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Beyond the Picturesque

Introduction to the exhibition
Steven Jacobs and Frank Maes

The concept of 'the picturesque' goes back to the eighteenth century and from the start was closely linked to that of the English landscape garden which replaced the strict geometry of the French garden with a carefully created and staged *image* of nature. Instead of showing a preference for the capriciousness of nature, the picturesque is characterised by the image of the capriciousness and irregularity of nature. Indeed, in the aesthetics of 'the picturesque' nature is approached indirectly by way of images – especially through the paintings of Claude Lorrain, Salvator Rosa or by Flemish and Dutch landscape painters. English landscape gardens were created by "to be seen in the way that they would be painted by a Claude Lorrain or a Nicolas Poussin," the term 'picturesque' therefore refers to a particular type of landscape which was considered to be a suitable subject for a painting and to a piece of reality which could be viewed as if it was a painting. While on the one hand new landscape gardens were provided with carefully coded meanings and constructed as a series of composed scenes, on the other hand the spectator himself could discover and recognise picturesque scenes in nature.

The exhibition in S.M.A.K. examines how the concept of the picturesque may still (or once again) be applied to **artistic interpretations of the contemporary landscape**. First of all it is striking how many artists are interested in the hybrid contemporary landscape in which the differences between the centre and the periphery, between city and rural areas and between nature and culture are no longer clearly defined. The Italian urban architect Mirko Zardini believes "it is only the sensitivity to the picturesque that allows us to observe this territory with new eye: to understand and appreciate the difference, contrasts, mixtures and fine distinctions." Secondly, the contemporary natural

landscape is largely and globally colonised with the aid of a worldwide distribution of images in the form of works of art and all sorts of medial landscape images in film, television, tourism, and so on. Artists frequently refer to depictions like this. They too approach the elusive and capricious contemporary landscape indirectly through previously created landscape images and with the aid of references to traditional models and interpretations.

Well known landscapes in art history form the reference point for various artists participating in *Beyond the Picturesque*: Paul Cézanne (via Marcel Berlanger), Caspar David Friedrich (via Jussi Kivi), Giovanni Bellini (via Christian Vetter), Vincent Van Gogh (via Wouter Verhoeven), Claude Monet (via Damien De Lepeleire) and Timothy O' Sullivan (via Mark Klett and Katrin Sigurdardottir) are indirectly present in the exhibition.

Many other works refer more generally to **landscape clichés**. Often they revert to early pictorial models but they have in the meantime become a part of our collective memory through advertising, popular image culture or the tourist image industry. *Beyond the Picturesque* takes the visitor past the very familiar images of the Italian campagna (Joel Sternfeld), high mountains (Marc De Blieck, Monica Studer / Christophe van den Berg, Oliver Lutz, Rapedius/Rindfleisch, Ellen Harvey), the American west including the Rocky Mountains and the Grand Canyon (Mark Klett, Katrin Sigurdardottir, Christian Vetter, Mungo Thomson), the coasts of Scotland and Iceland (Jan Kempenaers), the Australian outback (Alexis Destoop), the High North (Geert Goiris), the jungle (Axel Hütte) and waterfalls (Monica Studer / Christoph van den Berg, Sylvia Henrich).

In *Beyond the Picturesque* these stereotype landscapes are used to the full and highly praised but also undermined and stripped. Indeed, various artists emphasise the **artificial character of their landscape images** – something which is inherently linked to the aesthetics of 'the picturesque'. In fact in the eighteenth century painters and tourists were advised not to look directly at the landscape but to use a *Claude Glass* – an oval mirror named after the painter Claude Lorrain – and so consciously observe the landscape as an image. This aspect of reflection can be seen in the exhibition in a number of ways – the spectator who is looking at this landscape is confronted with his/ her own image in works by Monica Studer / Christoph van den

