

### Part three: *Flux, Signs, Symbols* (Fundació Suñol)

This is the third and last part of an exhibition (the first two parts of which can be seen at the Fundacion Foto Colectania).

Following the distinction between building and dwelling made by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Part One examines what man builds or dreams of building, while Part Two considers how men and women inhabit the world, and picture themselves in society or at work.

Here, Part Three rests on the assumption that life, whatever our efforts to control it, is a series of endlessly shifting circumstances. Mutability and evanescence are the conditions we live in, amidst signs and symbols as much as confronted with the so-called reality.

Nothing exemplifies this better than the climate, if we take this in the broader possible sense. As we begin our tour of the exhibition, coming out of the elevator or of the stairway, we encounter an intriguing photograph by Joel Sternfeld, *After a Tornado...*, which shows the chaos left behind by an all too common phenomenon. Opposite are three portraits by Jeff Brouws of people who survived the Katrina episode in New Orleans, and are trying to reconstruct their life. In both case, men's lives seem at the mercy of powerful and unpredictable forces.

If we decide to go left, past the Sternfeld picture, we enter a room in which our eyes are immediately attracted by a beautiful backlit photograph by Isaac Julien. Entitled *True North*, it purports to be a view of the North Pole, and is connected with a film Julien made about the Peary expedition which counted among its members the first black man ever to reach the Pole, Matthew Henson. But ironically, there is nothing « true » about this, not only because it is a reconstruction, but because the pole itself is impossible to locate with accuracy. What remains is the power of the adventure in itself, the quest itself is its own beautiful object.

In the same room, Stan Douglas's photographs of the center of Detroit speak of splendour and decline. Cities and buildings go through cycles, just like the economy (the splendid train station, now a Heritage building, stands to be rehabilitated, and who knows what will happen to the once prosperous, then derelict, downtown Detroit).

In the next large room, at the left there is Olafur Eliasson's wonderful *Glacier* piece in 40 elements, that captures the beauty and subtlety of such landscapes, constantly varying with the seasons, and now seriously threatened by the man-induced climate change.

Next to it, another usage of Nature, this time by Albert Renger-Patzsch, one of the great photographers of the first part of the 20th century, who looked in nature for the harmony and richness of motifs it provided in this idealised vision : *The World is Beautiful* (*Die Welt ist Schön* was a the title of one of his books).

Roni Horn, on the contrary, is concerned with the ever shifting nature of things, be they a face (*You Are the Weather*), or the surface of the water as here (*The River Thames, for Example*), where the surface of the water is inscribed with all sorts of words and phrases, as if it carried innumerable thoughts, dreams, and associations.

Alec Soth also took the river as a guide and a carrier for the discovery of precarious lives which the Grand Old Mississippi seems to leave in its wake like flotsam and jetsam.

Andreas Gursky's *Highway, Bremen* shows the growing importance in our lives of such «non-places», those semi-vacant entropic landscape created by the new forms of travel and architecture. The size of the tableau as well as the reference to a tradition of the sublime in painting result in tension and uncertainty.

Compared with this, Eggleston's pictures of the South seem to floating in suspended time. Dreamlike, yet without nostalgia, their enigmatic character is underlined by the presence of Álvarez Bravo's two magnificent evocations of sleep and dream.

Continuing past Jeff Brouws's already mentioned pictures, we come to Jonathan Monk's slide projection of words, a list of the items which could be seen on the wall in his mother's kitchen. In a world that seems entirely dominated by images, Monk raises the question of the power of words as representations.

Anri Sala's video shows the Mayor of Tirana's plea for colour as a way of fighting the city's morose decrepitude, a wager on the transformative power of art.

At the end of the same room, Anthony Hernandez's three photos show traces of human presences left by homeless people in the L.A. «jungle». The artist, just like Sharon Lockart's work on the New England habitat, becomes a kind of anthropologist carefully collecting traces of what is by essence impermanent.

So does Zwelethu Mthethwa's large portrait of a woman inside her poor house, whose walls, ironically, are covered with newspaper pages advertising glamour and consumerism. Hannah Starkey and Gregory Crewdson both suggest, in a different manner, the unreal character of contemporary life: one (Crewdson's) is dreamlike and cinematic; the other (Starkey's) suggests evanescence and artificiality.

Spencer Tunick's *Ship of Fools* can be seen as what it is, the result of a giant and playful performance, but it can also take more sinister undertones. The underlying violence is made explicit in Luc Delahaye's documentary tableau (here in Afghanistan), in which the horror of war appears distanced by the theatricality of the composition.

The last photograph in the show, Thomas Struth's remarkable *Pergamon Museum*, also intensely theatrical, brings the show to an end on a speculative note.

Have we, unawares, become mere spectators, museum dwellers of a kind? Is life in the global museum the useful place for us to meditate about history ? Or is it living in the ruins of past civilizations which we take for the real world?

**Régis Durand**