

Michael Najjar shows just how wild the world is from the inside.
Freddy Langer

Essay was published in *Franfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (F.A.Z), 8 March, 2012

The critics predicted that the science of geology would arise in protest, and wrote that the way the mountain was shown made a mockery of the law of gravity. And they reckoned, taking the extended chain of mountains and the shape of the tumultuous cloud mass as their gauge, that this peak rising sweepingly out of the deep furrow of the valley to press into, push into, no, bore into the delicate blue of the ether and whose ice-clad glistening bright peak seemed like a warning finger raised under the firmament and also a little like an arrow aimed directly at God Almighty – that this peak must be ten thousand miles high. “Impossible”, snapped the art critic of the “New York Tribune” with palpable disgust.

And we can picture him trembling with indignation after penning the last word of his review. A review which was published on 29 January 1870.

In his travels in the Rocky Mountains in the mid 1860s, Albert Bierstadt, the greatest of America’s great landscape painters, discovered a mountain that would later be called Mount Evans and be entered on geological survey maps as having a height of 4,348 meters. But at that time the mountain regions of Colorado were still a practically impenetrable wilderness and Albert Bierstadt’s overriding interest was not for geological findings or even empirical research but for Rosalie Osborne, the wife of his travelling companion, the writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow. It was in her honor that he christened the mountain, which appears in his painting soaring from a boiling mass of thunder clouds and rising far into the upper atmosphere, Mount Rosalie. This painting which is over three and a half meters wide and over two meters high he called “A Storm in the Rocky Mountains” not perhaps without some sly intention. Before Bierstadt had put the finishing touches to the picture, he had taken the former Mrs. Ludlow in matrimony.

For sure, love was not the only driving force in Albert Bierstadt’s work. He was also motivated by a longing for the Sublime, for a feeling of being awestruck in the face of the overwhelming, of feeling his own insignificance and yet at the same time of transcending it through the terror of the experience. We can all easily understand that nobody can look into the eyes of the Almighty without fear and trembling. Those of us who attempt it, however, are driven by the hope that a spark of the divine will spring over to us.

If we are to believe the philosopher Immanuel Kant, the feeling of the sublime arises when what we are contemplating with our eyes cannot be expressed in words and thus surpasses our cognitive powers. Rendering the sublime in spite of such limitations, he wrote, is the task of art. The photo-artist Michael Najjar took Kant at his word. Since adventures have now become a sport for the masses and the wilderness is now a playground, Najjar uses landscape merely as a pretext for another, perhaps even more powerful, theme – the financial transactions of a global market whose rules are determined in no small measure by dauntingly complex, perhaps uncontrollable algorithms - and a large part of whose rulers seem to have lost all contact with reality on the ground. The sums of money shifted around on such markets are astronomical and it’s not surprising that in his novel Tom Wolfe called those who move them “Masters of the Universe” just as though they were gazing down from heaven onto earth. Michael Najjar has done the same: he climbed Mount Aconcagua whose 6,962 meters make it the world’s highest mountain outside of Asia.

In the Andes Najjar wanted to photograph mountain ridges whose petrified zigzag curves served him as a representation of the monumentality of the financial markets. In summer 2008 he started training for the expedition. In September of the same year from one day to the next the investment bank Lehman Brothers crashed – and dragged the rest of the financial world with it into the abyss. Najjar then had to aim his camera at the depths as well. The economic crisis gave his work “High Altitude” an ominous topicality.

Michael Najjar is no mountain climber. Only two mountains figure in his mountaineering log book, Aconcagua and Kilimanjaro – all the more reason that we can call him “foolhardy” in the best sense of the word. He’s already shown that he isn’t a man to be afraid of a challenge when in the period 2003-2006 he braved the security personal of the twelve tallest buildings in twelve cities to analyze the structures of the urban landscape from their top floors for his “Netropolis” series. And he’s booked his place next year as a Pioneer Astronaut with Virgin Galactic for their first tourist flight into space where he’ll be the first artist ever in space. In his ascent of Mount Aconcagua, however, he achieved a perfect balance between outer and inner vision, between physical experience and aesthetic permeation.

“Seven steps, a short break” is how Michael Najjar describes the final 250 meters, the last three long painful hours to reach the summit. The side of the mountain plunges a thousand meters precipitously into the depths. The crampons on his boots stick in the ice and if only that was the reason he can hardly drag his feet. Seven steps, a short break. It’s Najjar’s second attempt on 29 January 2009. Two days previously his companion, the guide and he had to turn back shortly before reaching the summit. This time he succeeds. And in the twinkling of an eye he feels nothing of the cold, the pain, the exhaustion. It’s as though he could reach out and touch heaven with his hands. And for a moment he imagines that he could leap into the air and float down. It’s a kind of ecstasy inspired by the view, the achievement and the flood of endorphins released by the pituitary gland that sweep through every nerve of his body. It’s a feeling that borders on megalomania. “Hardly surprising” says Najjar and transfers this experience without further ado to the stock exchange floor where brokers are always striving to go higher, always looking for new peaks to conquer – and always willfully ignoring any danger of a fall.

Michael Najjar put the shots he took on the expedition through some pretty stiff computer manipulation, not to shape them to his own sense of style but to pattern them rigorously on the fluctuations of international stock exchange indices. What he shows are the ups and downs of the markets. And how reality and simulation on them are so intertwined as to be almost indistinguishable. What we see are the movements of the tectonic plates of the global economy over the past twenty to thirty years in whose course new peaks are thrown up and earthquakes and erosion are inevitable. Najjar shows the Sublime in an age when information technology is becoming all-powerful.

This work series should produce howls of protest from geologists, and in at least one of his pictures Najjar has blatantly defied the law of gravity: in the middle of “nasdaq_80-09” a mountain thin and sharp as a needle rises preposterously into the sky. No outraged critic has yet calculated just how many kilometers high this must be. But a glance in the NASDAQ technology stock exchange gives the exact figure; 5132,52. The all-time high figure reached on 10 March of the year 2000.