

The Art of Inhabiting a Picture

By Sinziana Ravini, published on the occasion of the exhibition *Noémie Goudal: Stations*,
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How do you make dreams look real and reality unreal both at the same time? French visual artist Noémie Goudal perfectly brings off this balancing act through realistic art of illusion that overturns the fundamental laws of nature and architecture alike. At first glance, her art appears to combine Böcklin's eerie aesthetics of death, Boullée's surrealist architectures and Bernd & Hilla Becher's industrial brutalism. However, her photographs of buildings, temples and post-apocalyptic natural landscapes differ from the works of these artists in that they are extremely airy, romantic and anachronistic, and impossible to pin down in time and location as they contain no temporal or geographical markers. Some of the structures look like the remains of a godforsaken sect, others like spacecraft sent to Earth from a remote galaxy.

This geomorphic architecture that does not abolish the distinction between nature and culture, instead demonstrating their lasting love-hate relationship, reminds us of the bunker mentality of times of war, and of games with dimensions and perspective played by mad scientists. Goudal's major sources of inspiration are the visual tricks of the Renaissance and Baroque, with their multiple perspectives inviting the observer to contemplate the painting using their eyes and the power of their imagination. If there is a key to Goudal's artistry, it would be Antonello da Messina's mystical painting of Saint Jerome.

Goudal's images are not, however, created using some simple montage technique; they are the result of endless journeys and expeditions to all four corners of the globe. The architectural pictorial montages in *Towers* (2015) or *Observatoires* (2014), for example, are constructed as theatrical sets, transported by the artist out into a natural landscape, by the sea, in the desert or in the jungle, where the construction of the picture acts as a link between earth and sky or between what is in front and behind the image, sometimes deepened further using mirrors. The strength of the works lies in Goudal's ability to sometimes expose and sometimes hide the way the picture was constructed.

Since the dawn of time, humans have been producing their imaginative takes on the universe, sometimes more successfully than others. Goudal's art encompasses knowledge of the cosmos and humankind's place within it. Her work has always fluctuated between the boundaries of science and fiction, reduced to individual chapters in an ongoing narrative. The Medieval period saw the heavens as an enclosed sphere created by God for mankind, while the Renaissance discovered the eternally expanding cosmos. Goudal's photographs succeed in the difficult art of combining these diametrically opposed views of the world. It is as if she wanted to say "why pick just one when you could be human and God at the same time?"

In *Southern Light Stations*, Goudal offers a series of images reflecting on the importance of the observatory to our human capacity to grasp the universe. Her geometric constructions, circular mirrors and optical instruments such as stereoscopes, remind us that an image is always a construction. However, an image can also be the perfect arena for transcendental meditation, and our eyes are not merely directed outwards and upwards, but also inwards and downwards, like a modern twist on Jules Verne's journeys from the earth to the moon, twenty thousand leagues under the sea or to the centre of the earth.

If Caspar David Friedrich alternated between the *Übermensch* aesthetic of the lonely wanderer and the little monk's humility in the face of God's creation as he stands looking out over the sea, Goudal, like the philosophical masters of the Renaissance with their analogies between the cosmos and earthly laws, almost magically succeeds in finding a balance between heaven and earth, all-knowing and unknowing, yes, even knowledge and faith.

Goudal is part of the romantic tradition of art and literature that killed God to set mankind in His place, but she also succeeds in killing the classic, romantic artist's subject that used to pop up in nineteenth-century natural landscapes, via a kind of *myse en abyme* of mirrored mazes reflecting the world in which the work of art appears and the mental abstractions of the viewer. As Goudal says in a statement that can be taken both literally and figuratively: "A picture is a space you can live in".