

ELGER ESSER

Art Review — New York Art World

by Donald Goddard © 2001



Ameland Pier X, Netherlands, 2000, C-print on diasec face 70 7/8 X 93 1/8 in

Since 1996, Elger Esser has traveled from Düsseldorf in Germany, where he lives, to make landscape color photographs (printed rather large, in human viewing scale, with wide white borders) in France, Italy, Spain, Holland, and Scotland. Most of the places are along shores or rivers. Usually the horizon is straight and rather low, as in Dutch landscape paintings of the 17th century. Some are of towns, particularly old Italian hill towns. Even some large cities are represented, Paris and Lyons, for instance, along rivers, of course.

Rarely are there people (perhaps time exposures eliminate them), though there are cars parked in cities, along the rivers. Nothing threatens, not clouds, or surf, or wind, or activity of any kind. Everything is tranquil, settled. The range of color is extremely narrow, encompassing sky, water, sand, plants, buildings. Within this compass, and even because it is so narrow, so compressed, the range of color, movement, and light, and of emotion, is enormous. The browns of brick or stone or dried plants seem all the same brown, but of course they are not; they are infinitely varied. The horizon line seems featureless but is full of incident that suggests another horizon line behind it. The movements of water and of clouds in Esser's photographs are merged, so that timed modulation becomes the vessel of all movement; every molecule is understood to be in play. This is a summing up of the world, but it is specific in every frame and so endless in its unfolding. The artist, thence the viewer, is part of its unfolding, part of its mood. Water flows to the sea and carries with it the landscapes' residue--Europe's history, humankind's history. It is quite different from the manipulations of contemporaries like Andreas Gursky, who exercises control by reducing and limiting reality to digital moves, to elaborate stagings of the present. Esser accepts what is there, in all its depth, complexity, and ineffability.



Beauduc, 2000, C-prints on Diasec face 70 7/8 X 87 5/8 in.

In this exhibition, the eleven photographs of the past two years are more minimal than ever. Only one building appears, along with a plowed plot of land in Spain, though there are slight indications of buildings along some of the horizons. There is more water than ever. Plants grow in water. Some landscapes are flooded, and in others water, land, and sky seem to merge--liquid, solid, and gas--they all partake of the same ethers. The compass is narrowed even further than before. Saone, France is a pale yellow-green joining of flooded plain and sky, with a fine line of trees along the horizon and rows of leafless trees and saplings growing from the water. So few elements, and yet what is there is perceived with a particularity that matches its vastness. Beauduc, France is a shoreline, faint blue, looking out to sea, with the sky above the sea reflected in the sand below, and between, in the water, a series of small horizontal islands of plantlife. In its reflectiveness it seems to be reversible, top to bottom, but it is not from the point of view of someone who lives in this world, though perhaps it is elegiac in this sense. Ameland, Pier X, Netherlands, is around one of the Frisian Islands in northern Holland. It is all water and sky, nearly all white, with a very thin horizon line and a few other lines (the tops of dikes?). However minimal, there are markers in these landscapes that enable us to see the relationships between the smaller and larger entities, between ourselves and the rest of the universe. We are connected not only to what we have built, but to what has grown in the same places.



Saone, 2000, C-prints on Diasec Face 70 7/8 X 91 1/8 in

The exhibition remains through Friday, December 21, 2001, at Sonnabend Gallery,
532 West 22d Street, New York, NY. Tel. 212 627 1018.
NY Art World

Art Review — NewYorkArtWorld.com

All artwork is copyright of the respective owner or artist.

All other material © Copyright 2007 New York Art World ®. All Rights Reserved.

