

Destinations (2004) Text from catalogue.

Conversation between Hugues Charbonneau, Patrice Loubier and Isabelle Hayeur.

PATRICE

Thursday, January 22, 2004

Dear Isabelle,

I start off the exchange with a few first impressions.

On several occasions I have looked at the photos from your series called *Destinations*, and found the same feeling that I experienced when I first discovered your work at the Skol Gallery in 2001, a feeling that I still have much trouble expressing, but that I will try now to elucidate. How can I describe it? Let us say that for me there is an uneasiness that characterizes these landscapes that appear so realistic. It is as if the limpidity of the image gives rise paradoxically to a form of perplexity, as if the literal quality of a faithful reproduction of the real gives way upon the look of the beholder, as if the spectator is presented with an enigma to be understood. On one hand, your photos appear to faithfully recreate landscapes that are so banal (but as I look at them, they become less and less so, or so it seems), or at least void of any drama or anecdote or, more precisely, void of any pathos: there are tags and graffiti on a low wall following the shoreline; there is a mobile home park next to a highway; there are people and their vehicles by the sea seen from far away, etc. On the other hand, these photos, which are seemingly so self-evident, appear to vacillate, so very subtly, because everything remains so real. Nevertheless, something seems to escape me. Is it the panoramic form and the unconventional extension of the landscape that the eye is forced to follow? Or is it the sober treatment, the neutral and even lighting that gives the impression of a suspended moment, a disembodied moment that confers something very impassable to these landscapes.

This feeling increases once we learn that the images are created using digital (re)composition (if I am not mistaken, if so, you will correct me). You create your work by grafting fragments of photos found on the Web together with photos you take by going to site yourself. It would be interesting if you took a moment to explain your way of taking photographs, which seems to imply the mixing of the "truth" found in reporting (that is, the testimonial value that is usually attached to the act of taking a photograph) with the reworking of objects made possible by the vast, imaginary museum of virtual images contained on the Internet. I find myself questioning what I see, but my suspicions have no grounds. Indeed I am unable to identify any breach in the verisimilitude whatsoever, as if the image was the result of an invisible manipulation that instilled therein some sort of fleeting allegorical signification. The mechanism is all the more so subtle (or perverse, or even underhand) that the digital recomposition does not give rise to any creative gap that would signal instantaneously the artificial nature of the process (which is totally

different from many works shown during the *Mois de la photo* in Montreal in 1997 that foregrounded the fictitious nature of their referents). Rather the process seems to dissolve in the verisimilitude of the representation. We are left with a complex image that brings together the usual documentary objectivity and the fiction of a made-up image.

There are also other recurrent and striking aspects in the series: the body of water – river, sea, stream or pond – as a leitmotif that governs or, at the very least, appears in all of your photographs; the alternation between water and earth that, in several images, disturbs our reading of the environment which, in turn, confers a certain level of ambivalence; and that, without talking about the fact that your photos are often a combination of nature and an environment that humans have changed. The trivial or downright banal character to the signs indicating that the space in question has been occupied (an abandoned wall, the monotony of a highway, etc.) holds in check the viewer's tendency to indulge in a contemplation of nature's sublime, which is nonetheless suggested by the format and the vibrant colours of the photographs.

In ending these first impressions, I have just one question: where do the titles come from? For example, is *Thébaïde* the name of a real place you photographed, a literary allusion or a key to reading the image?

ISABELLE

Sunday, January 29, 2004

When you say “gives rise paradoxically to a form of perplexity” and “as an enigma to be understood,” I find that to be quite exact. My images are meant to be ambiguous and free from explicit or univocal references. I construct them in such a way that they are inhabited by a plurality of meaning, that they are viewed as open questions. For example, in the photograph *Torrent*, there is a cohabitation of the savage and the civilized, the hospitable and the inhospitable, the marvellous and the incongruous. Such an image leads us to think about certain recreational or industrial sites. The same image could also evoke mining operations. The various elements that make up the image are perfectly integrated into their environment at the same time that they disrupt the image. It is as if the crux of the matter is to be found between fusion and domination that highlights our ambivalent attitude towards the planet.

