

Unraveling landscape stories

In Silvi Glattauer's photographic practice nothing is set, time, light and landscape are each staged in unexpected ways. An image is never singular: often literally composed from multiple exposures, always taken through multiple processes, and always opening a dialogue with the rich history of her own work and the work of other artists. For Glattauer photography, and more particularly printmaking, isn't about fixing an image it is about opening it up. It is work marked by nimble curiosity and although it is often technically startling it is never about technique, rather, it is about an ethic of slow looking.

French philosopher François Jullien reminds us that looking is never *natural*. Each act of looking, each photograph, each image, contains within it the trace of what he calls reason's unthought choices. Every landscape image comes to us with a set of historic landscape ideas. Our perception of landscape in western culture, Jullien argues, is masked by "a sort of theoretical tripod [that] furtively constrains our landscape-thought" (2018:6). The first leg of this theoretical tripod presents landscape as a segmented part rather than evoking a sense of the whole, secondly landscape is presented as primarily a visual experience, and thirdly landscape-thought is entrenched in a subject/object binary. Each of these unthought thoughts, or culturally entrenched perspectives, creates a sense of distance. The fragmentation of the part restrains us from opening to the immensity of landscape-experience, the focus on the purely visual inhibits a multisensorial awareness and the subject-object positioning keeps us from intimacy and absorption.

Glattauer destabilises these ways of constraining landscape by her engagement with the multiplicity of the image and through her long acts of looking. She does this in numerous ways: by her processes as a printmaker, by her layering and compositing of images, and through her continuous revisiting and reimagining certain sites, sometimes over the course of many visits. At a fundamental level she works her images, turning them from crafted light to rich print artefacts. Each image that emerges from the press bed is not just the product of one moment of attention when the shutter freezes time, it is also the product of cascading moments of attention in which choices are honed and new aspects of the image surface. Plates are made (sometimes rejected and remade), they are inked in multiple ways, and here again choices are honed through experimentation, accident and repetition, finally the sticky metal is rolled under pressure to press ink into paper. There, a mysterious object somehow emerges at the intersection of skill, process and world.

These images are not what the photographer or the camera saw, neither are they just the imaginative merging of fact and memory. They arise through a material process that begins in one place with the mechanics of photography and the physics of light and that

continues in another with the messy business of handcrafting prints. This is slow looking, a process whereby as Arden Reed puts it, “images swell into events and events condense into images”.

The synchronicity between skill-process-world is particularly obvious in Glattauer’s latest body of work in which in-camera multiple exposures have brought a new sense of play to her images. She describes this as “reframing the travel shot”. It has allowed her to approach sites that she has photographed many times in a new way.

“Because of my work teaching and leading photo tours I have been going back to the same places over and over, particularly to Spain and Argentina and Morocco,” Glattauer explains. “So, every time I travel, I give myself a challenge to do something different. To photograph in a completely different way to what I did before. So, for instance, the first time I went to the high plains of Argentina I was so struck by the hugeness and the colours, that I did a show which focused on really big colour prints, a metre and a half by two metres. The original colours all felt like beautiful watercolours. And so when I went back, I think the second or third time, I challenged myself to only work small and in black and white.”

This exhibition shows the results of Glattauer’s latest self-challenge: work with multiple exposures, but only in the camera, and allow random images to cohere. In some ways this is not that different to other series she has produced, as she has often used layering in her work, composing evocative studies of place through various digital and printmaking techniques, but this earlier work has usually been tightly composed to create painterly effects. In her new work, taking her cue from the Italian Futurists, she explores photodynamism where the layers are more deliberately set to dance with, against and around one another. In some images the layers do adhere tightly, in others one layer appears to bloom across another, in yet other images the pull between layers and sense of juxtaposition is strong, as they jostle against each other.

Playing with these different registers, Glattauer decouples the photographic imagination from the work of view-finding, inviting us to see landscapes as more than singular, partial views, and then through her printmaking processes she extends this playfulness into an even richer, engaged act of looking. This act of looking is more than one of visual capture, it is one born of movement and gesture, that involves her whole body. We can feel the swing of her arm and the pivot of her body in the composition of these images.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold describes this practice of active engagement with landscape as the work of “making visible rather than reproducing the visible”. He suggests it is a generative process of world-making where “practices of movement, gesture and

inscription” (Ingold 2012: 7) are intimate parts of seeing, perceiving and imagining. He continues:

Perception and imagination are one: not however because percepts are images, or hypothetical representations of a reality ‘out there’, but because to perceive, as to imagine, is to participate from within in the perpetual self-making of the world. It is to join with a world in which things do not so much *exist* as *occur*, each along its own trajectory of becoming. In the life of the imagination, the landscape is a bundle of such trajectories, forever raveling here and unraveling there. One could, with geographer Doreen Massey, think of every trajectory as a story and of the totality of the landscape at any particular moment as the ‘simultaneity of stories-so-far’. (Ingold 2012: 14)

In her new images Glattauer dances with her camera to bring us these rich landscape stories where multiple trajectories intersect. She invites us to consider both place and image as sites of discovery that are constantly coming alive, and she invites us to savour these possibilities through the act of slow looking.

References

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