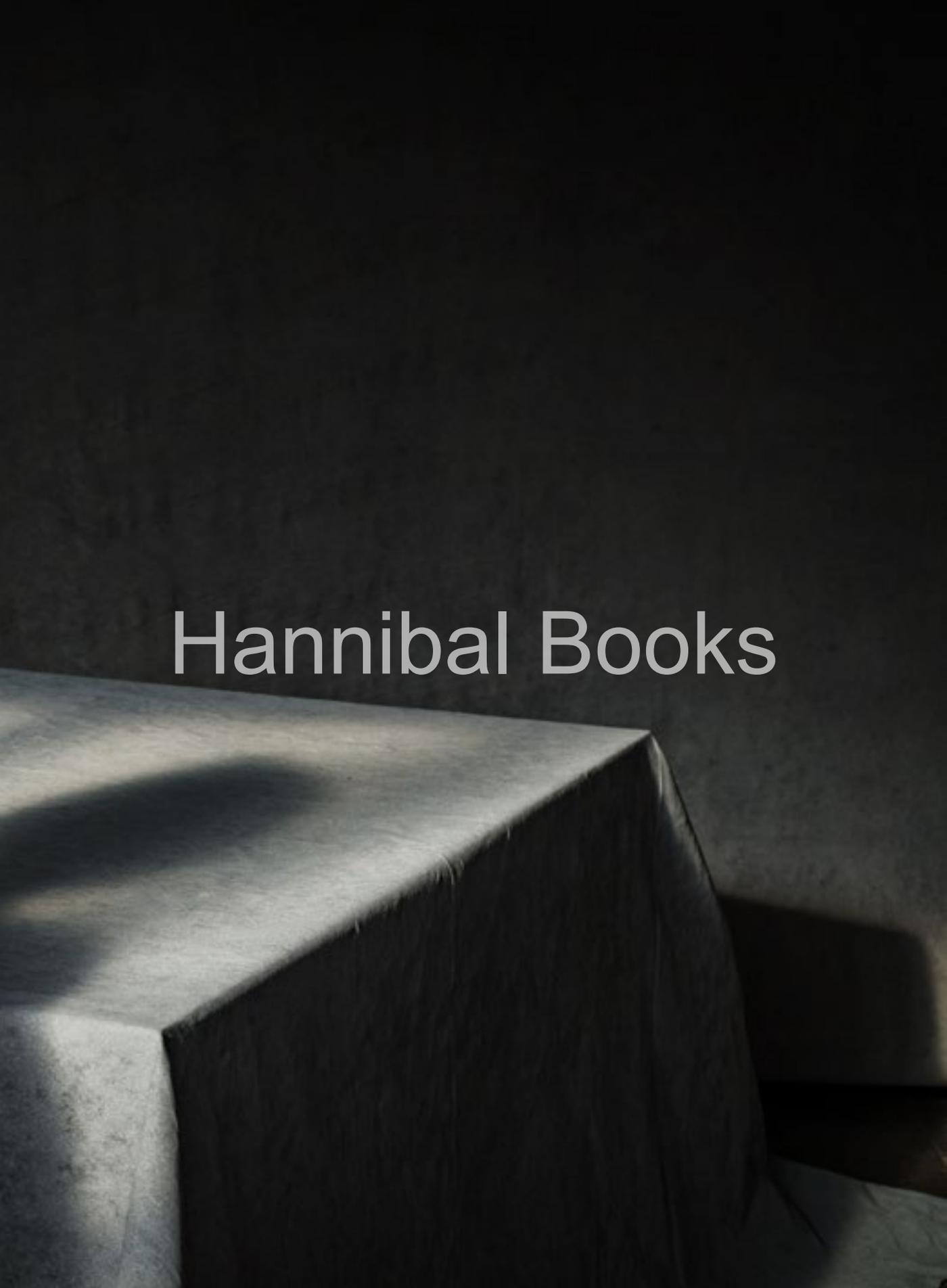


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A dark, moody photograph of a table covered with a light-colored cloth, illuminated by a strong light source from the left, creating deep shadows and bright highlights. The text "Hannibal Books" is centered in the upper half of the image in a white, sans-serif font.

COLOPHON

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Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer

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