

Dream Worlds are Possible

F. C. Grundlach, 2005, curator and director of the International House of Photography, Hamburg

Michael Najjar belongs to a new generation of artists who are familiar with all facets of the photographic medium and who deploy the huge range of possibilities offered by digital photography with great assurance in furthering their own artistic aims. The question of whether digital processing has a legitimate place in the creation of a work of art has long ceased to occupy our attention; on the threshold to the 21st century electronic visual media have come to the forefront as one of the key elements underpinning our cultural understanding. And no matter whether digital or analog, the still, static prints of photographic images will long remain one of the central motifs of our visual culture.

Digital photography has brought about a further immense radicalization of the interplay of documentation and construction, of reality and appearance. In analog photography the traces of manipulation – in terms of retouching, cut-outs, perspectives, and montage techniques – were often clearly discernible; in digital photography this is no longer the case. Yet the prime concern of digital manipulation is not the production of counterfeits or fakes; it is rather focussed on the unleashing of creative potential. This is where the work of Michael Najjar comes in. In his endeavor to push back and redefine the limits of our perceptual understanding, the frontiers of appearance and reality, he employs the whole scale of possibilities. With masterly verve he mixes analog and digital production techniques through the digital processing of analog photography in complex post-production stages.

Michael Najjar's photographs of Japan can be characterized by their use of abstracted stylistic elements. The people of Japan – particularly the young people – live in a media-driven, artificial world that often blends out real life. The megacity of Tokyo lies at the crux of this development with its Shibuyaki kids who use extreme self-styling to create their own hermetically sealed world. Their patterns of social behavior – that seemingly distinguish them from one group only by so doing to envelop them in the comfort and security of yet another – reflect the extreme ambivalence that lies at the heart of Japanese society. They live in artificial worlds in which each is his or her own stylist. Their bodies become screens on which their self-presentations can be projected.

The world is fantastically beautiful. Dream worlds are possible, reality can be negated. Yet at the same time in no other country in the world is the unrelenting pace of modernization so intimately bound up with a deep attachment to centuries-old traditions as in Japan. Michael Najjar has penetrated and recorded this seemingly genuine yet genuinely only “seeming” world, and the portraits he gives us in the exhibition and his “Virtual Environments” offer a thrilling exploration of the dialectics of modernization and tradition.

The young woman with her glittering white facial make-up appears at first glance to be little more than a typical model of a lifestyle inspired by the western world. Yet when we look closer we can see that she also resembles a figure from traditional Japanese theater where there is no room for “individuals” only highly stylized actors behind masks. The concept of individuality, which has such key importance for the western world, has no meaning in Japanese culture. As Michael Najjar has said, “Japanese culture always focuses on the structural connections of the subject with his environment and the reciprocal transformations which result therefrom. This point of view – which is diametrically opposed to the ontology of western thought – can lead to the absence or the dissipation of the subject.” Masks and individuality – all in one.

In a similar manner Najjar embraces a Japanese perception of reality in his “Virtual Environments”, which, as the title suggests, show a series of life-spaces. Yet the viewer is immediately unsettled by the composition of the photographs. Dynamic lines of perspective draw his gaze directly into the depths from where the lack of a focal center immediately ejects him – the whole composition is built on an intentional void. Here too the viewer can recognize the co-existence of tradition and modernity that we discussed above, most strikingly perhaps in the picture entitled “Collective Loneliness” where the brash high-tech ambience of a Patschinko gaming hall appears in stark contrast to the contemplation of nature offered on panoramic screens. Here, too, this dialect is also expressed in terms of the visualization techniques employed by the artist.

Michael Najjar presents us his view of Japan in a series of very different, large-format photographs. It ranges from the multi-layered disruptive view of Tokyo that lies before us like a living organism vibrating to its own internal rhythm, and shots of traditional photography during the cherry blossom time where nature becomes the foil to individual meditation, to montages of urban environments that appear like stage sets and where the faces from his portrait series resurface again. The ambivalent nature of

the relationship between tradition and modernity runs like a leitmotif through all these works.

Michael Najjar's Japan-photographs offer us the opportunity to challenge our conventional mode of perception. He has been spectacularly successful in placing the viewer in an artificial world of artifacts in which he moves on the same perceptual level as the environments and persons portrayed. Thus an individual encounter with the simulated image-worlds of "japanese style" can be experienced.