

Patrick Shanahan

A Momentary Presence - Tales from New Europe

JOANNA LOWRY

A dizzying perspective down a ski cable run into a verdant, autumnal valley, lake gleaming in the background. Drifting clouds in the sky reflected in the glassy surface of deserted salt pans. Distant mountains glittering on the horizon, viewed from behind a battle-scarred wall. Can we call these landscapes? Is this a form of landscape photography? Or is it, as Patrick Shanahan calls it in his own introduction to *A Momentary Presence - Tales from New Europe*, "a documentation of the landscape"? And what is involved in that moment of refusal of the term? On the one hand it is a refusal that marks a shift in the dialectic between two genres, between documentary photography and landscape photography as historically formed practices. On the other hand it marks a parallel shift between a notion of landscape as an aesthetic – as one kind of cultural strategy through which we might represent or view the physical world, and the very different notion of landscape "out there", pre-formed by geographical and historical forces that give it its form, and merely found by the photographer. Presented like this we can see that even to use the term 'landscape' opens up a range of complex issues about the role of genre and aesthetics as critical strategies in contemporary photographic practice.

In the nineteenth century landscape photography inhabited a place in the hierarchy of genres that it inherited from painting. If landscape painting was a minor art genre it was nevertheless incontestably art, and the presence of photographs of landscapes in the early photographic exhibitions was testimony to the validity of photography's claim to art status. Even then, though, it was evident that much of the photographic recording of the landscape was produced in response to a broader social context of production: tourism, journalism, bureaucratic governance and documentation. The history of landscape photography has involved a continual process of suppression and distortion of these non-artistic origins. Photography's documentary functions put continual pressure on the attempts to establish a pictorial aesthetic and this tension has continued through to the present day.

One of the key shifts in the framing of landscape by photography was initiated by the 'topological turn' that took place in the late nineteen seventies and early eighties. The pictorialist tradition was effortlessly subverted by a detached objectivist gaze that owed more to social geography than it did to the history of traditional painting, but that also generated a peculiarly flat, grid-based formal composition which could easily be critically supported by a modernist aesthetic arising out of modern American painting and Greenbergian criticism. Key inheritors of this shift – Baltz, Gursky, Wall, Struth, – have successfully re-established the concept of landscape as one that is central to a modernist discussion about photography as an art medium. It is significant that despite their purist commitment to the exploration of the photographic it is once again the spirit of painting that haunts these images. In their different ways they have put that concept under pressure – flattening it, stretching it, extending it panoramically, making us conscious of a new complicity between the photographic medium and the peculiarities of the landscapes produced by modernity whilst simultaneously establishing the concept of 'formal composition' at the very centre of an avant-gardist photographic strategy.

Shanahan's photographs pose a subtle and knowing response to these issues. He has coined the term 'spatial estrangement' to refer to both the culturally felt experience of individuals living through profound and sometimes traumatic social change, and also to

refer to what he describes as photography's "inherent ability for temporal and spatial displacement, fragmentation and doubling". His work involves a strategic deployment of genre and aesthetic formalism to reflect upon the troubled territories of modernity, on territories that bear the physical marks of war, politics, industry, commerce, decline, and regeneration. His project is concentrated upon the effects of political change in the countries of central and Eastern Europe. For the last three years he has travelled through nine different countries compiling the seventy two images that form *A Momentary Presence – Tales from New Europe* in an attempt to find a photographic language that can express the consequences of the collapse of communist control and the establishment of a fragile new European community, subject to the new pressures of capitalist expansion, commerce and tourism.

Modernity itself has always been a troubling driver of developments in landscape photography - whether as a series of signs to be ruthlessly repressed in the interests of a conservative pictorial aesthetic, or alternatively conceived as a utopian re-visioning of new technology and architecture that in some sense mirrors the technological capacities of photography itself. Alternatively it has been the instigator of many a melancholic reverie upon the ultimate failure of that utopian project through the tropes of ruin, decay and the return of nature. All three of these themes are ones that Shanahan actively engages with in this series of pictures of a society in the throes of deep structural change.

The view down towards the cable-car station on Mount Vogel in Slovenia is taken from a cable-car on its way up to the ski station, 1537 metres above sea level. In the distance is Lake Bohinj. This is in many ways a view to die for – lakes, forests and mountains and a panoramic viewpoint place us securely in a romantic tradition. But this fantasy perspective is subtly undermined. The broad expanse of the Sava Bohinjka basin is presented as a curiously flattened space, three strips of colour – the grey lower slopes of the mountain range at the far edge of the valley, their verticality enhanced by the steep falling away of their reflection into the depth of the lake, the green swathe of lightly wooded pasture land, and in the foreground the bright autumn colours of the woods on the near slope. The nineteenth century panorama has been subverted by a topological mapping of the space that does more to deny the picturesque than to invoke it. And even this space is cut through by the long diagonals of the cables descending down to the cable-car station below. It is these that position our gaze, slicing through the space, locating us firmly in a new touristic economy that has little to do with a romantic sublime.

