

## Topologies of Place

Can an artist recapitulate history and be of the moment as well? The question arises in a consideration of Edgar Martins' work, which resonates at times with some of the oldest and most familiar pictorial strategies: it can express ways of seeing and recording landscape that might seem nostalgic, even clichéd. Yet it can also be pointedly contemporary—at once edgy and politically charged, expressive of a kind of anomie and fraught with anxieties about ruin. In between, and within a limited range of subjects, it knowingly traverses some of the most interesting aesthetic terrain of the last century. How can this be? Martins works in series; the series often have distinct characteristics, displaying different levels of engagement with historical traditions. But even within a series, Martins can adopt distinct approaches: some images are what we habitually expect photography to be—evidence of the world as we think we know it—while others obscure their subjects through an illusionism that borders on magic.

Martins' pictures of Iceland in late winter reveal his most pronounced debt to pictorial traditions. Like some latter-day artist-explorer, he sets out to create a topographical inventory of mountains, snowfields, ice floes, boulders, and rivers; the awesome desolation and disorienting vastness he records are like eighteenth-century evocations of the sublime. His image of a cleft in the mountains, for instance, is particularly like British painter James Ward's vast *Gordale Scar* (1812-14; 3327 x 4216 mm, roughly 12 by 14 feet). Ward was one of the key painters in the British Romantic tradition; his *Gordale Scar*—a close-up, detailed image of a Yorkshire stream tumbling out of a steep ravine—is among the most important manifestations of nineteenth-century gigantism and that era's widespread taste for the grandeur of nature.

Eyes accustomed to the great engines of the American sublime—all lurid sunsets, towering cataracts, and snow-clad peaks—might find the British version a bit tame; it is this more subtle tradition that Martins suggests. His Iceland photographs share the muted tonalities of Ward's painting: just grey, brown, white and sometimes blue. Some of the pictures have only two tones, sepia and grey, like old hand-tinted photographs. In a sense, these *are* hand-colored images: the creamy skies are in part a function of pre-exposing the film. Martins says he wanted "to create a set of images which were reminiscent of late 19<sup>th</sup> century topographical images' by exposing the film for a few seconds to bright light, he was able to fog the film, hence obtaining the sepia qualities. As with all of his work, these images were made with a wide-angle lens and a tripod-mounted, large format camera, a technique that is itself a bit anachronistic. "It's a very unspontaneous way of working," Martins admits, "very static and premeditated."

For all their historical evocations, however, these photographs also reveal a modernist sensibility at work. Like some minimalist painting, a number of them are virtually monochromatic, capturing near-perfect whiteout combinations of cloud, mist, and snow. At same time, they convey striking abstract qualities: great masses of vertical mountains set off against horizontal riverbeds; arresting figure/ground relationships between ice floes and gravel; detailed foregrounds dissolving into atmospheric distances; the arrow of a road shot straight onto the heart of a peak. And they are attuned to subtle distinctions in climate and season: those shot in the depth of winter tend to have bluer skies and crisper light, while those made in the late winter reveal a

moister atmosphere.

Martins' painterly effects reach an apogee in his images of forest fires shot in Portugal in 2005/2006. It is hard to believe that representations of ruin could be so seductive—this is especially true of those photographs shot along a creek, where the vivid greens of vegetation are just being invaded by flame, which drips off the riverbank and is reflected in the water. In those photographs where the fire is more advanced, Martins achieves rich atmospheric effects. Thick haze focuses our attention on the foreground, as in the shot of a pair of pine trunks rising out of the ferns and set against a scrim of smoke. As in the more monochromatic Iceland pictures, atmospheric conditions have a pronounced effect on pictorial space. Only a couple of images have any suggestion of spatial depth—in one, we are looking up a blackened valley; in another, a road disappears into the smoke. The rest are foreshortened, focusing our attention on the qualities of line, the tonalities of smoke, the colors of flame. Martins' intentions in these images were not only pictorial, of course; there is a contemporary anxiety to them as well. Portugal's 2005/2006 fires were the result of extended drought and extreme heat; many believed them to be an expression of global climate change. Moreover, they could be seen as evidence of environmental mismanagement: much of the forest was eucalyptus, a fast-growing but extremely flammable tree that is frequently planted in reforestation projects. Martins was in search of this story (I'd prefer to the word 'theme' or other similar word as 'story' could be associated with a more documentarian approach) as much as pictorial effects in these images of fire.