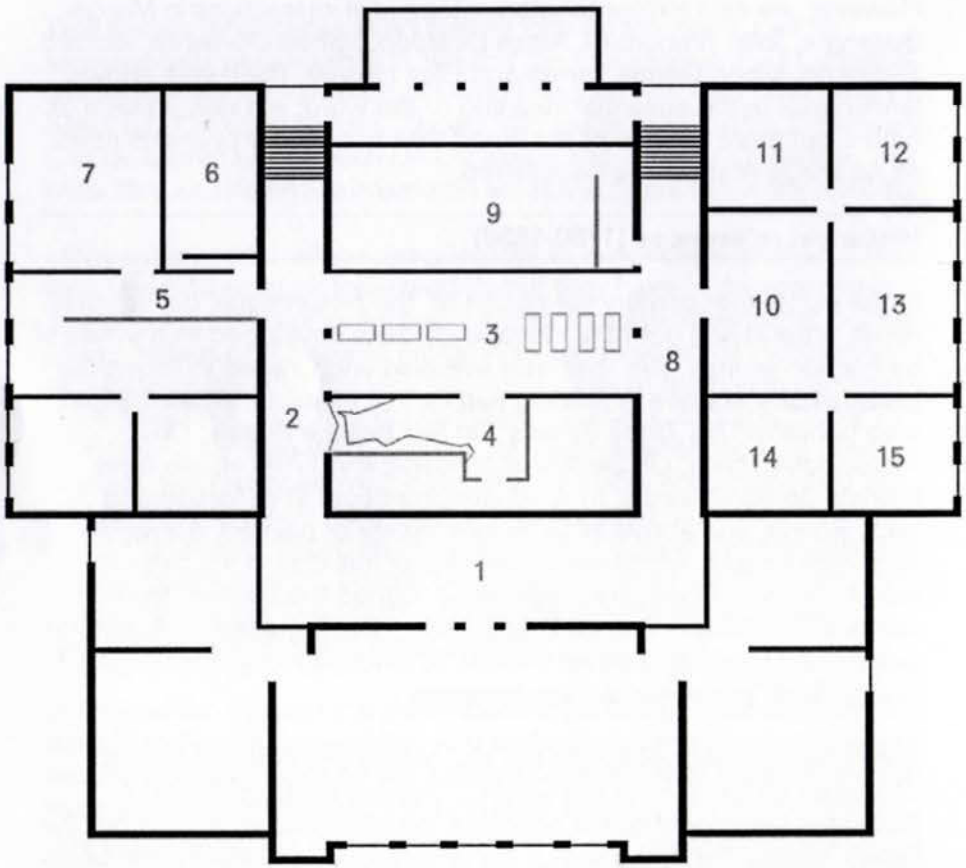
Berg, Oliver Lutz and Ellen Harvey. In this respect the preference for a hybrid landscape goes hand in hand with a hybridisation of the media used. With the aid of a specific medium many of the works of art in the exhibition provide us with reflections on other artistic media. The importance of models derived from the art of landscape painting is illustrative for photographers such as Axel Hütte, Joel Sternfeld, Jan Kempenaers and Geert Goiris or a video artist like Wouter Verhoeven. However, we also encounter other intermedial interactions in Marcel Berlanger, John Timberlake, Alexis Destoop, Robert Devriendt, Richard Sympson, Mario Garcia Torres and Ellen Harvey. Their work shows landscapes in the essential meaning of the word: not only a piece of nature but more a piece of the world that specifically presents itself as an image that can be deciphered.

Historical references (1780-1850)

In the eighteenth century the notion of 'the picturesque' did not only result in the laying out of landscape gardens developed as a series of composed scenes. The spectator was also encouraged to recognise **picturesque scenes** in existing nature. For example, William Gilpin, who published his *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; On Sketching Landscape* in 1794, encourages tourists 'to frame views, to graduate prospects from foreground to background, and above all to ensure variety of painted, drawn or engraved texture, which minimized similar qualities in the natural world.' In this respect the picturesque formed the basis of the first forms of landscape tourism in which the tourist, guided by illustrated guides and supported by references to landscape paintings, set off in search of **'picturesque' landscapes**.

The collection of books from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, all taken from the Ghent University library collection, illustrates the impact of the notion of the picturesque. Apart from the British islands, the birthplace of the picturesque, we see Mediterranean landscapes (Italy, Greece) with reminders of antiquity. In addition to this a large number of picturesque travel guides were devoted to regions that played an important role in romantic depictions, such as the Alps, the Rhine and the High North. These same regions are also found in the work of contemporary artists who are participating in *Beyond the Picturesque*.

