

## Global Landscapes.



What is a global landscape and how do we begin to think about the landscape in a global context? What I'd like to do here is talk about a number of recent and contemporary photographers dealing with the grandeur and beauty of the landscape, but countering its Romantic associations with evidence of the destructive consequences of global capitalism and global wars.

Richard Misrach's landscapes of the Nevada Test Site, taken in the mid to late 1980s, subverted the myth of the American Dream with what he refers

to as the "Frankenstein's monster" it had become through military destruction.<sup>1</sup> The scale, lighting and colour of these pictures, gives them something of the gloss and spectacle associated with the cinema and advertising, associations which jar with the devastations he pictures. He makes his own landscape Other: the view of the desert, iconic of American identity, is shown scarred, pitted by bomb craters and littered with missiles. Such a process of estrangement is further underlined by a series of violent images symbolic of the destruction of American culture: photographs showing the bullet-ridden pages of Playboy Magazine which have been used as target practice, 1989-1991. As Max Kozloff has succinctly put it: "Misrach has no trouble in revealing how a macho culture has literally vomited all over the very same environment that in yesteryear it had held up as the territory of its heroic aggression."

The symbolic destruction of this culture through the *Playboy* series, contrasts with the more literal evidencing of death in what amount to his most apocalyptical and visceral pictures, *The Pit*, 1987-1989. Here he draws attention to the livestock, cattle and horses that have died of unexplained or unexamined causes. The suggestion is that these deaths are linked to the military testing-grounds all around and his pictures of dead horses in the desert become especially meaningful as landscapes which invert the 'cowboy' mythology of the Old West, from John Ford to Marlboro.

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<sup>1</sup> See Anne Wilkes Tucker, *Crimes and Splendors: The Desert Cantos of Richard Misrach*, Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1996; Richard Misrach, *Bravo 20*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1990; Richard Misrach, *Violent Legacies*, Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications, 1992.

Misrach's *Clouds and Skies* series extend the contradictions of his earlier work.<sup>2</sup> His photographs make a deliberate allusion to Stieglitz's Modernist cloud studies from the 1920s, *Equivalents*. But read against the destructive evidence of his earlier landscapes, we view his pictures of skies with anxiety, fully aware of their potential toxicity. In some ways such pictures provide a politicised revision of the photo-conceptual jokes of Robert Barry in his *Inert Gas Series*, 1969, in which the artist 'photographed' invisible gases being released into the air.

The English artist, Paul Graham also turned his camera to the skies. Only he did so over Northern Ireland during the 1994 April Ceasefire.<sup>3</sup> In this work, the indeterminacy of the Spring weather provides a metaphor for the uncertainty of the political situation. In keeping with a documentary practice, Graham identifies the sites from which he photographs the sky— setting his benign escapist pictures in deliberate collision with a roll-call of places infamous for their connection with the country's bloody and violent history.

The photography of Paul Seawright, who was born in Belfast, is characterised by a disavowal of the kind of photojournalist imagery that came to dominate newspaper coverage of the war in his homeland. His *Sectarian Murder*, 1988, for example, involved the artist revisiting and photographing (in the 1980s) the scenes of sectarian killings in 1970s Belfast.<sup>4</sup> In many of the photographs from this series one finds a pictorial innocence, and a contradictory sense of calm and normalcy. One also finds the attempt to confront that which cannot be seen, the sense of an invisible

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<sup>2</sup> See Misrach's *The Sky Book*, Sante Fe: Arena Editions, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See Andrew Wilson, Paul Graham, London: Phaidon, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> See his catalogues, *Inside Information*, London: The Photographers' Gallery, 1995 and *Paul Seawright*, Ediciones Universidad Salamanca: Salamanca, 2000.

threat and menace. It was a documentary made in response to events which had passed, but events which continued to determine and shape people's relationships to the city in the present; as Justin Carville has said, *Sectarian Murder* "challenge[s] the viewer to confront the ideological and psychological territorialism that sectarian murder engenders in the communities affected."

