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**SPEKULATION
SPECULATION**

FROM LANDSCAPE TO LACAN

On “The Symbolic Landscape: Pictures Beyond the Picturesque”
at UC Irvine University Art Galleries



“The Symbolic Landscape: Pictures Beyond the Picturesque”, UC Irvine University Art Galleries, 2013, installation view

At first sight, the category of the picturesque seems hardly pertinent to the realm of contemporary art. Its grand days, when it designated a type of scenery particularly suitable for being painted, or, put differently, a landscape that particularly lent itself for its reproduction in pictures, i.e. for the production of pictures, are as long gone as the model of the Grand Tour. All the more surprisingly, curator Juli Carson picked up on exactly this concept for her recent show of contemporary works, “The Symbolic Landscape”.

Suzanne Hudson unpacks the exhibition’s informant dialectic of original and copy, first articulation and repetition, concept and image, which underlies the fields of subjectivity as much as it structured the painted fields in the age of “Sense and Sensibility”. The route zigzags from landscape to Lacan.

In 1981, Rosalind Krauss drafted “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition”, an essay in which she concerned herself with modernism’s misprisions: Authenticity and authorship chief among them. While Krauss’s dismantling of originality in the opening pages helped to make this polemic an ur-text for contemporary discourse about art, her turn to the constructedness of nature as representation near the piece’s conclusion has received significantly less attention (of course, the latter point follows directly from the former). It is here that Krauss invokes Jane Austen’s “Northanger Abbey”, and more specifically, her heroine Catherine, who is schooled in the lessons of the picturesque by her more sophisticated interlocutors to the extent that she rejects as inadmissible to the category a landscape that might not be formed into a



Monica Majoli, "Black Mirror (Amy)", 2011

picture.¹ As Krauss puts the matter: "Although the singular and the formulaic or repetitive may be semantically opposed, they are nonetheless conditions of each other: The two logical halves of the concept landscape. The priorness and repetition of pictures is necessary to the singularity of the Picturesque, because for the beholder singularity depends on being recognized as such, a re-cognition made possible by a prior example."²

Taking this critique of pictorial form as her starting point, Juli Carson deftly curated an exhibition, "The Symbolic Landscape: Pictures Beyond the Picturesque". The painting, but also film, photography, and installation, that Carson brought together absorbs "landscape" less as a condition of morphological resemblance than, in her words in the show's press materials, "figurative or

textual strategies," which nonetheless refer to the longstanding generic conventions against which these interventions register. Landscape becomes both historically determinant (thus the importance of Carson's frame of the project within the historiography of the picturesque triggered by Krauss's invocation of an early nineteenth-century discourse) and oddly capacious. This last point obtains given the displayed work's heterogeneity, and perhaps is a direct consequence of the fact that Carson's roster of more than a dozen artists comprises so many of her UC Irvine colleagues: Kevin Appel, Miles Coolidge, Monica Majoli, Daniel Joseph Martinez, Connie Samaras, and Bruce Yonemoto. These affiliations make "The Symbolic Landscape" a very local group show, therein suggesting another valence of landscape as sociality.

Carson writes, apropos of the nonequivalence of the exemplars, that the project “begs the broader question of just what a landscape is for the subject, especially when psychological notions of that genre are entertained. As a result, Krauss’s original theorization of the picturesque can be translated into the broader psychoanalytic question of who we are, in the field of the Other. For it’s within this psychoanalytic, symbolic landscape that the Other stands for the many “fields” of desire that define us as subjects: From history, to nation state, to love (and beyond).”³ Importantly, Krauss’s model suggests an inherent relationality, between instantiations of landscape – as copies – to one another, as well as any such instantiation to its “original”. While Carson’s formalist predilection was everywhere in evidence, Carson’s signal contribution is her insistence that this is not only, not merely, a matter of form but of reciprocal becoming.