Ground-Floor



1. Katrin Sigurdardottir
   Marcel Berlanger

2. Monica Studer / Christoph van den Berg
   Christian Vetter

3. Books 18th and 19th century
   Damien De Lepeleire
   Mark Klett

4. Monica Studer / Christoph van den Berg

5. Jussi Kivi
   Marcel Berlanger

6. Wouter Verhoeven

7. Robert Devriendt
   Richard Sympson
   Rapedius/Rindfleisch
   Mario Garcia Torres

8. Christian Vetter
   Marcel Berlanger

9. Alexis Destoop

10. Axel Hütte
    Geert Goiris
    Marc De Blieck

11. Oliver Lutz
    John Timberlake

12. Katrin Sigurdardottir
    John Timberlake
    Mungo Thomson

13. Jan Kempenaers
    Joel Sternfeld
    Ellen Harvey

14. Ellen Harvey

15. Sylvia Henrich
    Geert Goiris
    Christian Vetter

List of exhibited works

The following short biographical texts are arranged alphabetically. This will help you to follow your own route and make it easy for you to look up information on a specific work.

Marcel Berlanger exhibits a series of paintings of *Château Noir* on the Mont Ste-Victoire, based on a book containing reproductions of Paul Cézanne's *Mont Ste-Victoire* paintings. Under each reproduction in the book a photo has been printed, taken from the position of the artist 'en pleine nature'. An English photographer has portrayed each painted area of landscape (years after Cézanne). When Berlanger did the paintings of the mountain he did not do this outdoors but in his studio, so that the thread that runs through them is the reproductions in the book as well as photos he had taken. Apart from this Berlanger presents two monumental paintings, *Scale* and *Mars*. In the latter he depicts a landscape never before seen by human eyes and which only exists as a 'picture'.

Starting out from photogenic views **Marc De Blieck** is mainly interested in photographing existing landscapes as an image. The search for possible viewpoints forms the basis of the series of panoramic landscape photos entitled *Wasn't There*. The two large works on exhibition are the result of combining two exposures on the same film. Due to an interval of a few hours between the two shots and the use of various colour filters, there is a shift in the image. In the two smaller works the logic of digital photography is taken to its extreme. The panoramas each comprise 4 digital photos selected from a series of 300 shots.

Ce qu'a vu Monet (for Kenneth B. Pearson) by **Damien De Lepeleire** comprises a lithograph printed on various types of paper and then coloured with watercolours and East Indian ink. The lithograph was created during a residence in 'Le centre du monde' on the Breton island of Belle-Île. The idea of this residence is that artists go there without a project and hopefully leave with a new project. Which is what happened here. During his stay, De Lepeleire cycled twice a day to Les aiguilles de Port-Coton, which Monet depicted in paintings now housed in the Musée d'Orsay. The result was this series of 25 water colour lithographs.

The video installation, *Dwelling*, by **Alexis Destoop** is constructed from animated photos and comprises six sequences which together form an open story. This is a retroprojection (the projector is placed behind the screen) on two screens hanging next to one another in space. The work thus forms a diptych with a division in the middle which breaks the totality of the image. Destoop emphasises the breaks which form a thread in the film: *Dwelling* plays on different levels with the relationships between continuity and fragmentation, such as in the contrast between foreground and background, broad panoramic views and fragile interiors or the Australian desert and the Scandinavian coast. The film contains references to genre cinema ranging from the western and the road movie to Bergman's *Persona*.

Seven years ago **Robert Devriendt** started working on his small paintings, and grouping details about persons, interiors and natural environments in series. This gives them a quality that transcends reality. Devriendt believes we should create illusions to help us deal with reality. He suggests a drama but it is up to the viewer to give shape to this and to interpret the clashing images. His work always seems to be based on a clash between the direct action of things and what they radiate and the indirect deceleration effect of culture.

Geert Goiris greatest interest lies in desolate landscapes. However in his mild irony and sensitive wonder he never strives for the spectacular. His landscapes are isolated, quiet, uninhabited and still. Goiris mainly photographs barren deserts or lava landscapes which appear to comply with a geological dimension. They are open landscapes in which you can see far into the distance and which comprise specific challenges for the photographer. It is no coincidence that he also photographs bone-dry polar regions in which he takes advantage of the remarkable local light situation and focuses his gaze mainly on traces of a human presence which are preserved over ages.