These calm panoramas feign their impassibility. They seem to be in suspension, but something is stated therein without being told. It is this narrative dimension that solicits the viewer who observes the images up close. He or she takes note of the signs, the traces, the artefacts that are presented to him as keys to reading. The presence of water, of which you noted the recurrence, is one such indicator. Other natural elements play an important role in my photos. One of my friends told me that my photos were like a type of “climate.” The highways, the open horizons, the sand, the garbage, the piping, the birds, the dwellings are also a constant part of my photos. These markers establish bridges between the various images, thus creating discursive continuity.

As you say, these landscapes are characterized by a particular banality that oscillates between the familiar and the unusual. I often begin my montages with shots of anonymous places that I combine with more grandiose, exotic or even bucolic scenes. The bringing together of these spaces that are radically different and often antipodal gives rise to paradoxical hybrids.

The creation of realistic images using computer graphics is possible, if that is the artist's intention for, as you mention, many artists choose to leave the manipulation visible. I use digital photomontage as a technique to amalgamate all sorts of different places and to melt them into a single territory. These new spaces all totally coherent, making it possible to see *possible* worlds. Even if the touch up is indiscernible, it is nevertheless a part of the composition, because you feel to a certain degree the artificiality to the montage. Even if hidden, the crafting of the image creates a distance that perhaps confers to these photos a sense of disembodiment.

Above all else, photography is my primary resource. I do not use it for the documentary value that we usually associate with it; nonetheless, that does not mean that my work

does not have a certain documentary value. My photos do not seek to show the world as it is, but rather they seek to communicate the various impressions with which they leave us. The authenticity of these spaces does not really matter to me. It is rather what they teach us generally about our ways of living that really interests me. I use my shots as the reflection of certain realities. It is of little importance that my pictures are taken in North America, in Asia or in Europe. I remember a discussion you had with Hugues last year* when you said that places and experiences tended to become interchangeable in today's world. The global culture that we know today creates a world that is more and more "smooth." The bringing together of multiple sites renders the phenomena tangible.

I have collected all sorts of images since the beginning of my artistic practice. I often work with these "found" images by combining them with my shots. This image bank has made it possible for me to discover things that I would not have been able to discover otherwise. And because these images tell us about our vision of the world, our cultural habits and the way in which we plan our environment, they are of anthropological interest. A year or two ago, I started collecting images on the Internet. The quality is good enough to enable me to incorporate them as details in my compositions. They sometimes suggest certain paths for me to follow; or sometimes I look through them because I know what I am looking for right from the beginning. I often look at the satellite images on NASA's website that match the regions where I have travelled. For example, after having visited and documented southern Florida, I downloaded images of the Florida Keys. You are able to see how agricultural and urban development is gradually invading one of the most fragile ecosystems on the planet. This is one of the aspects that I wanted to make perceptible in the images *Plaisance* and *Thébaïde*. This last title is a key that helps the viewer to read the image. I wanted to suggest ideas of retreat, the desert or solitude.

*Discussion that took place in conjunction with
La petite enveloppe urbaine **No. 10**, Travel Pictures.

HUGUES

Monday, February 9, 2004

Dear Isabelle and Patrice,

Your discussion reminded me of the cognitive maps that I have often looked at in books on human geography. These maps make me think of Isabelle's work because such maps move beyond the rules concerning the site in absolute terms (a site that can be precisely identified using geometric rules). Rather they rely on rules of a living site, a site that can be narrated. If a person is asked to draw a picture the spaces that he or she knows, the result will be a map that reflects certain cultural, economic and ideological realities.

I am thinking about two different cognitive representations of San Francisco that I found to be of great interest. First, a Hispanic worker draws a map containing few elements that nevertheless take up much space on the piece of paper: the Mexican sector, a jerky line indicating the bus route he takes and the factory where he works. His boss, when it comes his turn, traces a complex network of streets covering the entire city. He then marks with the tip of his pencil the location of museums, restaurants, businesses, clients and the airport. He omits very few parts of city, but he does definitely not indicate the Mexican sector. There are then two San Francisco's superposed one over the other, not unlike transparent layers made by photomontage software that have but one thing in common, that is, the factory without which the two universes would be utterly disrupted.

