

Ori Gersht Being There

Joanna Lowry

Two kinds of time – historical and cosmological – converge forcefully in Ori Gersht's desert pictures. The desert is peculiarly situated within the modern cultural imagination. In mythic terms it is a site of absence, an emptiness, a space beyond the city and the social. If the city has become the emblematic symbol of modernity then the desert is its other, and all of those binary oppositions through which culture is customarily distinguished from nature can be mapped onto a polarisation between these two spaces.

The desert is thus mythically positioned outside modernity and outside history, and those who live in it or survive it take on a mysterious romance in the modern imagination. In narrative terms it occupies a place beyond the social that the individual might go out into, or be expelled to, only to return magically transformed and renewed. The desert, therefore, operates almost as a symbol of the limits both of a geography and a history: beyond those



limits is the endless disinterested extension of cosmological time.

In reality of course, the desert is a place in which history is played out and in which wars are fought. The peculiar potent symbolism of the desert ensures that it is written into the historical formation of modern national and political identities even as it promises some notion of an exteriority to them. The desert of Judea, outside Jerusalem is just such a place. In Gersht's photographs the camera records with a kind of impassivity the vast space of the desert as a place in which geology is exposed, in which rocks might lie undisturbed for a thousand years, in which the events of history are set against the endlessly repetitive cyclical temporality of night and day. It is a space of the sublime. But across these spaces run the tyre tracks of vehicles, scouring the surface of the land, indices of those other more recent histories and current struggles: of domination, reclamation, colonisation, and war.

Ori Gersht

The emptiness of the desert as an object of representation for photography again brings us close to the figure of the monochrome in painting. It approaches the status of the blank canvas – a space of the non-event. But Gersht positions his photographs just short of this pure modernist space. The desert floor is flattened but it is not totalising – at the top of the pictures lies the narrow strip of the horizon. Gersht's photographs pose the problem of just what events occur within the boundaries of this horizon – a military truck must have careered across this empty terrain, a Bedouin boy casually grazes

his goats across invisible political borders, a burning bush flares in the night. In such a politically contentious place and time no event is innocent, every incident is charged with potential significance. The camera records this collision between the fragile intensity of human history and the much slower time of the natural world. Its impassive documentation offers a space in which the overlaying of these different kinds of time can be momentarily brought together in the same picture and held there in a kind of suspended atemporality. The desert looks back at us, through the frame.