Monica Majoli’s oil-on-panel “Black Mirror” portraits exemplify this approach. Here, Majoli employed a Claude mirror to depict three former lovers, each of whom posed in the artist’s bedroom. A onetime popular compositional aid for tourists, amateurs, and artists, the small convex mirror has a dark, tinted surface capable of framing in its reflection an image in the spirit of Claude Lorrain (its namesake). It matters to know that the exercise is predicated upon the user turning her back to the scene, seeing in the magic surface – once adjusted to proper height – the world as image, with the background pushed into the distance, the view widened, and the focus sharpened. Yet the landscape Majoli conjures is that of desire rather than any environmental correlative. Ebony grounds reveal evanescent glimpses of a strand of hair or the tip of a nose, which betray a

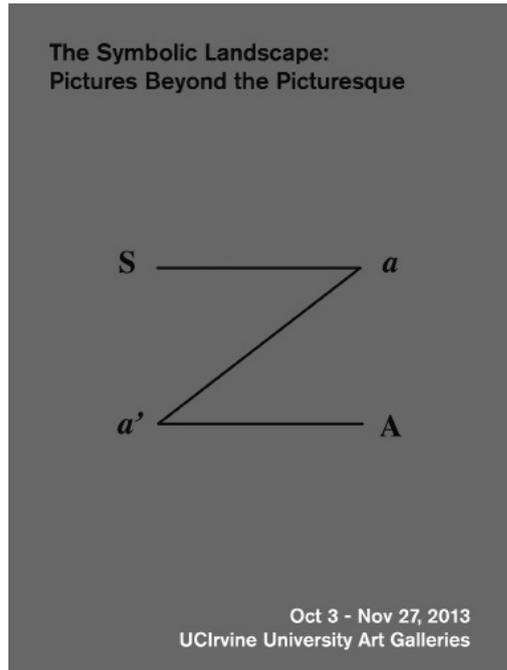
necessarily elusive attempt to wrest something not only essential but communicable from a subject, always at some remove. Distance is intractable, heightening the act of wanting and admitting it as structural to representation.

Carson’s engagement with the psychosexual did not contain itself to such works, but extended to the framing of the show as a whole. Indeed, Carson literally stacked the deck: Instead of producing a catalogue, she issued a series of pocket-sized takeaway cards, each of which reproduced a work on one side and a short text on the reverse, which she wrote in a consistent format for each entry. These texts propose a model of critical writing commensurate with her premises, since one cannot hold both sides, and hence the aesthetic and the theoretical, simultaneously in view. Even so, neither text nor image falls away, but is forever caught as the absent complement to the other – or understood as imbricated in it. This heuristic does the most work relative to the card introducing the show and its theme: Carson fronts her gloss on the symbolic landscape with a simplified notation of Jacques Lacan’s L Schema. A would-be entry into a forest of signs, it also exists as pure decoration as it is nowhere accounted for or otherwise explicitly addressed.

Take it or leave it, Carson seems to say, here as nearly everywhere else. To turn to just two examples: Appel’s paintings based on scanned and printed photographs of rebar found at a nearby desert dump site are gorgeous abstractions, but they also self-consciously play with the fact of the substrate (rebar as reinforcing bar in construction and surface upon which organism grows); and Coolidge’s digital prints of Angelino freeway accident investigation sites look at first blush like the concrete expanses that they are, though they also

follow from modernist imperatives (e.g., chance and accident, much less investigation, ring equally true in the context of Abstract Expressionism and formalist painting as they do in relation to the patterns traced by oil splatters on pavement). With so many comparable instances, I began to feel that the whole claim for the picturesque is but a tremendously useful pretext for staging a politics of form inconceivable apart from a theoretical justification that is not exogenous to the respective work, but coincident with its materiality. Thus taking it or leaving it might just amount to the same thing.

Still, what happens if one does claim for “The Symbolic Landscape” the interpretive priority of the L Schema, as Carson seems to do, despite her allowance of its superfluity? Can the L Schema, or the relationality that it expresses, also be a landscape? In the topological coordinates of the diagram, Lacan traces a four-term structure involving the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, and the relay between them in the formation of subjectivity. Lacan, in his 1954–55 seminar, famously conceived the L Schema out of Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter”, which the psychoanalyst interpreted through the titular object’s triggering of differentiated responses determined by the symbolic structure in which it temporarily resides. In short, Lacan assumed the precariousness of interaction between subject and unconscious (as Other), mediated by an ego formed from without. Recall here Carson’s language of the psychoanalytic, which extends Krauss’s term of the picturesque so productively: “For it’s within this psychoanalytic, symbolic landscape that the Other stands for the many ‘fields’ of desire that define us as subjects: From history, to nation state, to love (and beyond).” Carson can thus have it both ways, asserting the social,



Exhibition postcard with Lacan's L Schema

political, and sexual as always already within the aesthetic.