It seems to me that the images from the series *Destinations* works according the same rules, that is by addition, amplification, subtraction, reduction and interdependence. Even though they appear to represent landscapes in absolute terms, they offer rather what could be called "Isabelle Hayeur's cognitive vision," that is, an object made up of souvenirs of places visited, of Web searches and perhaps, most of all, of certain questions that are important to the artist. There are recreational vehicles parked in natural settings that are seemingly so fragile. In another image, a concrete slab, left over from an older structure, is separated from a small village by a marine ecosystem and, on the horizon, a shopping centre indicates the beginnings of a new economic cycle. In *Citadelle*, the foreground is home to seagulls that share a feast of fish carcasses while in the background a large body of water, which could be an ocean, and a long wall covered in graffiti close out the composition. In other words, there are many elements that do not belong to the original site and yet they are somehow interdependent.

It seems to me that Isabelle's new body of work has little to say about the construction of contemporary images. Nor does it directly reproduce the exploitation of our natural heritage. Rather Isabelle's work appears to originate in game of equivalences between the ways in which she constructs her representation of the world and the way in which

ecological heritage is transformed by human occupation. This is a process that echoes another.

PATRICE

Tuesday, February 10, 2004

Dear Isabelle (and Hugues!)

I read with much pleasure your email of January 29 that allowed me to better understand your work, both how your photographs are created and the manner in which they signify as images. I think that one of the crucial elements to your artistic practice is the subtle balance between artifice and verisimilitude that you describe in the fourth paragraph of your email, a balance that I tried to evoke by talking about an ambivalence or a uncertain movement between the documentary and fiction. The graphic manipulation, as you explain it, is invisible, but it has nonetheless an effect on the spectator, even when he or she is not able to clearly identify any anomaly whatsoever (unless of course the person is well-versed in botany or geography and thus able to pinpoint certain environmental "stitches"). I would like to come back for a moment to the strangeness so prevalent in the images that are made in such a way. Even though I talked about banal environments, what strikes me now when I look at them again is the tension that resonates throughout the landscapes and which the initial feeling of familiarity masks at first. In one sense, nothing really happens in these large and calm horizons (the human presence seen therein gives above all a sense of the immensity of the almost empty picture); nevertheless, the universe's own impersonal inertia in the absence of the observer (this is akin to the "there is" sentiment of Lévinas), or the daily grind of a grey afternoon (as in *Peregrinity*) that can be felt, are sufficient to give something very poignant to the photographs. Rather than being indifferent towards the subject matter at hand as many contemporary photographic productions are, thus becoming banal in and of themselves, your work demonstrates a sort of amorphous plenitude of the ordinary without becoming beholden thereto.

In rereading what I just wrote, I realize that I describe the way in which I have appropriated your work by starting with what I felt when looking at your photographs. I am talking about what affect your photos have on me, that is, the subjective meaning that I make by looking at them. Alongside this approach that privileges what could be called the "tone" or the timbre of these images, there is another one that would make it possible for us to interpret them iconographically, by seeking to understand what they say on the way in which contemporary space is represented, on how land is used or on their relationship to the environment and to nature. (This could be seen as an alternative between sensory pleasure and interpretation of a work of art. We could thus either take in the image emotionally or read it as an image.) When I learned of the connotations regarding the title *Thébaïde* that could be considered as keys to guide the spectator, you point to the possibility of the two approaches (the title suggests a sensation all-the-while giving the image the status of a symbol).