In contrast to the invisible threats of such haunted spaces, Seawright's *Belfast* series from 1997-8, documented evidence of social division and segregation through the remnants of sectarian structures in the post-ceasefire city. Here the opacity of his blocked views of barriers, gates, walls and caged doorways, served as troubling reminders of "an unpalatable past" in a city full of change: a Belfast "obsessed with its own new-found possibilities for glamour" as one writer put it.<sup>5</sup>

When he accepted an Imperial War Museum commission to go to Afghanistan as an artist in 2002, Seawright would be in the very colonial and 'outsider' position that so much of the work made in his homeland had always sought to challenge and undermine. As a result, many of the pictures from this series, *Hidden*, explored the colonial associations of the empty desert landscapes of Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Countering the media's portrayal of the war-torn country as a spectacle of ruins, and opposing the British photographer Simon Norfolk's colour-saturated pictures showing layers of destruction and devastation, Seawright's spare, ashen photographs were preoccupied with the hidden malevolence of heavily-mined landscapes.<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> See Colin Graham's article, 'Belfast in Photographs' in *The Cities of Belfast*, eds., Nicholas Allen and Aaron Kelly, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See my essay in Paul Seawright's *Hidden*, London: The Imperial War Museum, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Norfolk's *Afghanistan: Chronotopia*, Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2002

desert as minefield allowed him to evoke Victorian travel photography, replete with its imperialist and colonialist connotations, and to combine it with the invisible menace of the lethal weaponry of modern warfare. Although Seawright came to this war zone after much of the fighting was over, the idea of the unexploded mine provided him with an effective means of stressing the continued violent destruction of conflict, long after wars are said to be over.

The French photographer Luc Delahaye makes long distance panoramic views of events and situations linked to international news, a totalizing, vivid representation which, while offering a sense of an overview— the bigger picture— nevertheless at the same time also highlights how limited and partial our view is.<sup>8</sup> There is no sense of a mastering and omniscient gaze. As Delahaye points out, his pictures highlight “the insignificance of my own position”.

The art of the great French painters— Delacroix, David, Gericault— Roger Fenton’s panoramic views of the Crimean war, the Matthew Brady group’s documentation of the American civil war, all have a bearing upon the pictorial power and resonance of Delahaye’s photographs. One also finds clear echoes of the contemporary art of Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky and Andres Serrano.

Delahaye, a multi-award winning French war photographer for *Newsweek* and *Magnum*, had begun to move away from photojournalism in the 1990s,

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<sup>8</sup> See Mark Durden, ‘Luc Delahaye: Global Documentary’, in *Deutsche Borse Photography Prize 2005*, London: The Photographers’ Gallery, 2005. Luc Delahaye produced a limited edition book, *History*, London: Chris Boot, 2003.

embarking on a series of art projects that included close-range surreptitious photographs of subjects on the Paris Metro, (published as *L'autre* in 1999) and lush colour pictures of the economic poverty of Russia, taken during a trip between Moscow and Vladivostok in the Winter of 1998/1999 (published as *Winterreise*, 2000).<sup>9</sup> His latest art photographs are different in that they are explicit in their critical relation to photojournalism. In opposition to the quick instantaneous image capture and global distribution associated with the contemporary news media, these pictures entail a slow record of newsworthy and historical moments.

The photojournalistic image is in many senses the opposite of these pictures: photojournalism gives the sense of a fragment taken from a temporal continuum of unfolding dramatic events. On his works' distinction from photojournalism, Delahaye has spoken about being interested in including the broad context of a given situation and how photojournalism is "at its best when conceived as a series— the picture story."<sup>10</sup>

Delahaye's photographs rely on the power of photography's evidentiality, the role of witness, of being there, but at the same time they also fail to register a clear response to what is witnessed— they remain distanced and disengaged, one might even say deadpan. Delahaye is instead absorbed in the artistry of making good pictures. Questions to do with form, beauty,

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<sup>9</sup> See Luc Delahaye, *L'Autre*, London: Phaidon, 1999, and *Winterreise*, London: Phaidon, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> See 'A Conversation with Luc Delahaye' by Jörg Colberg, [http://www.jmcolberg.com/weblog/2007/06/a\\_conversation\\_with\\_luc\\_delaha.html](http://www.jmcolberg.com/weblog/2007/06/a_conversation_with_luc_delaha.html) accessed December 2007. On the relation between art and documentary he says how "A work of art is always a document: a document about the artist, about its time and the context in which it has been made; and sometimes a photograph contains enough information about a given situation that you can say it has some photojournalistic value."

composition, pictorial allusion, are integral to our relationship to his photographs.

