



Ori Gersht
Places That Were Not

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The sector of the Pyrenees known as the Lister Route has seen some history, but the history can't be seen. Once there were marked borders here dividing France and Spain, and this is where, in 1940, Walter Benjamin failed to cross into unoccupied territory and soon after – in the border town of Portbou – took a suicidal dose of morphine. Ori Gersht's photographic series *Evaders* (2009) surveys this dramatic mountain landscape, pondering its literal fogginess and allegorical lack of purchase on historical truth. In *Evaders, Far Off Mountains and Rivers*, massive blue-toned stone outcrops dominate the foreground, such that it takes a while to notice a leather holdall abandoned on a path. The latter, particularly in the context of the legendary missing manuscript that Benjamin had supposedly been carrying in his suitcase while he fled, is a wholly overdetermined insert, a MacGuffin of sorts; but the image has been drifting into the speculative and fantastical from the start. Its frosty blue colour scheme (assumedly computer-tweaked) is too redolent of Caspar David Friedrich's desolate meditation on death *The Sea of Ice* (1823–4) to be accidental, and the small image *Evaders*, with its single figure amid snowy pines, makes the hitching-to-history overt.

And so these photographs are, strangely, refutations of the visual and of themselves. We can't see the significant landscapes they place before us and thus, it's suggested, can't see the past: not really, because our understanding of landscape is cultural. In this case, it's filtered through both geopolitical history and the history of art. A man alone under the sky can no longer be just that, to an educated audience: Friedrich, and the history of German Romanticism, get in the way. (Other images here contain strong shades of the German's English equivalent in grandiose emotion, John Martin.) For Gersht, this dovetails with the argument that Germanic heritage got in the way for Benjamin too, and that his fidelity to the country's culture meant that he failed to grasp the nature of the Nazi threat in time. The erasure rubs two ways, because arguably we can't apprehend Romantic art correctly either, since we don't live in that time; distance erases, and fictions create more fictions. The figures in these narratives might not have gotten away, but their afterimages can't be caught.

Three photographs from a second series, *Hide and Seek* (2008–9), approach another site of disappearance and of fearful flight. In hushed images of marshes in Poland and Belarus, which sit among the remains of the giant forests that used to cover much of Europe, Gersht was apparently seeking places where those fleeing political upheaval would hide. This notion ghosts images that scurry away from it: a lone figure in a boat on a lake (*Hide and Seek, Boatman*, 2008); skinny reeds rising from water (*Hide and Seek, Swamp no. 01*, 2009). Performing a dumb tracing of the plane of the visual in the face of what's known to be vanished, mingling itself helplessly with a continuum of dreamy representations – for there is much refracted Impressionism in these spectral, light-filled images – this is photography as failure, but knowingly so. And paradoxically, in underlining the dense visual perplex that attends the landscape of memory, it is not failure at all. *Martin Herbert*

Evaders, Far Off Mountains and Rivers,
 2009, lightjet print on aluminium,
 152 x 230 cm, edition of 6 + 2AP