Tuesday, March 10, 2009/ by Ed Schad

I call it oranges.blogspot.com

Elger Esser and Nature's Second Virginity



Elger Esser
Rose Gallery

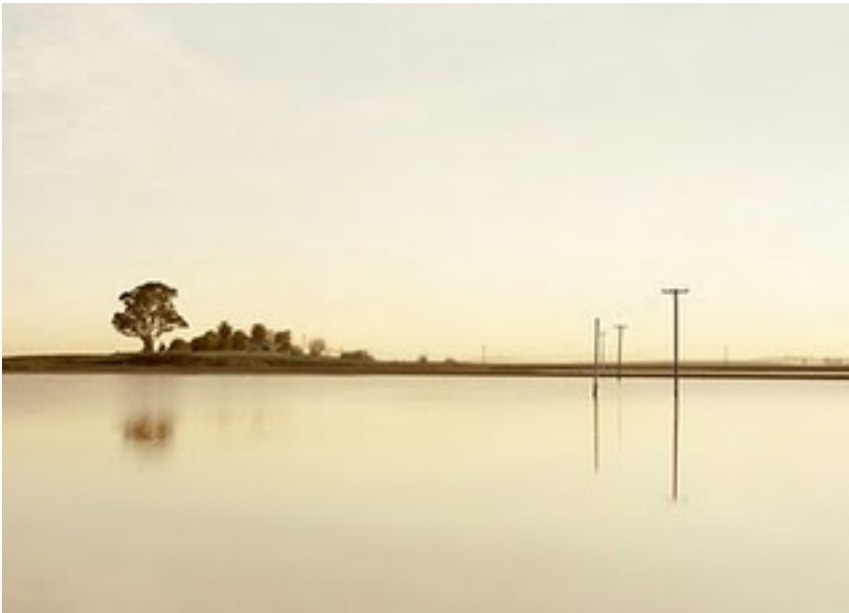
Depending on your poetic temperament, Elger Esser's photographs might be hard to believe in. He finds stillness and beauty in the most unlikely places – an abandoned barge, a polluted canal, a field of wrecked cars, a burnt out or decomposing dock. The light is soft and milky, often a pale scrim of green which showers the world in an ethereal fog. Esser often focuses on ruins or on remnants of things past and the result is something that feels other worldly but isn't, seems manipulated by the photographic process but is actually a scene that Esser labored to find.

I like how Eric Gero, studio manager of Lapis Press and recent project manager and assistant to Esser, put it when he said, "these are places where humans have been." What I find important in Gero's statement is that though humans have touched the nature presented, Esser still finds resonance in the scene, not by being cynical about human presence but by believing that we can still see things for the first time. Nature and light pervades back into the scene and over the remnants of humanity. This pervasion of nature into and through culture is then something new, something seen for the first time -- even though we've been there, we need not fabricate something to be surprised. The real, the givens behind things, can emerge and be seen.

Ponte A Tressa II (2002), for example, shows a series of flowing hills, populated by (not punctuated by) stripped cars and power lines. The scene is not beautiful, I would argue, *despite* these cars and power

lines but beautiful *with* these elements. The viewer finds the beauty (that instant aesthetic desire to know the object) all at once. The same happens in the brilliant *Cutting Warf 1*, 2008, and again it is power lines that record the human touch on landscape. Esser again does not draw attention to the touch (perhaps as some people do to condemn it) but shows the touch now naturally as part of the scene. This is not eternal nature but nature that has evolved into culture and is now different. Just because we can't go back to untouched nature, that does not make our new reality any less desirable or beautiful. Esser is neither a poet of authenticity (Wordsworth wanting to return to nature before humans) nor an environment poet (Like Robert Haas who condemns man's destruction of nature). Maybe, we will call him a poet of co-existence.

These are not apocalyptic images. Though strange in appearance, Esser is not projecting an idea of a future



but instead he is finding the present. Esser's are not photographs of spectacle, they are photographs that acknowledge that though we can be melodramatic about our technology and our lot, that silence and stillness and a centered vision of reality still exists, still fills up around us, and invite us to dwell. We can't go back to the ancient times, we are not innocent, but neither are we lost to the silence that has been there all along. Esser seems to believe in a sort of second virginity for nature, virginity found by belief rather than granted by an essence. These are wise photographs.

This vision, it seems to me, comes from Esser's unique interpretation of the project of Bernd and Hilla Becher, those late typographies where the Bechers, through a straightforward presentation of industrial buildings (by just comparing them) observed poetry and meaning filling the scene, that the act of looking and making meaning can never be separated, ever. Like the Bechers, Esser depends on the documentary nature of the photographic process (light from nature onto paper) but knows that the fundamental truth of the photographic index (the imprint or trace of reality) can hardly contain everything, meaning comes in from all sides and informs the image, adds to the image. Again like the Bechers, Esser believes in reality and that reality provides its own wonders.

