

Emptying the Landscape

By Marta Gili, Director of the Jeu de Paume, Paris, 2014

*Integration alone is not enough. Disintegration is essential too. That's what life is. And philosophy. That's science, progress, civilisation.*¹

In the present day, history is constructed from images which are fragments of reality and as such, break up its vertical, chronological and linear narrative. These images confront and jostle each other, on occasions superimposing or juxtaposing themselves, at other times breaking away or separating, tracing a horizontal cartography of diverse and heterogeneous micro-accounts.

Many of the artistic practices that experiment with images reveal this contemporary lack of connection with the great historical accounts and with their unfulfilled promises of progress and a better future.

This is inevitable: images are only representations and ones that require us to look at them again and again – sometimes today, sometimes tomorrow – but even then, they do not always say the same thing. This is because all of them require us to listen to their silences, observe what they reveal and what they conceal, and consider what they say and what they keep silent. Images permanently question the validity of the triadic combination: “seeing, believing, knowing.”

Noémie Goudal belongs to that group of artists who consider that images must offer the elements required for the construction of a thought, but without actually revealing it. Her investigations into the tensions between contemplated, experienced and constructed landscape go beyond the by now slightly antiquated practices of photography, which provoked controversy on the medium's capacity to invent reality or to reveal truth as false, or vice versa.

Like other well-known names in contemporary art (Thomas Demand, James Casebere or Edwin Zwakman, among others), Goudal works on what we might term a rough and ready duplication of reality through constructions, sets or models made of card or paper, which she then photographs in different contexts. Her work relies on the viewer being sufficiently perceptive to realise at once that her proposal is not that of “deceiving” the gaze by claiming that what seems to be evident is in fact a trick, but rather the opposite: Goudal wants the viewer to appreciate the approach employed in order to be able to move on to reflections of another type that revolve around encounters and communication failures between the landscape and human beings.

Beneath the different layers of artifice from which Goudal's images are made, the artist firstly questions the very notion of landscape, which always remains a construct per se. As the French geographer, Orientalist and philosopher Augustin Berque noted, the term “landscape” is a relatively recent one, arriving in Europe in the Renaissance. It first appeared in China, where it was used by hydraulic engineers in the context of controlling natural water courses and protecting houses against flooding. The term literally meant “water from the mountains”. It had no aesthetic connotations until, around the year 300 BC, the Chinese poet Zuo Si wrote some lines that exalt an emotion relating to this word: “The waters from the mountain have a pure sound”².

In Goudal's images this still surviving notion of the purity and beneficence of the natural landscape shifts slightly so that it reveals some of the fragility in the relationship between the natural and the artificial, the organic and the inorganic, amnesia and memory.

It is here that another fundamental element in Goudal's work emerges: namely its theatrical nature, like a stage set. In her work, nature generally presents itself as a large stage occupied by a set that is in fact its own representation (in *Tectonique*, 2014, for example, or *Stereoscope*, 2012) or the representation of the constructed (*Observatoires*, 2013; *Satellite*, 2013). As in the theatre of the Absurd it could be said that here nature is represented in order to be vacated, like a stage ultimately intended to be inhabited by other sets, which are in turn nothing other than masks of something that might have been or might have taken place in another time, past or future, or another place, near-at-hand or far off.

In Goudal's work nature, the landscape and monumental constructions imbued with a seemingly magical mysticism become archetypal characters from an enigmatic world in which the unity of time, place and action (the theoretical bases of classical theatre) have been totally abandoned so that viewers can arrive at their own conclusions. As in Ionesco's plays, themes such as the conscious or the unconscious, the absurd and the logical, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, run through Goudal's works. This is a deconstruction of the landscape and its forms with the aim of rethinking them in another way and through a different gaze.

This, then, is how Noémie Goudal's photography empties the landscape, breaking it down and reconstructing it with the intention of looking at life's experiences from a range of different viewpoints and without excuses of any kind. As one of Samuel Beckett's characters in *Waiting for Godot* states: “Here's a man for you, blaming on his boots the faults of his feet”³.

1 Eugène Ionesco, *The Lesson*, at <<http://www.drama21.c.kr/writers/ionesco/lessonxt-e.htm>>, chapter 192.

2 Augustin Berque, *Cinq propositions pour une théorie du paysage*. Éditions Champ Valon, Paris, 1994.

3 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*. See: <http://samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_Part1.html>, Act 1.