

Modelling landscapes - the Google Earth series by Stefan Peters

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Photography; in this digital era we use it not only to map the world and our lives, but this extremely accessible medium has apparently become an excellent mediator for quite a number of contemporary painters as well. Some set to work on images found on the Internet, others stage and shoot their own basic documentation.

According to the (David) Hockney-Falco thesis, optics were already used from the 15th century by a number of painters to project an image on a carrier by means of mirrors and lenses, a kind of prelude to photography and video projection as an intermediate step to the painted image. Many centuries later, artists such as Gerhard Richter will consciously choose not to conceal in any way the fact that the painting was created according to a photographic example image. In fact: the so-called errors or photographic side effects such as lens distortion, overexposure, motion blur, or the harsh drop shadow of the flash lamp are utilised in the painting as image qualities. Quite a number of painters today investigate how they can relate, explicitly or otherwise, to the photographic image. The crushing, ever expanding quantity of images, instantly available through a variety of media, has not made matters any easier. How does one, as a painter who embraces photography, find one's bearings in that eclectic stream of images?

Let us now consider, from this immense offer of images, the natural landscape as a subject. Aside from the unbearably idyllic Alpine poster on the wall of the Laundromat around the corner, or the kitschy waterfalls on the desktop of your mother's laptop, this natural landscape can of course also boast a formidable and intimidating painterly tradition of roughly five hundred years. This goes back to the time when exceptional painters such as Joachim Patinir ceased to treat the landscape as mere filling around a portrayed subject but as a fundamental, autonomous, and serious topic. Although few of us remain unaffected by natural beauty and the authentic feelings that we as humans project upon it, the fact remains that, just as with tourist pictures, a flair of disconnectedness or kitsch seems to lurk around the corner when it comes to approaching the subject as a painter. It seems to have rather become the domain of the amateur painter, who seems generally less preoccupied with the artistic urgency or cultural accuracy of his work.

How can this tranquil, emphatically flat landscape of contemporary pictorial art regain its valid, proper voice? There are quite some examples, such as the intriguing, almost fairy-like natural landscapes in the work of Peter Doig or the deeply romantic seascapes of Thierry Decordier for example. A surprising presence in the genre is David Hockney, a thematic glutton, who has, as a celebrated elderly painter, taken up the landscape theme again. Today, this artist frequently creates stunning landscape paintings. Even if, in his work, photography and computer images are expressly utilised in the creative process, these days he is outside painting in nature, in all weathers, on large formats, with final results that are far removed from the photo-inspired image.

Another person whom I would just as easily and by no means inappropriately add to the list of strong examples of exciting, significant trajectories in the context of the painted landscape genre is Stefan Peters (B).

This young, multidisciplinary artist started in the year 2010 with an on-going and ever-expanding series of paintings of natural landscapes through which he manages to rethink a thing or two in a very balanced and refined way. Through the connection with our passion for taming the world in a photographic manner and cataloguing our surroundings into containable stories, he injects in this very subtle, poetic set of images both a contemporary and a historical view of the world.

Formally, these are works of considerable and varying size, usually circular (sometimes rectangular), colourful and above all atmospheric paintings on canvas. Peters first sets out to find source material of photographic landscape images from all over the world through Google Earth on the Internet, to then subsequently reinterpret and manipulate them through painting. By introducing artificial optical effects in his painted images, such as for instance shadows cast by trees, shrubs or tree trunks in the foreground on an apparently painted background, Peters creates from simple photographic images of nature actual dioramas such as we know them from old natural history museums. Often, a sculptural staged foreground is combined with a painted background that aims to evoke an infinite depth of landscape yet fails to convince our spoiled contemporary eyes. In these museums, one will find large display cabinets with for instance a set of grazing, stuffed ungulates on a mound of artificial grass behind which a desert plain and a bright blue sky were painted with great and often amateurish abandon. This kind of décor and scenery can also be found in zoos, subtropical swimming paradises, or garishly decorated restaurants. Nowadays, these naive, failing still lifes and ensembles in museums strike us with a certain charm or even poignancy. Even if they retain a certain educational or entertaining value, it is difficult to regard these museologically displayed classification and representation urges from past, often colonialist times, in an entirely uncritical manner. Even the big brother of the diorama, the so-called Panorama, which originated in the 18th century as a form of spectacle, has an air of ineptness and naiveté about it. It depicts a representation of a landscape, townscape or historical scene on an oversized cylindrical canvas that completely surrounds the viewer while attempting, in a manner entirely bereft of irony, to evoke the entire surrounding world. Yet, no matter how excellently painted, these constructions have to contend with our complex perception of perspective and the difficult transition between a spatially staged foreground and a painted background as well.

In his paintings, Stefan Peters subtly and brilliantly creates the effect of this spatial foreground with a flat background by deliberately keeping any sense of depth out of the background. He paints a background image that feels like it was painted on a wall of a fictional room: it is an imitation in the second degree, and this is precisely what makes it so intriguing. His confusing game with our perception of depth, scale, and proportions is brilliantly executed and deliciously ambiguous.

The circular paintings from the series not only refer to the photographic lens, an old pair of binoculars, or a peephole in a door, they are also plain conventional tondi (tondo in the singular), known from the Renaissance, the period in which numerous circular shaped sculptural and painterly works were created.

Peters's work, through his particularly fast, agile, rather sketchy brushwork, is also reminiscent of traditional Chinese landscape painting, the Guó Hua, which is, by definition, calligraphic, executed in black or coloured inks on paper. Peters's paintings also reveal elements of Japanese prints, woodcuts that became popular in our region in the mid-18th century, which are also characterised by a simplified depth effect that consists of a foreground and a background, but no elaborated intermediate sequences as is the case in the old European tradition. In this way, the images of the landscape are both flat ('ascending') and deep, just as in Peters's work, albeit in a very different way.

The artist, through his depopulated visions of nature, his small empty film sets, his intimate theatres and fictional nature dioramas fundamentally speaks about nature, man, representation and depiction. He does so without postmodern deconstructionist insipidity, but in a sober, gorgeous and intense manner. It is not the brooding melancholy of Thierry Decordier's painted landscapes or the fairy fireworks of Peter Doig's world, but nature in its colourful beauty and simplicity, intelligently hovering between seriousness and irony, between commentary on our human, clumsy urge for representation and a sincere celebration of our fascination with nature.

Another quality is that Peters, in these paintings, does not shroud everything in a hazy veil of blurredness and pale colours. No: he shows things without mystifying them. He dares to clearly articulate shape and colour and does not hide.

The beauty of these works is anything but detached through their underlying references to how we as humans stand in a problematic relationship to whatever we consider to be nature and the world around us. They deal with what we regard as familiar or strange and exotic, as real or unreal, found or constructed, true or false. Through the dynamic, available and consultable digital mapping of our world, the snapshot cartography that creates a constant illusion in terms of the proximity and controllability of the worldly landscape, Peters comes to an entirely individual image series that exudes intimacy and beauty. But also: emptiness, meditation, slight discomfort or subtle threat.

In this way, Peters's Google Earth landscapes made fiction appear like fascinating models on canvas; scale models of a nature that has been made human and windless.