

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN ART:

SOUL-PICTURE LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHS:

Kirsten Pinz, Bela Letto, and Barbara Rosenthal in Berlin

by Ngan Le

"Seelenbilder und Landschaften - Fotografien Barbara Rosenthal, Kirsten Pinz, Bela Letto" ("Landscape Photographs as Artist's Metaphor") 13 August - 31 August 2011 Vernissage Friday 12 August, 19h .Music live video/music performance by Barbara Rosenthal and DJ RoBeat 17 August , 20h; Curator: Roland Göckel Projects. Galerie Christian Glass, Pariser Str. 11, 10719 Berlin Die-Sa 13-19 Uhr  
<http://www.galerie-glass.de>

Viewers expect photography to portray the outer world, and with greater accuracy than other media. But the best fine art photography expresses the photographer's inner mind.

In Berlin this summer, the photo-text-music-video installation "Seelenbilder und Landschaften" ("Landscapes as Artist's Metaphor") at Galerie Christian Glass, presented three international fine-arts photographers who portray real, recognizable imagery in ways that define themselves more than the subject matter. Curated by Roland Göckel, the exhibition showed how in the hands of Kirsten Pinz (Berlin), Bela Letto (Rumania) and Barbara Rosenthal (New York), cameras become windows to souls. Pinz's and Letto's digital color photography hung across from each other in the front gallery; Rosenthal's analog 35mm black-and-white film photographs hung in the back gallery with a table of her books and videos, and in the basement video lounge her photo-poetry-DVD "Surreal Photo-Stories" played as a loop. On August 17, there was also an evening of Rosenthal's photo-and-text-based video shorts in collaboration with live electronic music by Berlin's

DJ RoBeat. Galerie Glass has made a bold statement for photography as an art form, and as a contemporary New Media genre.

All three photographers express themselves in terms of "mood", but quite differently. The photographs of Kirsten Pinz and Bela Letto are digital color, all variously sized and framed, and they both shoot stop-action from one stationary and perpendicularly framed viewpoint. Barbara Rosenthal's images are never still, and her long tonal-range grayscale photographs are very curious and other-worldly.

Barbara Rosenthal's uniform, almost starkly framed and matted, 35mm full-frame analog-film unmanipulated digital prints, do, inarguably depict natural landscapes. But they more strongly present an internal world (that can only exist in her own mind). This world filters through the technical specs of her manual cameras, lenses, and chemical processing and digital printing, which leave pictorial evidence of themselves she refers to as "artifacts". Her photographs are strikingly original, unusual and personal. She speaks of "photographic vision", describing it as "metaphysical, surreal, existential, dream-induced, fable-like, magic."

The 15 photographs in her portfolio for this show were shot within the last 5 years on three continents, many from moving conveyances. The camera pushes into space on various planes, the landscape thrusts itself toward the edges, races into corners, showing much sky. The world whirls and streaks around this photographer, and she is not stationary within it. Rosenthal has often said she photographs in a trance. She says she shoots "as if all the objects in a moving universe strike a perfect balance, and everything stops or leaves a trail.

"My eye-mind grabs things coming at me from all sides simultaneously; I

calculate all the different speeds, vectors, quarks, masses and locations. My tally-mind tallies them against the rectangle, lens, shutter speed and aperture. I know how they're going to hit. I see them as a converging, moving target. I foresee the finished scene. It's very fast, but I align myself and wait or keep shifting as the pieces fly into place. That's when I click the shutter."

It would be wrong to think of Barbara Rosenthal's photographs as merely bizarre landscapes. These resultant "moments of perfect balance" and "perfect" relationships have an ominous feeling, which clues us to the artist's world view. Her basement DVD loop, "Surreal Photo-Stories", revealed more of her Kafkaesque mental landscape, now set with ominous characters, animals, architecture and scenery. This 20-minute DVD of 130 of her photographs (1976-2011) organizes them into the fable-like categories she first became aware of when preparing her book "Soul & Psyche" in 1996: Trapped Figures, Tiny Houses, Strange Neighborhoods, Aberrant Trees, Sinister Forests, Eerie Locations, Free Birds, Renegade Horses and Dark Continents. The soundtrack is Rosenthal's voice reading surreal stories from her book "Sensations". The stories and photographs tell of an individual seeking safety in a dangerous world, possibly of resurrection. Her work brings us into her unconscious and our own.

In Barbara Rosenthal's work, and in the photographs of Letto and Pinz, artists' choice of subject matter, and use of their medium, transmit inner messages. Bela Letto and Kirsten Pinz both clearly define their subjects and locations (usually beachfront). They capitalize on a universal symbol: nothing seems more primal than seascapes, where three great forces yield to each other: land, water, and sky. Pinz and Letto both make the viewer feel still, silent, isolated, sad, yearning to immerse our souls in the vast ocean.

Kirstin Pinz, from the port city Hamburg, photographs incoming tide in realistic color and attention to detail. The sea is strong, assertive, with deep low-saturation blues and greens. The sand is uniform, undisturbed, the horizon absolutely straight. But a small object, such as a shell on the beach or a post in distant waters, anchors the isolated viewer's staunch gaze. Pinz believes in the invincibility of the individual.

Bela Letto's photographs are dreamier, impressionistic, in soft pastel, low-saturation, high-value color. They often showcase a single person ("The Angler") or hint at their presence ("Sylt"), in mid-distance. Letto's ocean breathes serenely at first. But then, on Letto's beach, a series of small obstacles must be carefully navigated, carefully negotiated, to enter the photographer's personal space. Each of Letto's photographs seems to lead the viewer on a path.

Barbara Rosenthal's memorable images might be the scenery of our dreams, or more likely, our racing wishes and nightmares. Her realm is the mental. Kirsten Pinz confronts reality boldly. Bela Letto's photographs are lonely and sensual.

Ngan Le is an American art historian and curator based in Berlin, with special interest in international and image-text art.