

paul serrada – et in arcadia ego

...“et in arcadia ego” (even in arcadia i exist) is a Latin phrase that is usually interpreted as a ‘memento mori’ (remember you must die) – a reminder of man’s mortality. this phrase has come down history as if spoken by hades personified. such phrase then is meant to set up an ironic contrast between the shadow of death and the usual idle merriment that the nymphs of ancient arcadia were thought to embody. art is an answer of humankind to the shocking discovery of mortality. however, death’s claim to rule even arcadia is challenged by all that art, which survives ourselves at least up to the present time. the duty of art in the face of death, and her ‘raison d’être’ (purpose of being), is to represent life, console anxieties, evoke emotions, balance feelings, break isolation, and allow communication about the unutterable.

paul serrada’s present photographs prove that arcadia is a poetic ideal that still resonates in the visual arts. having professionally lived and travelled in many countries, serrada has the chance to capture eclectically the spirit of places he experiences around the world. serrada began the present project in 2003, and the images presented herewith are a careful selection amongst dozens of photographs of the virgin forest kočevski rog in southeast slovenia, which ranks amongst the most forested countries in europe.

in european tradition the forest is a magical, religious and mythical place. be it as it may, the forest has another dimension to life that feels ambiguous - soothing and frightening; homely and strange; attractive and repulsive. finding oneself alone in the forest, one may perceive an amazing array of experiences – noises, shadows, metaphysical feelings and emotions beyond reason. this creates the profound and overpowering experience of the sublime. suddenly, the scales change, nature grows enormously, while one grows powerless and becomes insignificant. it is such a feeling of awe that serrada captures in his photographs. what is more, the absence of man in these forests takes the scale of nature away. the large size of the prints also accentuates the dominating sense of nature.

all of serrada’s forest photography reminds its viewers the everlasting mystery in nature. he brings to the present aspects of the lost garden of eden as it was inhabited by the ancient satyrs and centaurs and encountered by the medieval knights in search of the grail. in one group of photographs he presents actual pictures of thick and dense forests. these photographs are printed on mesh that allows light to seep from the rear, thus dissolving the picture. one feels that on these prints nature is at work and that old things dying give way to new life. serrada’s art is a reflection on nature’s composition - decomposition - recomposition, which reflects the life - death - rebirth cycle. the energy for the pictures’ transformation originates from beneath appearances, the dark premises of the roots, the fallen logs and

dead leaves, which is the realm of the underworld. amidst the picture's darkness one may see the new shoots of nature, light and life emerging.

in another group of photographs serrada suggests something beyond the romantic view of nature. the observed decomposition is interiorized and taken on the level of new patterns: "nature reconstructed". paradoxically, technology facilitates serrada to reintroduce nature in art, which is something parallel to the act of creation. he digitally manipulates a photograph by recycling an endogenous pattern. the way he reproduces a pattern is not mechanical, but rather organical. there is a variation that follows a formula akin to nature. at first glance the viewer does not notice it. as soon as the repetition is noticed, the viewer begins to feel lost in the woods – the nauseic feeling of disorientation. this makes the viewer wonder where he is and why this picture relates to him, and finally what this picture suggests about his existence. the repetition of patterns also evokes the phenomenon of rebirth. in one instance serrada builds the repetition diagonally, creating an oblique perspective. in another he arranges the repetition in a spiraling fashion. in either case serrada's photography is invested with movement, which is life. the repetition that serrada employs brings to mind fractal asymmetric diffusion, as actually found in nature. even though such pictures have been arrived at artificially by means of digital technology, nevertheless, they look organic and natural.

paul serrada's "et in arcadia ego" is evidence of the fact that art can blend well with psychology, philosophy, and phenomenology. with his photographs serrada momentarily mimics the role of the creator, in a way that is too focused to go down as hubris. he takes a picture of a detail of god's creation and suggests that there can be seen the 'raison d'être' of existence. in this respect serrada is like prometheus, offering a secret that nevertheless requires of the viewers their eternal attention.

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