

# EDEL ASSANTI

## *The View from Here* - Dr Cliff Lauson

“Perspective subjects the artistic phenomenon to stable and even mathematically exact rules, but on the other hand, makes that phenomenon contingent upon human beings, indeed upon the individual: for these rules refer to the psychological and physical conditions of the visual impression, and the way they take effect is determined by the freely chosen position of a subjective ‘point of view’.”<sup>1</sup>

On a large wall in Noémie Goudal's sunlit studio in Paris is a collage of photocopies and cutouts. A kind of ideas or mood board, it contains swathes of collected images of observatories from around the world loosely gathered together, from the Pantheon in Rome to Jantar Mantar (fig. 1), a group of five eighteenth-century equinoctial sundials scattered across India. These skywards-facing buildings are all examples of geomorphic architecture – they are buildings that evidence their relationship with nature through their construction. Observatories are perhaps some of the most extreme examples of geomorphic architecture, in a way due to their vast and cosmic subject matter: some are towers and staircases that attempt to ascend higher toward the heavens for a closer look, while others take on a dish or spherical appearance, attempting to catch the greatest amount of celestial rays. Goudal's visual research surveys humankind's engagement with the skies across time and space, a typological study that informs her own photographic series of towers and observatories which explore ‘the relation between the man-made and the organic’.<sup>2</sup>

The *Observatoires* (2014) series is comprised of ten large monochromatic photographs that are architectural elevations of these buildings. Like headshot portraits, they appear uniformly sized and against backdrops without visual distractions, a comparative technique that has led writers to point out their similarity to the typological aesthetic employed by Bernd and Hiller Becher in their well-known studies of industrial buildings. Goudal's studies, however, seem almost too even, too uniform in their composition, and this is due to the artificial nature of their creation. The *Observatoires* are in fact images of buildings (or building fragments) that have been staged by the artist. They are selections of found architectural imagery that have been enlarged to around the size of a person, tiled across multiple sheets of paper and pasted together onto a light wooden framework. Like set pieces or props, these are transported to the isolated coastal site where Goudal shoots them. The staged nature of her photographs, however, does not aspire to the seamless aesthetic of contemporary images that are heavily photoshopped. Instead, they are ‘straight’ shots of the stand-ups placed in the landscape. And thus printed at scale, clues indicating the artifice of the images' construction are visible – close inspection reveals the ruffled edges of the pages, sometimes lifted slightly by the coastal wind, and sometimes slightly misaligned. The paper stand-ups do not last long once exposed to the natural elements.

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Recast from their natural surroundings into an abstract coastal environment, and sometimes mirrored in a tidal pool, the geomorphic buildings become detached from the original surroundings that once defined their form. Like follies, they appear to have been transplanted from a different time and a different place – abandoned footnotes from the history of architecture. In Goudal's second series, *Towers* (2014; fig. 2), this effect is magnified as the buildings themselves are fictitious creations made by collaging 'samples' of textures, edges and details in such a way that maintains the overall look of a coherent structure. Here, the ephemerality of the paper printouts sharply contrasts the stone and concrete surfaces depicted upon them. The *Towers* really are follies, save for their shared ambition to reach skyward. These are beautiful and composed landscape images, but ones that also have an air of post-apocalyptic ruin in their singularity and abandon.

Both the *Observatoires* and *Towers* rely upon a fixed and centred camera position. As photographs, they have a frontality that allows the buildings to obtain a three-dimensional illusionism from a certain distance, while the aforementioned material 'flaws' betray their construction from up close. But if there is a critical ambiguity in Goudal's work, it is less the age-old photographic conundrum concerning the truthfulness of the documentary image; instead, it is the overlapping relationship between perception and observation. Inasmuch as her photographic series describe a type of architecture built for looking, Goudal also invites the viewer to become immersed herself in the act of close inspection.

While living and studying in London, Goudal encountered Antonello da Messina's *Saint Jerome in His Study* (c. 1475; fig. 3) at the National Gallery. Besides being a contemplative rendering of biblical iconography, it is also a key example of linear perspective as discussed in art historian Erwin Panofsky's foundational text *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. For Panofsky, the use of perspective creates a reciprocal relationship between the viewer and the image: 'It is as much a consolidation and systemization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self.'<sup>3</sup> Exemplifying this principle, Goudal's broader practice incorporates various visual frameworks that relate perspective to perception and observation.