This is a far cry from Andreas Gursky, who constructs his photographs from dozens of base images in photoshop. Whereas with Esser, we get the weirdness first (we can't believe that what he is seeing was actually how that moment in time was for his camera), Gursky's photographs initially strike a viewer as impressive but real. With Esser, we slowly come to understand that the photographer is not trying to trick

us, that he is showing us a moment as he sees it, a moment that is bound in the photograph. With Gursky, it is only after careful viewing do we realize that something is amiss, that a cow has been repeated several times, that the ceiling and rows of products in the store are arranged and resorted, that the lighting is theatrical. With Gursky and his constructed reality, the understanding of the image as constructed and inauthentic comes later.

So who do we believe here, Gursky or Esser? Who is more conducive to our present moment? I consider this to be a very important question on many fronts, maybe even concerning the biggest questions of our time. If I go with Gursky, I acknowledge that part of us that assembles from the fragments of our senses and makes reality up as it goes along. If I go with Esser, I depend on that part of us that believes that though we add to nature, that nature still has a certain reality behind it.



To try and answer this question, I will start with a theory that I heard presented by Matthew Biro of the University of Michigan in the recent CAA conference, basically that Gursky's presentation of images is more real, a closer metaphor to our reality than the indexical beliefs of the Bechers. I guess that one could extend the argument to Esser.

Biro reasoned that Gursky's constructed images are closer to our reality because Gursky's process (assembling appearances from separate sources) is a metaphor for how we regard ourselves these days, as an accumulation of images, as construction of surfaces that can be rearranged at will. This is the Oscar Wilde view of the self -- as our representations shift, so does our reality, that our only reality is our representations. This self has no center, form is separate from function, our world is a world of translations and shifting.

Again, as we've seen time and again on this blog, this is the status quo vision of the self offered by the present art theories, the vogue theories that fill Artforum and the like. In other words, the self apparently once was thought of to have a center and had images which corresponded to that understanding and now we apparently have a new understanding of self and also have images to match -- this is how Gursky, according to people like Biro, can be more of the moment than the Bechers and Esser.

But to give all of reality to the flow of images and the rearrangement of images seems tyrannical to me, this giving over everything we are to what we have made for ourselves, our interpretations of nature and self. In my view, the need of this theory to overcome limiting positivism (the idea that we can rationally interpret the function and will of nature) leaves us fundamentally alienated from the fact that there are givens, that there is reality not shaped by us but found by us, that prevails upon us rather than the other

way around.

So ultimately, I side with Esser because he acknowledges our impact on things and that our representations of things shape how we see things. However (and this is a big however) the reality is still there, it still emerges (especially when we forget about it or get melodramatic about it). I love that in this world where constructed images reign (at the moment I hope rather than forever) that someone like Esser can show us the dazzling font of reality mixed with human vision. I like this photography of co-existence. I like its prospect, I like that the real is now emerging as something forgotten, something buried, something uncanny. I like that reality can still surprise us.

ELGER ESSER



Ameland Pier X, Netherlands, 2000. , C-print, laminated to Plexiglas, 71 1/4 x 92 1/4 inches.

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Purchased with funds contributed by the Photography Committee, 2001. 2001.75. © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Like many contemporary German photographers, Elger Esser studied under Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Yet unlike others schooled by the Bechers such as Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, or Thomas Struth, Esser attends to the unmanipulated, ephemeral, even romantic landscapes of Europe. Simply put, he photographs beaches, wetlands, riverbeds, and valleys. Such places offer up a low, straight horizon that is likely to be one of the most striking details of the resulting image. His views are often comprised largely of air and water, light and its reflection. In *Ameland Pier X, Netherlands* (2000), for example, the horizon divides the sky from the sea, forming two halves that are almost mirror images of each other, similarly tinted by the pale, luminous tones of an overcast day.

There is a sense of placelessness to these landscapes, despite Esser's lending of location details to the titles. Whether they portray the Seine in Paris, a beach at Beaduc, France, or a narrow strip of the Dutch shore, his photographs pay tribute to the universal lure of a seemingly infinite horizon and ultimate calm in the foreground. The picturesque quality of these views brings to mind everything from old-fashioned scenic-view postcards to nineteenth-century American Luminist paintings. But in the stillness of the landscapes and their muted, dreamlike colors linger evocations of the sublime, recalling the expressive effect of works by such great Romantic landscape painters as Caspar David Friedrich. The large scale of Esser's prints coupled with the expansive distances and often indistinct horizons he photographs works to envelop the viewer, offering an alluring tension between the landscape originally encountered by the artist and experienced by the viewer.