

Ori Gersht: Places That Were Not

**Ori Gersht:
Places That Were Not**

Andrew Mummery Gallery, London
13th – 27th Feb 2010

Ori Gersht's images inhabit the realm of the epic and personal clothed in the aesthetic language of the "beautiful". His regard for technological and historical photographic processes, and literary, philosophical and metaphysical references, imbue his images with layers of intentional meaning and visual provocation. From the moment one enters the Mummery and Schnelle Gallery we are led on an orchestrated journey from *Evaders F Route* (2009) to *Hide and Seek Drape 01* (2009). We move from large-scale panoramic and epic photographs to small-scale images. Our visual trail takes us from the Lister route in the Pyrenees that enabled people to escape the advancing Nazi's, to the swamps and marshes on the borders of Poland and Belarus, our viewpoint and relationship to space constantly shifting.

Gersht's practice questions the idea of photographic truth, his images both a record of his journey, and his quest for the loaded trace. *The Evader* series deploys the colour palette and vantage points of the American sublime artists,



such as Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Edwin Church and the German Romanticism of Casper David Friedrich. In order to photograph *Far Off Mountains and Rivers* (2009), Gersht was dropped by helicopter onto a craggy outcrop of rocks, only inhabited by nesting birds, overlooking the Lister Route with its associations with Diaspora, smuggling and escape. The resulting

image embraces the mythology surrounding the suicide of Walter Benjamin, who hoping to evade the Nazi's and finding the route closed in 1940 returned to his hotel, took an overdose of morphine and died; the abandoned leather bag in the foreground a reference to both his tragic failed journey and his mythological "lost" manuscript. Shot with a medium

Hot Shows



format camera, from three vantage points, the negatives were scanned and digitally joined by the technical expertise of Alex Kent. Challenging the way the camera lens is designed to record space, this is an impossible image, both existing as truth and fiction simultaneously. Romantic sensibility is also evident in images such as *Evaders F Route* (2009), where the landscape is shrouded in the wraithlike ethereal presence of an early morning mist. It is, though, the transmutation of space and place, even when a specific location is "somewhere", which fascinates Gersht. *Evaders, Days into Nights* (2009) is shot at the Walter Benjamin Memorial PortBou. A dark figure, his head hunched into his neck, almost fills the space, blocking our view. Gersht cites Benjamin describing Kafka and "the way the characters of Kafka's book tend to carry the smallest burdens of the world but in the same way Atlas carried the entire world on his shoulders". The strangely electric phenomena, of a reflection of light on the dense black of the photographic print, are reminders of the alchemy of photography.

Atmospheric conditions and the seasons have always played an important role in Gersht's photographs, mist or

fog can become a statement of loss, or those "inconsolable gaps" that exist between a physical experience and a psychological one. *Hide and Seek*, the second body of work in the exhibition, is shot around the swamps and marshes of Eastern Europe. *Swamp no 01* (2009), is an image of a site loaded with history and underpinned with literary references to Primo Levi's book *If Not Now, When*. Drawing on Levi's descriptions of the forests and marshes between Poland and Belarus, as described by the partisans he met after the war, Gersht felt attracted by these sites, which are threatening and unattractive and yet could become places of refuge.

If Not Now When no. 01 (2009) appears to take on the fragility of stained colour field painting, or watercolour. Taken just before dawn, when shapes begin to emerge, the landscape is mysterious and resonant, dissolving and reappearing like a mirage out of the fragile stained colours. Operating in the gap between memory and time, what is real and what is reflection becomes impossible to separate. Gersht often deploys long exposures, espousing Benjamin's thought that there is something almost spiritual in the technique and its engagement with

time. In *Hide and Seek Boatman* (2008) the horizon becomes completely dissolved, the image a monochromatic blue, the boatman hovering on the reflective surface like McNeill Whistler's *River of Dreams*.

Layering and metaphoric language continues with *Hide and Seek Drape no.01* (2009). Net curtains, traditionally used to keep out prying eyes, and delineate public and private space, were collected by Gersht from houses in Poland and hung from a frame in front of the lens of the camera. With the perspective diminished, the illusion is created of face and landscape dissolving or amalgamating into one other. This device is metaphoric. The area is where the Sobibor concentration camp was sited, and quickly replaced by trees, whose roots thrived on the ashes below the surface, and that a photograph would be unable to capture.

For Gersht there is always "something that is emotionally charged when walking on a route that is loaded with history. I'm never trying to recreate anything, only re-mapping it... these are witness works that do not bear witness, they are places of photographic fiction and mythology." JEAN WAINWRIGHT

Opposite *Hide and Seek, Swamp no. 01, 2009*

Above *Evaders, 2009*

All Images © Ori Gersht