*A Mass Grave Near Snagovo, Bosnia, November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006*, shows the grim forensic labour of a team of the International Commission on Missing Persons, in the former Yugoslavia, evidencing war crimes and seeking to identify the dead. In Delahaye's picture we see the work of these people, calm and dignified, their equipment and what is being uncovered—the detail showing a skull placed amidst the earth in relation to the head of one of the people in the forensic team is both pictorially striking and symbolically resonant, showing how close to death they have to work. We are also very much aware of the setting, the Autumnal-tinged wooded landscape's pictorial beauty and the calm blue skies, a backdrop for the horror of this work.

Edward Burtynsky creates sublime landscapes out of global destruction.<sup>11</sup> Alluding to abstract painting and sculpture, as well as such nineteenth-century American photographers as Carleton Watkins, his pictures play out a dystopian vision of an overworked and polluted landscape; spectacular scenes which mark an excessive over-use of the land. Burtynsky has spoken about how “We are surrounded by all kinds of consumer goods, and yet we are profoundly detached from the sources of those things. Our lifestyles are made possible by industries all around the world, but we take them for granted, as background to our existence.” From nickel tailings in Sudbury, Ontario, to shipbreaking on the shores of Bangladesh, Burtynsky's

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<sup>11</sup> See Edward Burtynsky, *Manufactured Landscapes*, New York: Yale University Press, 2003.

pictures are intended to highlight the awesome material consequences of Western consumerism.

"When I first started photographing I was shocked at the scale with which we drag out our natural resources. I think it could be the paramount issue of the day— how far can we go as a capitalist, consumer culture before the negative effects come back to haunt us." In the diptych *Shipbreaking, Chittagong, Bangladesh, No.9a and No.9b*, 2000, the strange ruined landscape created by the deformed hulks of the dis-assembled ships, resembling the heavy metal sculptures of Richard Serra, is interrupted by a line of workers that stare out at the viewer in the middle distance. Such interruptions are however uncommon in his vistas. Many maintain the sense of an all-encompassing and uninterrupted view. In showing us the material consequences of international capitalism, his pictures still function as opulent, luxurious objects. There is an awkward collision between the aesthetic richness of his mode of picturing— further embellished with the knowing allusions made to abstract art and earlier grand photographic traditions— and the destructions and depletions his photographs evidence.

In closing I'd like to bring in issues of identity and mourning, with the use of the iconography of the ruin in relation to Joel Meyerowitz's photographs of Ground Zero.<sup>12</sup> Before his photographs of rescue, recovery, demolition and excavation, as Liam Kennedy put it, "our eyes move across the images, searching for what we may not be sure, but mimicking the search going on in the images by the fire workers, police and others at the scene."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Joel Meyerowitz, *Aftermath*, London: Phaidon, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Liam Kennedy, 'Framing September 11: Photographs After the Fall' in *History of Photography*, Volume 27, Number 3, Autumn 2003.



Meyerowitz used a 10 x 8 wooden box view camera made in 1944 to create these monumental pictures of the trauma of the present. For him working with such a camera was important because the exquisite detail of its record gave his pictures a physical impact: "So these people who looked at this work— not as a work of art but as history, as what happened here— could literally look at the photographs and feel what it was like to stand in front of the pile." Meyerowitz's emphasis on the powerful illusionism of his pictures, his awareness of the monumental importance of his contemporary document of this destruction as history, nevertheless does not address their ideological function.

The traumatic ruin of the wreckage of the World Trade Centre served an important ideological role, a global reminder of a city 'wounded' by terrorism. The absence of images of victims may have contributed to the extraordinary fixation on the damage inflicted on the buildings. Patricia Harrison, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs was key in convincing State Department chiefs that a photography exhibition could be an effective weapon in countering misinformation about the US, arguing that it was necessary to convey to foreign audiences the physical and human dimensions of the recovery effort. To this end she worked with Meyerowitz to construct a touring exhibition of his photographs of Ground Zero. Launched by US Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington in February 2002, it was intended that 25 identical sets of the exhibition would travel to more than 60 countries by the end of 2005. In travelling the world, these apocalyptic scenes at the heart of the wealthiest nation in the world, were intended to shape and maintain a public memory of the Sept 11th attacks and their aftermath. At the same time, Meyerowitz's Ground Zero pictures also carry with them the ghosts of other awesome spectacles of

destructions: many of Richard Misrach's portrayals of the American West as a "Frankenstein's monster" serve as uncanny rehearsals for what Meyerowitz and the US government has been showing the world.