There is a tantalizing convergence of subject and medium in these smoky photographs. They both portray and are made possible by one material suspended in another: their subject is suspended carbon; their medium photographic emulsion. Martins went to considerable effort to capture these images: he completed a residency and training with fire fighters in Portalegre before being allowed to work in the field with them, and he coordinated his work with the National Fire Protection Unit. This effort, he recounts, was expressive of commitment he generally makes to the "sites, places, and people" he photographs. In the case of the Portugal fires, it enabled him to work close-up to the flames, using a still wider-angled lens than he typically uses. Proximity to fire resulted in a technical accident that accounts in part for the quality of the images: in extreme close-ups of the flames, the film was fogged by exposure to intense heat, which reinforces the atmospheric quality of the smoke. In a sense, the subject *became* the medium here—the heat is presented as much as re-presented; it enacted a technical transformation that was encoded in the film itself. Martins has since used this technique to affect film after exposure: negatives of some of the newer Iceland photographs—those shot at the height of winter—were exposed to heat & direct sunlight to "bleach/fade the colors," to make them less saturated.

In Martins' beach photographs, by comparison, the documentarian becomes an illusionist, revealing his propensity to adopt different strategies for different subjects. A topographical mode gives way here to a tactic of defamiliarization; Martins is bent on revealing the incongruities and inconsistencies he encounters at the edge of the city/ocean at night. Shooting largely on the same Portuguese beach in the summer, Martins sought "distance from conventional spatial representation. I was working between representation and reality—in a third space." Indeed, in many of these images, Martins conjures the state between dream and waking that poet and essayist André Breton characterized in a 1924 manifesto as "a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality* if one

may so speak.” There is certainly an uncanny sense of displacement in these images—the beach is like the surface of the moon, utterly barren and inhospitable; the black void above it is neither sky nor water but the limitless realm of dreams. Shot with a long exposure, the images are surprisingly flat. Space is even more foreshortened than in the fire photographs; the beach is little more than a proscenium in front of an inky curtain, which becomes the locus of some odd occurrences and some improbable subjects. What, for instance, accounts for the black trapezoid in the center of one image? Is it a tarp? Or a hole in the sand? What lies within the curve of a vanishing wall in another? Water, or more sand? Even in those images where we think we know what we are seeing, Martins uses tricks of scale to confuse us. Shot from a distance or from a slight elevation, beach chairs, volleyball nets, soccer goals, even a wooden shed, all appear diminutive, toy-like, inscrutable.

There is another, more subtle link to surrealism in these images: the reliance on the found object. For Breton, the *objet trouvée* could liberate the artistic imagination; it was an expression of the marvelous and one of the attributes of a beauty he termed convulsive: “This *trouvaille*, whether it be artistic, scientific, philosophic, or as useless as anything, is enough to undo the beauty of everything beside it.” Martins’ beaches are littered with such chance discoveries: umbrellas, tire tracks, plastic piping, piles of sand. While these subjects might appear manipulated, they are almost entirely photographed as found; even those that look the most contrived—the woman with balloons, for instance—were discovered. Although we know her to be solid, the black dress dematerializes her, rendering her less substantial than the balloons. Even the lighting, which looks like the most staged aspect of the image, was found: it is ambient light from a nearby football stadium. Found elements underscore an ambiguity in these images between the composed and the contingent. The ratio of sky to beach is clearly composed, as is the placement of found objects in relation to the centers or edges of the pictures. But pretty much everything else in these photographs is contingent. The as-found quality extends from composition to processing; they are composed using a large-format camera and then are not cropped in printing.