Ellen Harvey's *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* attempts to depict the Citadelpark surrounding the museum in accordance with William Gilpin's aesthetic theories of aesthetics. Imitating his successful eighteenth-century guides to the English landscape, she has written an illustrated guide to the park with Gilpin as the so-called author. The guide comprises documentation on Gilpin's impossible visit and invites the reader to visit the park. In *The Room*

of Sublime Wallpaper we see a room that appears to be filled with landscape paintings.

In her installations, which mainly comprise photos and collages of various materials, **Sylvia Henrich** examines the interaction between landscape, the urban and perception. A recurring theme is the so-called authenticity of nature which she shatters. In a combination of photos, reproductions and text, like *Wasserfall/Täglich*, nature is revealed as a construction.

Apart from a distinct interest in urban surroundings **Axel Hütte** directs his gaze mainly towards landscape. His look is influenced by all sorts of pictorial conventions as is evident in his series of photos of the Italian landscape as well as his images of spectacular mountain tops, glaciers, deserts and jungles on various continents such as in *Rio Negro-2, Brasil* and *Pico Veleta, Spain*.

In a series of works entitled *The Picturesque Grid*, **Jan Kempenaers** develops the theme by directing his gaze at natural landscapes in Scotland, Iceland and the American West. However, his photos, with their confrontations between small human figures and a majestic nature which Romantic landscape painting evokes, do not comply with a romantic nostalgia for an unspoiled wilderness. On the contrary, Kempenaers often makes it clear that natural landscapes are transformed into calculating spectacles.

After completing his geology studies, **Mark Klett** managed to become one of the most important contemporary landscape photographers. His work unites a cultural historical interest in nineteenth-century landscape photography with diverse preoccupations in contemporary art, as well as a geological and ecological interest in landscape. In the late 1970s this formed the basis for *Rephotographic Survey Project* (RSP), a project with scientific and artistic ambitions in which a whole series of nineteenth-century photos of the American West were made once again. Together with several photographers Klett depicted more than a hundred sites which had been captured by photographers like Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson, who had accompanied pioneers and explorers.

Oliver Lutz presents his paintings of mountain landscapes in combination

with an infrared security camera and a monitor: *Landscape*. He uses pigments which function differently in a visible and invisible (infrared) spectrum. While the viewer's eye only perceives the black top layer, the underlying image becomes visible on the monitor. In the meantime he places the spectator without him knowing it within the frame while he/she is walking around in the installation space. Due to the slight delay between the registration and the reproduction of the image the spectator sees himself looking at, walking past, or leaving the painted image.

A residence in an artists' cooperative in Buenos Aires, Annemarie Schwarzenbach's books about her exotic travels and documentaries on the Monte Verità Swiss artists' cooperative, were the inspiration for **Rapedius/Rindfleisch**' work, *Monte Vera*. Both Schwarzenbach's escapism and the high-minded "Cooperativa Monte Verità" failed, due to idealistic aims and expectations which soon clashed with worldly emotions and personal conflicts. *Monte Vera* reveals within the museum context Rapedius/Rindfleisch' vision of the expectations, emotions and failures of the travelling experience. Miniature drawings record both real and fictional events. The installation creates a gulf between the panoramic perspective one has from a distance and the fragmented close-up view. Rapedius/Rindfleisch gets the spectator moving while illuminating the construed character of idealised depictions of the travelling experience.

Untitled is a work by **Katrin Sigurdardottir** which fills the space (entrance hall) and in which experience plays a central role as a place of memories and imagination. Her work comprises models of existing or fictional landscapes. *Untitled* appears to consist of several decorative elements placed against the wall. A blown up nineteenth-century archetypal photo of the American West (by Timothy O'Sullivan) is stuck on the panels. The work, *Haul*, on the other hand comprises eleven small suitcases each containing a section of a landscape. These moveable landscapes are individual sculptures and are found in collections all over the world but can also be combined to form one landscape.

Joel Sternfeld is one of the most important photographers who explored American natural and urban landscapes in colour photography, as from 1970. His crystal-clear pictures, which are taken

using a large format camera, link up with the tradition of the formation of the picture of *roadside America* in the 1930s. His meticulous attention to detail and composition are often combined with a playful, ironic and sometimes surrealist view of human presence in the landscape. In the *Campagna Romana* series the landscape again forms the platform on which history, culture and banality meet.