In Moste, near Ljubljana, huge steam pipes from the nearby thermo-electric power station snake across the centre of the image with an almost bodily presence. Parts of the steel cladding have fallen away revealing the soft inner body of the insulating materials. They bisect the image into two halves: in the sky a network of pylons and electrical wires, on the ground a symphony of bright complementary red and green ferns. The formal structuring of the space and sharpened colour values draw attention to the traditional opposition between nature and culture. In a seemingly ironic gesture that references an earlier picturesque tradition, ivy crawls up the concrete legs of the structure. Both these photographs pitch a formal modernist organisation of the picture space against a conventional pictoriality to foreground the tension between nature and industrial technology.

A similar formalist strategy underpins his melancholy photographs of deserted salt pans at Lera in Slovenia. These salt pans, part of an extensive network of dykes and pools and canals, are now part of a national park on the Croatian border. Once the centre of a large

industry that used to yield 40,000 tonnes of salt per year they are now only in partial use. Shanahan's image shows a disused pool reflecting a stormy sky. The presence of the land itself is compressed to a thin horizontal stripe across the middle of the image with three salt panners' huts in various stages of ruin and disrepair. The luminous bands of light and reflection in the image provide a curious disruption of our sense of distance and space, a disorientation enhanced by the uncanny symmetry of the reflections of the sky in the water. The three ruined buildings, perfectly spaced, provide a careful calibration of the space of the photograph whilst simultaneously allegorically symbolising a more profound sense of social decline and loss.

The trope of the ruined building, whether a symbol of a declining industry, failed economy, or war, is central to the articulation of the problem of modernity. All social change is founded on the ruins of earlier failed projects: the ruin is a constant reminder of the vanity of the progressive dream. In the Balkans it is often also a reminder of the high price of political change. Many of Shanahan's photographs expose traces of war damage: fragments of ruined buildings, walls, and military installations, each of them framing the mountains, valleys and landscapes beyond them with a careful precision that disorients our relationship to both. The ruin is fundamentally linked to the allegorical tradition, and, if anything, these images situate the series firmly in the space of allegory, as a meditation on the futility of history against the backdrop of the natural world. In this respect the work is not entirely original. It plays a part in a much wider movement of photographers visiting central Europe, each of them seeking a role in the recording of history. For in a strange way it seems that these troubled landscapes have come to stand for history itself. The momentous changes that these societies have undergone in the last thirty years, both ideologically, economically and socially, and the intense suffering of these people, has marked the place in our collective imagination as a landscape of trauma, a landscape in which all marks are potentially scars, all ruins symbols of loss, all signs of progress are potentially signs of the suppression of the past.

In this context there is an ambiguity in the iconography of destruction and reconstruction. A ruined building looks not unlike one under construction, particularly if that construction is delayed or abandoned. In either case such edifices can operate as signifiers of the folly of human enterprise as witnessed by history. The photograph of the Barakuda campsite in Zadar, Croatia, abandoned during the Balkan conflict and now reappropriated as a squat and skateboard park is centrally punctuated by the small lighthouse tower with its steps spiralling up into the sky, a poignant symbol of human aspiration amidst the general scene of dereliction.

Shanahan presents us with a gently ironic meditation on the question of history and its relationship to landscape photography. This is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the photograph of a house garden in Pula, Croatia. Once a major naval base at the centre of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Pula is now a major tourist destination with new hotel complexes skirting the city. At the centre of this photograph is a small assemblage of plants and objects, perhaps a stuffed toy, a plastic chair – a little ramshackle bit of bricolage placed against the backdrop of the new stadium and apartment blocks behind it. Two different forms of reconstruction. The unearthly glare given to the image by Shanahan's use of ambient sodium street lighting, one of the key tools of estrangement that he uses in his work, reminds us that photography is as adept at representing the unreality of change as it is at representing the real.

There is a limit to what a photograph can tell you about social and historical change – at

one level, in its absolute adherence to the materiality of the world, it displays a stubborn resistance to the processes of interpretation and revelation. At another level, because of this very obtuseness of the image it is, as we know, ideologically manipulable - always subservient to the story we want to tell. Our desire to tether the meaning of the image, shackle it to a footnote, and declare that this statement sums up what the image tells us, is extremely strong. It is only through recognising the historicity of the genres that are the chief bearers of meaning in our culture that we are able to use the photographic medium to reflect upon political and social issues rather than just to illustrate them. Shanahan uses a deep understanding of the genres of landscape and documentary to harness the ambivalence of the photographic image to comment on our relationship to history itself. Landscape photography can, perhaps, after all, offer a space for a critical practice.

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