The photographic series *In Search of the First Line* (2014; fig. 4) depicts a number of interventions in derelict and abandoned spaces. These areas share a columnar architecture that Goudal uses as the basis for framing large-scale backdrops that depict more complex architectural structures receding into space. Where there were once derelict voids, now appear multifaceted and sometimes ornamental doorways, windows and arches. And like her other photographic series, these backdrops are composed of tiled pieces of paper, which is evident in their irregular shading from page to page. Nevertheless, the overall effect is still very visually compelling. By using architecture to illustrate and reinforce the receding lines of perspectival space, Goudal constructs a kind of visual argument that harkens back not only to Renaissance painting such as the Urbino *Città ideale* (1480–90), but also to, as art historian Hubert Damisch has pointed out, Italian stage design of the same era (fig. 5).<sup>4</sup> Various architectural details on the backdrop

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provide multiple orthogonals converging on the singular vanishing point, and this has an overwhelming phenomenological effect on the viewer, drawing them into illusionistic space.

If the *Observatoires* and *Towers* buildings are akin to props, the *In Search of the First Line* series expands upon this theatricality in the direction of larger stage sets. They transition from the illusionism of a depicted object to a trompe-l'oeil installation. And yet the works discussed so far have all been photographic images that make use of perspective in composition. Conversely, *Study on Perspective* (2014; fig. 6) is a freestanding sculptural installation that is similarly engaged with perspective, but through the third dimension. The artwork depicts an interior corridor within a Brutalist building. However, the scene is sliced up and spread across four layers rather than a continuous gradient. This construction very much mirrors the layered backdrops of a stage set scenery. But unlike a conventional theatre, in which the audience is confined to the front side of the proscenium arch, the viewer here is free to move around the artwork, inspecting it from all angles; its techniques of construction are laid bare.

Similarly involving the viewer in a more active way, Goudal's stereoscopic images employ viewing glasses that must be peered through in order to resolve their three-dimensional images. Based upon the simple lenticular stereoscopes of the nineteenth century, the lenses focus on two different offset images which are viewed separately by each eye and combined in the brain to create the illusion of a single scene. In a way redoubling this artificiality, Goudal manipulates the depth effect of the photograph(s). Starting with a single image, she digitally cuts out and offsets certain elements of the image. Thus when viewed the manipulated elements appear flat at fixed depths against a flat background; they appear unnaturally as layers of reality, as in her previous works.

This is also the case in Goudal's new room-sized stereoscopic installation *Study on Perspective II* (2016), presented for the first time at Le Bal. Based on the earliest form of this technology, the so-called Wheatstone stereoscope (fig. 7), the artwork involves a mirrored pyramid that splits the viewer's vision sideways (fig.8), directing it toward the two life-size images at opposite ends of the room. Again, the effect in viewing the manipulated image is that nature appears to be a kind of stand-up or set. Further, standing within a room amidst the optical effect is a kind of bodily immersion that recalls the prehistory of the camera itself, the camera obscura (fig. 9). The viewer is literally contained within the room that produces the image, enclosed within a particular type of the architecture built for seeing. Here, the camera – as architecture and apparatus – is the *dispositif* in Goudal's practice, which is to say that it functions *both* as the viewing mechanism and also the visual paradigm for observation. We can trace this conceptual line in her work through a series of 'darkened rooms' decreasing in scale from the cosmic observatories, to the camera obscura, to the camera, to the interior of the eyeball itself. It also comes as no surprise then that some of the spherical observatories on Goudal's studio wall have the appearance of giant eyeballs.

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Resolved as this paradigm may seem, there is always a deliberate imperfection present in Goudal's work, whether in the page edges, the tiled shading, or the layers of depth. It is in the act of looking at nature that the flaws of representing it are revealed. In terms of subject matter, the infinite space and ever-changing weather of the sky often seem to elude the rationality of the linear perspective system. This difficulty has been an issue for artists since its invention, and it is an omission that threatens to unravel the coherence of the illusion.<sup>5</sup> In Goudal's work, this imperfection is deployed with precision: a set of stereoscopic images featuring clouds have their subject matter unnaturally layered against the background sky. Furthermore, her *Southern Light Stations* (2015; fig. 10) series substitute large sections of sky with two-dimensional representations of it – their tiled surfaces as well as suspension cables both remaining visible. While the *Observatoires* aim vision skywards, the skies themselves problematise the point of view. Throughout the artist's works, the various challenges in representation serve an inquisitive role in that they expose the space of perception. Goudal's project is one that examines the scopic space, however imperfect, between the eye and the vanishing point, the lens and the CCD, between the earth and the heavens.

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<sup>1</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 67

<sup>2</sup> 'Extracts from a conversation with Noémie Goudal', *Loose Associations*, The Photographer's Gallery, vol. 1, p. 22

<sup>3</sup> Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, p. 67

<sup>4</sup> Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman (London: MIT Press, 1987), p. 200

<sup>5</sup> See Damisch, Hubert, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), chapter 4