

Jane Boyer
Sabine Delcour: Bas-reliefs et Cheminements
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The male gaze has been soundly chastised by postmodern feminist artists like Barbra Kruger in the iconic work, "Your gaze hits the side of my face", (1981) with its passive disengaged female marble bust in profile. The power struggle involved in the male gaze, as well as many other named gazes such as the "postcolonial gaze", describe the struggle of a dominant subject objectifying another through their gaze, often with the objectified other accepting their own passive position as object. But what happens if the issue of the gaze is not a gendered or political one, but a human one between nature and us? In *Bas-reliefs et Cheminements* (*trans. Progressions*), Sabine Delcour may present a glimpse of this conundrum in her eerie hyper-real landscapes.

There is a temptation to regard Delcour's full-frame medium format colour photographs, with their jutting rock formations and mountainous vistas, as part of the tradition of depicting the sublime in the late 19th and early 20th century by photographers such as Gustave Le Gray, Timothy O'Sullivan, Carlton Watkins and Ansel Adams. But where Delcour's images really sit is with postmodernist discourse of the gaze. Didier Arnaudet discusses Delcour's engagement with 'the gaze' for an earlier series, *Autour de Nous* (Around Us), a series of photographs taken during a residency in Ibaraki prefecture, Japan in 2002 depicting family houses under construction. In his essay, "Here and Elsewhere", which makes part of the available texts accompanying this current exhibition, he wrote, "*The gaze penetrates them, performing an autopsy of their future intimacy. Everything boils down to the same obvious fact: an inside which as of yet has nothing to protect it from the outside.*"

Delcour's gaze is at work again in *Bas-reliefs et Cheminements*. These photographs aren't about the overwhelming power and splendour of nature, though she says in her artist statement she is exploring the language of nature and its millennia of "*géopoétique*" tales. Rather, these images speak of the human gaze of possession, of obsession for what cannot be possessed, the gaze of assumed superiority and dominance. What Delcour presents here is not the postmodern, passive-aggressive, gender-biased, female-as-object of the male gaze, but a human-biased gaze thrown back on itself by its own assumptions of entitlement. What we really see in these images is a gaze, which contemplates itself, obsessed with its own phenomenology and power. It just happens to be looking at the splendour of nature.

But what are we without nature? Perhaps the very essence of Delcour's work lies in this question. Her response seems to be, "an empty shell gazing on what we cannot possess, basking in a majesty we can only simulate, facing a history we cannot begin to fathom."

These photographs are not beautiful landscapes, though they are beautiful and they are landscapes. There is a psychology at play in these works, the psychology of looking, illustrated through the phenomenon of seeing. Delcour gives voice to nature by replicating our vision, a curious act, which separates us utterly from nature in her photographs. We're left with her photographic process, which mimics human vision with its central point of focus and limited, blurry-around-the-edges field of vision. This presents a hyper-real view of these nature scenes creating the sensation that we are physically in the presence of, but set apart from the craggy Icelandic vistas and forested pathways; in truth, we are aware of our own vision and the power we have in 'owning' the scene through Delcour's photographs. This in turn makes us self-aware, the object of our own gaze.

Kruger did a similar thing making us feel aware of our male gaze, even if we were female, with "Your gaze hits the side of my face", but that debate stopped at the gender politics of the male gaze and female objectification. Delcour's work engages the universal existential self, questioning the real extent of our power and our seemingly fragile impotent existence.

Unfortunately, the show is let down by the exhibition space. The photographs feel like adornments, their stark near monochrome colours melding with the black, white and grey contemporary décor of the Medoc Chateau wine tasting room. These images need space to breathe in order to fully enter the visual space Delcour has successfully recreated through her photographic process. Instead I feel forced to imagine a more generous space.