I would like to end by spending a few moments discussing another title that is rich in meaning, that is the name *Peregnity*. I looked up the word in various English dictionaries without success, wondering at the same time whether or not it was a play on some French words like *pérérité* or *pérégrin* or even *pélerin*; indeed, it is difficult not to associate the title with the person who walks along the highway. And then when I look at the photograph more closely using the CD-ROM, I see a word on the road sign and all of a sudden I understand. It is an anagram for Repentigny! Besides that resonance, which evokes the stability of permanence as well as the idea of travelling, the title may illuminate the spectator as to the game your photograph plays with reality and fiction. In the same way that an actual place name is transformed by inverting two syllables, thus creating a fictitious name that is nevertheless believable, you graft digital fragments of landscapes in order to create an imaginary, yet coherent environment, a chimerical landscape that has all the impact of a real document.

ISABELLE

Tuesday, February 16, 2004

Dear Hugues,

I find it very interesting – and totally appropriate – the parallel you draw between the creation of a cognitive map and the way in which I create my photomontages. Cognitive maps are used to get a grasp of and to understand the environment in which a person evolves. These spatial reconstructions include not only an objective understanding of the space in question but also the relations that we have with them. We could say that space then integrates all *that takes place in particular area* by articulating what is structural, functional and symbolic.

Our relation to space is complicated and cannot be reduced to our physical interactions with it. The meaning of a space is derived from a condensation of the factual and the sensory. A space is first perceived, then read and interpreted. The space is then overloaded with mental images and psychological data. In all places the real and the imaginary come together.

We continually remake the world in our own minds. When we think about the things we have already seen and lived, we often deform them, we often intensify them, we often transpose them, we often confuse them. As you say, my photos, as with cognitive maps, work in a similar manner. They are tinted with a subjectivity that also reveals that part of ourselves that we confer on space.

ISABELLE

Saturday, February 28, 2004

Dear Patrice,

You talk about what you experience when looking at my landscapes and I am glad, because I privilege the sensory aspect of a work or art. I want people to experience my photographs both directly and physically. The large size of my photographs that tend to immerse the beholder helps to create this type of viewing.

As you so rightly observe, these images are inhabited by a tension that is in stark contrast with the apparent banality of some of my subjects. I believe that that tension is in part due to the construction itself. While composing my images, I create unusual perspectives and I mean to bring together places whose scale of size is different. Over and above a few formal inconsistencies that destabilise the eye of the viewer, there is also a strangeness that is created via the meeting of divergent universes. I just hope that this strangeness produces a hesitant, but perplexed feeling.

The spaces in which we live are characterized with a violence we no longer see or feel and to which we have gotten all too used. The landscape brings together broken up and discontinuous spaces. This dividing up is closely related to the atomisation of our daily lives (be it our work, living or leisure space). These fault lines and ruptures interest me. The people who commute from the city to the suburbs have a daily experience of such a dislocation without really realizing it. They then spend their weekends and annual vacations in enchanting places ("postcard-like") wondering very little about what such a fracture could mean. In some of my montages, I have tried to highlight this division of space, especially in images like *Alluvions* and *Dunes*, which I obtained through the mixing of images of holiday getaways and shots of North-American suburbs. When faced with these equivocal worlds, we seem to hesitate between attraction and repulsion.

I am also you really happy that you unravelled the play on words concerning *Peregrinity*. As you describe it so well, the sound of word was meant to suggest both ideas about perpetuity and peregrination. The word echoes, on one hand, the idea of the road as a place of passage and, on the other, the figure of the walker-nomad. This key also underscores the utopian dimension to this remodelled bedroom community. On the very edge of the city, in vacant lots and in open fields, the dichotomy between permanence and non-permanence is always present. These transitory spaces are the site of movement and change on all levels. The processes of transformation are particularly apparent, both their destruction and their regeneration.

The universes I construct also show both rupture and openness. Through a bringing together of the political and the poetic spheres, I hope to make people think about the ways in which we lay out and imagine space. The landscape is project between human beings and the world. By reinventing landscape, we define new relationships between the individual and the environment. We also construct our own identity.

Copyright :

Hugues Charbonneau, Patrice Loubier, Isabelle Hayeur and
Centre de recherche urbaine de Montréal (CRUM) 2004

<http://isabelle-hayeur.com>