With the work entitled *Vue des Alpes* **Monica Studer / Christoph van den Berg** created a large-scale website which you can visit virtually and stay in an exclusive hotel located in a breathtaking Alpine landscape. The *Wasserfall*, *Nebel* and *Loch* clearly refer to those digital landscapes with stereotype Swiss motifs. Because they do not smooth over the digital character and do not base their work on photographic examples but develop it by way of memories, the pair examine how personal memories and images in the media play a defining role in how a landscape is perceived.

Cosimo Pichierri and Marco Trinca Colonel work together under the name **Richard Sympson**. The subject of the *Palmo a palmo* series appears to be rather trite. In fact the images show a careful topographical analysis on a scale of 1:1 or ordinary sites in which events much discussed in the media take place. The work, which is presented in the form of wallpaper stuck on the museum wall, is put together with the aid of a digital collage of hundreds of frontal shots. Consequently, this not only rejects one privileged viewpoint and traditional perspective but reduces photography to an almost blind form of sampling and registration. There is no horizon and the image refuses to be a landscape.

Mungo Thomson examines how the perception of our surroundings is determined by popular image culture. The video *The American Desert (for Chuck Jones)* reverts back to the myth of the frontier and the pristine nature that prepares for colonial expansion and industrialisation. The images are derived from the series of cartoons in which Wile E. Coyote desperately pursues the Road Runner – a series that was started by Chuck Jones for Warner Brothers in 1949. With the aid of digital editing techniques Thomson removes the characters. The result is a combination of *establishing shots* of sand flats, rock formations and clouds which immediately evoke the South West and is as amusing as it is strange. The silence is broken only now and then

by the sighing of the wind, the chirrup of birds, the falling of several boulders, a thunder storm or a passing train.

The series entitled *Another Country* by **John Timberlake** comprises four photos of paintings in front of which plastic figurines from model making have been placed. In the painting the image of a mushroom cloud (based on photos of atomic testing) merges together with a traditional landscape that refers to the paintings of Constable, Turner and Cozens for example. In the *Colony 13* series a photo is divided into a lattice shaped pattern and pieces of it cut out. In these blank spaces Timberlake draws the contours of a mountain landscape. The *Google paintings* are fairly recent. In this series of relatively small paintings he depicts satellite photos of the well known computer programme Google Earth, stating below them information such as the coordinates and eye level.

As far as **Mario Garcia Torres** seems to be concerned a work of art is not simply 'finished' or something to be kept, but something that can die and can be instilled with new life. In *Carte Abierta a Dr. Atl* Garcia Torres depicts the subjectivity of history and the unreliability of memory. The film, made using super-8 mm and then transferred to DVD, has subtitles: a letter from the artist to the Mexican painter Gerardo Murillo (Dr. Atl). On the image we see a panorama of the Barranca de Oblatos, the same landscape where Dr. Atl created his paintings.

Wouter Verhoeven made the film *The Eternal Life* (35') in function of this exhibition. It is inspired by the image idiom of Western painting but as far as content is concerned it is permeated with principles of Eastern philosophy. He writes the following about the film: "All the images are filmed from a fixed camera viewpoint. They can be divided into the three classical genres of painting: portrait, landscape and still life. There are clear references to Dutch realistic and mannerist portraits, landscapes from the romantic period and still lifes reminiscent of Cézanne. Although the static images last relatively long and there is barely any action, everything is moving and alive. The spectator who gives himself up to the slow tempo of the film achieves a state of Being. He doesn't have to do anything, he has no needs and the notion of the ego disappears. And this also applies to the character who appears in the film. Although it is portrayed in a Western form – central and dominantly in the picture – it's attitude is very Eastern."

Christian Vetter's paintings are a meditation on our approach to nature. His visual idiom refers to the archetypal landscapes we know from advertising, tourist folders and westerns. Apart from this the sometimes strange landscape backgrounds in art history (Leonardo, Bellini, Patinir) form an important source of inspiration for his landscapes. Through their flatness his paintings have an element of décor and present themselves as ideological constructions charged with all sorts of historical associations. Apart from paintings of forest shacks he also focuses on elements in the domestic environment: the fireplace, stuffed birds, bear skins, hunting trophies as a wall decoration, natural stone walls and so on. Apart from three paintings Vetter also presents the video entitled *The First Year Of The Machine*, in which a sort of robot with a webcam shows pictures of a snowy mountain landscape.