

# ON LANDSCAPE PROJECT

## Landscape Interrupted

These days, “to landscape” a place generally means to improve it with reference to Nature, usually by adding plants to soften the impact of buildings. With a simple shift from noun to verb, a grand history of garden design and academic painting has been reduced to a few lollypop trees and an occasional patch of grass. The artists in this exhibition point back in various ways to the tradition of landscape, recuperating aspects of its power to inform, transport and transform the viewer, not only by evoking other places and moments, but also by heightening our sense of the here-and-now. In these works landscape also functions as a frame to be transgressed. All four artists challenge the straightforward representation of locations, offering a sense of nowhere, everywhere and elsewhere.

Minna Kantonen photographs trees in cities. Not just any trees: she focuses her attention on the small arboreal clusters that appear in the shadow of larger structures. Through Kantonen’s lens, these by-products of the new urbanism have a poignant presence. On the one hand the vistas are generic; London, Berlin, Paris, Lisbon and Helsinki blur into a single megalopolis. On the other hand, there is something awkward, surprising and charming about the trees, an impression that is heightened by the photographer’s careful choice of light and framing, and by the rhythm and sequence of pictures. Inevitably reflecting contemporary anxieties about gridlock and climate change, the project is caught between politics and poetics. Relics of the wilderness, city trees serve as living symbols of the natural world. They remind us of what is lost and also represent survival. These witty, affectionate images invite us to become more aware of the arrangement of urban space, and to consider our place within it.

The literal comes into collision with the sublime in Emma Wieslander’s work, two projects centering on the setting sun. In *Wish You Were Here*, she has produced a series of tenuous apparitions, constructed images that teeter between sunset seascapes and images of light bulbs hanging above a dirty studio floor. Although the reality of the set-up is difficult to ignore, the eye somehow longs to draw out the illusion of sky, sun and sea. The result of a desire to create a sense of vastness within the confines of the artist’s studio, these photographs make the most of minimal means. A few drips left behind by the studio’s previous occupant are combined with the clichés of landscape composition in a bid for visual seduction. Different temperatures of light bulb produce different moods. No one is fooled, but the illusion does not disappear.

In *Burnt*, Wieslander has used a magnifying glass and sunlight to burn the sun out of a series of sunset photographs. The centre of each image becomes a blind spot, a void. The charred edges of the holes are resolutely anti-illusionary while maintaining a romantic charge. As in the light bulb images, the means of production are clumsy, almost absurd, yet the results are elemental. It is difficult to look at the glow of these impossible, doctored suns without feeling their warmth and power.

In her *Constructed Landscapes*, Dafna Talmor uses collage to transform intimate landscapes into images of greater universality. To make these pictures, she draws on an archive of negatives made to preserve the memory of places significant to her life. Most photographers have similar collections of images made under a personal compulsion that never seem quite sufficient as pictures in their own right. Cut with a scalpel and spliced to another, the negatives produce hybrid places, impossible locations in which elements of Israel, Venezuela, the United Kingdom and the United States merge into idealized, imaginary spaces. The images are enticing, delirious, with strong graphic compositions and subtle layered textures. The process has its challenges and risks; an image cannot be anticipated, and is not fully

revealed until the moment of printing. Raw, dark spaces, created in places where only one layer of negative remains, function simultaneously as openings and obstructions. The resulting landscapes represent an accumulation of memory and the projection of an ideal.

Although the three photographers have different approaches, they share a complex relationship to the photographed reality. They all honor the indexical trace, photography's direct physical link to the world, yet all three point beyond the literal to spaces of imagination, projection and identification. Each of these projects involves a conceptual system, but one whose outcome cannot be predicted. Kantonen has photographed urban trees for several years, scouting locations deliberately and by chance, shooting each spring, and producing an evolving series with a life of its own. The editing and arrangement of the sequences of images is as important as the shooting, creating the potential for narrative and projective identification with the trees. Wieslander's process is experimental in constructing and combining elements in search of affective charge. The quest is for pictures that will function as landscapes and also play on the eye and mind in a particular way. Talmor, too, approaches her work in an exploratory spirit, combining and recombining forms until useless fragments are redeemed into new, workable images. The terms of success are defined in the viewing and unfold as the series of images grows.

Minna Pöllänen's work expands the frame of the photograph to incorporate objects and interactions in the landscape. Usually involving industrially processed wood and basic woodworking skills, her site-specific structures defamiliarize and reconstruct natural elements, underlining our mediated relationship to them. If the land art of the 1960s and 70s was typically rather grandiose, these interventions are characterized by modesty and wit. Projects based on a particular patch of Finnish forest have included rebuilding dead trees with scraps of planks, comparing the circumferences of pine cones, and constructing viewing platforms with no view in the traditional sense. The photographs in the *Nature Trail* series document these real-world interventions and also hold their own as free-standing images. A photograph like *Establishing an Average* points to the futility of attempting to calibrate the natural world against human systems of measurement. With a low viewpoint, and a horizon cluttered with young trees, the image sidesteps the sublime and the picturesque in favour of a more idiosyncratic, detail-oriented aesthetic.

Pöllänen's *Observatories* (previous locations have included Montreal, Helsinki and Brooklyn) are placed near significant sites/sights, but deliberately overlook them. Made of plywood and waste pipe, without any fancy optics, they invite us to reconsider the everyday. This exhibition's indoor *Observatory* directs our gaze to the cityscape surrounding the gallery. The pre-determined views limit rather than extend our grasp of the scene, and a false wall thwarts our desire to compare the selected sights to a broader vista. Yet the carefully selected sights are revelatory, carefully composed selections from the continuum of urban space. Pöllänen's *Sightseeing Tours* (one of which will accompany the exhibition) reinforce this notion of vernacular sightseeing, replacing the usual tourist spiel with other modes of information and exchange designed to awaken a critical awareness of how materials, economics and power relationships come together to shape the space around us.

The four artists in the exhibition relate in different ways to real places and to landscapes familiar from the histories of painting, photography and land art. Landscape serves as inspiration but explicit influences are held at arm's length. The picture plane serves less as a window onto the world than as a site of exploration and experimentation. Thus the projects are at once representations, reflections on representation, and direct visual experiences in and of themselves. These are works that defy fixed interpretation and invite viewers to experience them in the present.

-Lucy Soutter