

High Altitude - Landscapes beyond Visibility

By Luigi Menghelli

At first sight Michael Najjar's photographic view of things might remind us of the enchantment of the figures in Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, transfixed by the magnificence of the landscape. Mount Aconcagua in Argentina, the mountain that Najjar portrays, might almost be said to be a living organism of irresistible force, endowed with an intensity of "otherness", yet also framed so as to contain its expressive violence. But what makes us think that Najjar's work aims at capturing nature as a way of testing extreme feelings is also the fact that he himself has firsthand experience of climbing the rocks and glaciers of Mount Aconcagua, venturing mind and body into remote and rarely visited places. His approach might be compared to that of Richard Long who also walked in inaccessible spots, but with the difference that the English artist documented the traces he left on the ground as though they were atavistic marks left behind by great animal or human migrations; that of Najjar, on the other hand, records the experience of being there almost as though it were a scientific inquiry into landscape. What he aims to garner from this Andean mountain are those peculiarities that make it unique, astral, and almost abstract to the eye of the beholder - with its peaks like gothic steeples, razor-cut gullies, and landslides that seem like cascades of freefalling rocks.

The artist's aim is not to reduce the image to a cliché, to turn mountains into a universal landscape and convention: even "in imago" they have to maintain their aspect of divinity and, like all gods, shall reveal themselves as ambiguous, duplicitous, and hidden. And so we can understand how it is that Najjar is concerned with subjective truth rather than with the simple aim of recording. He is

not a geographer nor a mapmaker: he is an explorer in search of a vision in which nature is experienced with such intensity as to transcend the subject who looks at, or reflects on, it.

The very title of his latest body of work, *high altitude*, aims at concentrating attention on an unverifiable dimension where, as the artist himself says, "The line between reality and imagination is blurred, scrambling perceptions of time and space. The feeling of sublimity

is overwhelming". But then this is something that Susan Sontag has also underlined: "Photography implies an immediate access to reality; however, the outcome is another way of establishing distance. To possess the world in the form of images means rediscovering its unreality and its distance from what is real."

There is no escape: photography makes that evocative simulacrum of things, the image, approachable - but not reality. However, Najjar goes much further than this; like others fascinated by mountains, such as Andreas Gursky

or Hiroyuki Masuyama, he makes use of the most refined artificial manipulations to alter, modify, and re-elaborate all the visual material collected during his expedition in order to generate a hyper-real image, one that is "more real than reality". And in fact he says that he retouches rock after rock, stone after stone as though it were the medium itself that reconstructs reality. This is similar to *trompe l'oeil* which adds the intellectual fascination of illusion and mystification of the senses to the formal interest of the painting.

In this way Najjar can use his revised and modified images to produce a kind of "rendezvous" with the artificial environment that we experience daily. If, in fact, until some decades ago an analysis of objects could be made by examining or observing them as though they were a dictionary of words congealed in matter, nowadays they have been transformed into "digital language entities", pure

communicative data, part of a spectacle that involves us in its plot without showing us the machinery behind the scenes.

By modelling the mountain on the world's leading stock market indices (Dow Jones, Hangseng, Nikkei, Dax, etc.) Najjar aims to highlight how the borderlines of the mountain can be related to the graphics of a financial chart. But then, even if the photographic image seems to allude to the historical and cultural aspects inherent in its material referent, we must never forget that it also presents itself as something immaterial or, in the words of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce, as an index, a trace that hides as much as it shows.

However, we also might hypothesize that the operative strategy elaborated by the artist provokes a reversal of the experiential field: what is virtual replaces what is real to become a new way of perceiving reality - as happens, for instance, with the monitors in an airline pilot's cabin where he sees simulated images of the land he is flying over. Thus computer-generated imaging enables us to capture a new way of relating to the visual world and, in the flat two-dimensionality of a screen, to visualize what normally remains invisible to the human eye.

The attempt to imagine, describe, and capture this "otherness" means that the artist is not obliged to depend on the language of representation. Rather he can give himself over to "such stuff as dreams are made on", to the imaginary and poetic schemes with which we continue to make sense of what we consider to be reality. His is a quest to reveal a world that previously was not there; to show what lies concealed beneath the surface of the image, to render an intimation of what lies hidden beyond mere visibility such as the figures in Friedrich's paintings might have experienced.