Carson furthers the Lacanian emphasis by constructing the installation as a kind of Moebius strip, which folds back on itself. The first show in the institution’s history to spread across Irvine’s two galleries, “The Symbolic Landscape” is divided into two parts separated by a courtyard. The first room in the newer, Kunsthalle-like space contained outwardly anti-pictorial works relating more obviously to the evoked if forsaken genre. Appel and Coolidge were hung here, alongside such gems as Dorit Margreiter’s “Bearing Masonry, Concrete Block (1923)” (2012), a print of a single, decontextualized concrete piece of

Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis Brown House in Los Angeles – his last fabricated with this substance – which was broken after the 1993 Northridge earthquake. A second, more traditional gallery presented a kind of discursive landscape presided over by Martinez's "She Could See Russia From Her House, the future is worth consideration" (2013), in which he travelled around Sarah Palin's Alaska and made collages (maps overlaid with abstract shapes and snippets of Yahoo news) to be mailed to friends and colleagues; Mary Kelly's "My James" (2008), a postcard formed in compressed lint that details a fictional narrative based on the very real and very gruesome murder of three civil rights activists at a voter registration drive in Mississippi; and quite remarkably, Carson's own "Civil Wars: Queer Theory and the Arenas of Activism" (1994), documentation of a 1994 panel held at the New School in which Carson and Matthew Ehrlich sought to undo the divisions between worldly activism and what happens in the art world and academy. Distinct as much of this was, one to the next, Carson ensured that each of the two sites existed as the inverse of the other.

Most obviously, Carson accomplished this continuity by putting one video in the place of the other. The sounds of Hassan Khan's "Blind Ambition" (2012), a video of nine sequences of social interactions around Cairo, shot on mobile phones after the revolution at Tahir Square, seeped into the first gallery. Although the Arab Spring is everywhere felt it is named nowhere, but the presence of the work in this room was enough. Across the way, in the company of Martinez and Kelly, Carson situated Yonemoto's remarkable large-scale film projection, "The End of the World at the Edge of the Earth (2013)".

Taking the last growing glacier on the planet as its subject, Yonemoto further equated this marvel in Patagonia with another – namely the fact that Lacanian analysis is likewise expanding its reach there. Yonemoto collapses the two in the figure of the glacier, called Perito Moreno, which is, as Carson eloquently writes, "a frozen terra firma – that best deconstructs all binaries: At once being land and water, terrain and subterranean, static and mobile, historical and contemporary." A landlocked mass that grows by breaking, it is the perfect emblem for the unconscious, and for "The Symbolic Landscape" as such.

SUZANNE HUDSON

"The Symbolic Landscape: Pictures Beyond the Picturesque", UC Irvine University Art Galleries, Irvine, October 3–November 27, 2013.

Notes

- 1 Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde. A Postmodernist Repetition", in: *October*, 18, Autumn 1981, p. 59.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- 3 Juli Carson, exhibition statement. Online at: <http://uag.arts.uci.edu/exhibit/symbolic-landscape-pictures-beyond-picturesque>.

CREDITS

transobjeto.wordpress.com (40); Immanuel-Kant-Museum, Königsberg (44); Camilla Geier (45); Wikimedia Commons, Foto: Doctor Wolfel (48); texture.tumblr.com (50); The Atlas Group, Walid Raad, Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, Hamburg (52); Cord Riechelmann (55); catharsistudio (58); Erwin Panofsky, Die Perspektive als symbolische Form, 1927 (60); Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archiv, Signatur 237 (61); Artangel (66); Ethan Wagner, Thea Westreich Wagner, Collecting Art for Love, Money and More, London 2013 (69); Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Köln (72, 73); Artangel (76, 77); Sotheby's (80); Parallax (85); artasanaset.com (86); Geneva Free Ports, Foto: Olivier Koeb (88); Bureau d'architecture 3BM3 (88); Louise Lawler, Metro Pictures, New York, Sprüth Magers, Berlin (91, 92); National Gallery of Art, Washington (96); Gil Blas (99); Succession Picasso (101); Gabriele Mandel Sugana, L'opera completa di Gauguin, Mailand 1972 (102); Claire Fontaine, Galerie Neu, Berlin, Hartware MedienKunstVerein, Dortmund, Foto: Hannes Woidich (108); I. H. van Eeghen, De familie Vinckboons-Vingboons, 1952 (111); Falcon Media (112, 113); STUDIOCANAL (115); Carlotta Films, Allerton Films (116, 117); Koch Media (119); Börres Weiffenbach/bauderfilm (120); Lions Gate, Concorde Video (122); Universal Pictures, Foto: Mary Cybulski (124); dctp / Kairos Film (126, 128); Universum Film (UFA) (129); dctp / Kairos Film (131); Niels Leiser (134, 137, 138, 143); Cheyney Thompson, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Köln, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, Foto: Gregor Titze (144); Parallax (147); Dandy Dust Productions 1998 (150); Robert Hobbs, Robert Smithson. A Retrospective View, Ausst.-Kat., Wilhelm Lehbruck Museum Duisburg, New York, 1970 (153); Sam Lewitt (156); Sam Lewitt, Galerie Buchholz, Berlin, Köln, Foto: Gregor Titze (160); Jutta Koether (162–165); GCC und Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, Friedericianum, Kassel, Foto: Achim Hatzius (166); Artists Space, New York (168); Artists Space, New York, Foto: D. James Dee (170); Artists Space, New York, Foto: Daniel Pérez (171); Timur Si-Quin, Société, Berlin, Fridericianum, Kassel, Foto: Achim Hatzius (174, 175); Fridericianum, Kassel, Foto: Achim Hatzius (176, 177); DIS (183–188); Ethan Wagner, Thea Westreich Wagner, Collecting Art for Love, Money and More, London 2013 (190); Hito Steyerl (193); Vimeo.com, Jenk K (194); Trevor Paglen, Galerie Thomas Zander, Köln, Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco, Metro Pictures, New York (196); Alinari-Giraudon (199); Edgar Peters Bowron (Hg.), Romantiker, Realisten, Revolutionäre: Meisterwerke des 19. Jahrhunderts aus dem Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig, München 2000 (200); Ian Fleming-Williams, Constable and his Drawings, London 1990 (202); Foto: Jan Lietaert (205); Julie Martin, Daniel Langlois Foundation (206, 207); Kerstin Schroedinger, Mareike Bernien (208, 210, 211); Florian Hecker, Sadie Coles HQ, London, Galerie Neu, Berlin, Foto: Paula Court (212); Florian Hecker, Sadie Coles HQ, London, Galerie Neu, Berlin, basierend auf Fotografien von Lena Deinhardstein (215); Gillmeier Rech, Berlin (216, 218); The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago (220); Karl Holmqvist, Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles (223); Amelie von Wulffen, Freedman Fitzpatrick, Los Angeles (224); Mary Bauermeister, 401contemporary, Berlin, Foto: Soeren Jonssen (225, 226); Kaye Donachie, Maureen Paley, London (228, 229); Estate of Ilse D'Hollander, Konrad Fischer Galerie, Düsseldorf (231, 233); Petzel Gallery, New York (234, 236, 237); The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Foto: Jonathan Muzikar (241, 244); Isa Genzken (242); Mira Schendel (245, 246, 248); Pierre Huyghe, Esther Schipper, Berlin, Foto: Andrea Rossetti (250–253); UC Irvine University Art Galleries, Foto: Robert Plogman (255); Monica Majoli, Foto: Douglas M. Parker Studio (256); UC Irvine University Art Galleries (258); Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Foto: Stephan Baumann, bild_raum (261); Pauline Boudry, Renate Lorenz, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe (262); Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Foto: Stephan Baumann, bild_raum (263); neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin (265, 267, 268); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Foto: Uwe Walter (270); Deichtorhallen Hamburg, Sammlung Falckenberg, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Foto: Uwe Walter (271); KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Foto: Uwe Walter (273); Bethan Ryder (276); Foto: Nina Hoffmann (278); Fritz Westman (280); Richard Phillips, Foto: Courtesy Gagosian Gallery (283); Albert Oehlen (285); Texte zur Kunst (287).