Some of the chance discoveries in these photographs resonate with more recent art history. As suggestive as they might be of surrealism, Martins’ beach images equally reveal a sensibility honed by exposure to minimalist and post-minimalist art, especially the landscape sculpture of the late 1960s and 1970s. The hill of sand, for instance, recalls Robert Smithson’s rock salt and mirror pieces—mounds of crystalline material rendered scaleless by reflection. Martins’ image is also difficult to read: the pile could be vast or small, like the raked gravel mounds in Japanese *kare sansui* gardens. The black linear materials in several images—cable sleeves that are debris from a construction site—are evocative of Richard Serra’s scatter pieces, collections of materials subjected to various processes and shown in their end states. A plywood platform could be a Carl Andre installation of modular plates, while walls recall the linear qualities and spatial characteristics of Serra’s Corten steel sculptures. The image of a pair of wooden walls radiating from a void is especially like Serra’s *Spin Out: For Robert Smithson*, three plates in a centrifugal arrangement around an open space in the garden at the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands.

These visual similarities signify deeper analogies between Martins’ work and the sculpture of the 1970s. Like Serra’s work before it, Martins’ photography expresses a change in recent artistic practice that historian and critic Hal Foster describes as “a

partial shift in focus from object to subject, from ontological questions (of the essence of a medium) to phenomenological conditions (of a particular body in a particular space as the ground of art).” Serra himself has told us that “the biggest break in the history of sculpture in the twentieth century occurred when the pedestal was removed,” when sculpture entered “the behavioral space of the viewer.” Sculpture began to coexist in our space; it became situational, conditioned by the characteristics of place, which was conceptualized as a behavioral and perceptual field shared by sculpture and viewer. With “the discrete object dissolved into the sculptural field which is experienced in time,” Serra could describe the experience of sculpture as “defining the topology of the place, and the assessment of the characteristics of the place, through locomotion.” More than a simple expression of topography, in other words, these sculptures prompted a topographical exploration of a site in relation to history—both the history of place and the duration of perceptual experience. While topography might be assumed to be fixed, topology introduces a notion of indeterminacy, subjectivity, and change over time.

How is this relevant to Martins’ beach photography? These are fixed images, after all; on the face of it, they are hardly the stuff of topological investigation. And yet they are all about temporal experience. There is a kind of theatricality to them, which is partially a consequence of their structure: the sense of being on a proscenium; the odd lighting. A few literally depict people in enigmatic action; in many others, there are the traces of activity—tire tracks or footprints. In most of them, there is a sense of observing an abandoned stage, or a stage awaiting some event. We read these photographs as presentations of behavioral space, each a field of action with its own particular—if incompletely understood—history, a history that we seek to unravel through a kind of metaphorical locomotion around the image. Both as records of activity and as puzzles we seek to decode, these images address temporality, becoming expressions of Martins’ and our meditations on the topology of place.

In some of his recent work, notably the images of airports and highway barriers (the barriers series is not that recent, it was produced in 2005), Martins has been addressing a peculiarly contemporary landscape—the ever more generic exurban frontier. This is an increasingly familiar global phenomenon: in much of the developed world, landscapes are no longer characterized by polarities of city and country; moreover, cities themselves are no longer characterized by centers and peripheries. Instead, development is increasingly dispersed, multi-centered, and banal; we are witnessing a metastasizing urbanization of the edge, which feeds on infrastructures of mobility and consumption. There is a growing body of literature about this globalizing post-modern geography, much of which Martins has read: books by Frederic Jameson, Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, Martha Rosler, Marc Augé, and Christine Boyer, among many others. Perhaps most relevant to Martins’ work, however, are the ideas of architect Rem Koolhaas and cultural critic Jean Baudrillard. The latter found a new morphology for cities in the suburbs, where development is organized around vast commercial complexes—hypermarkets, he called them—that are preceded and enabled by transportation infrastructures, especially highways, airports, and parking lots. Koolhaas has written extensively on peripheries—notably in an essay called “The Generic City”—where they are assessed with a kind of morbid fascination as places without histories, without identities, and without a public realm beyond roads and airports. Indeed, Koolhaas wonders if the generic city is synonymous with the contemporary airport; he speculates that “its main attraction is its anomie.” It is the

space of the uprooted.

Like these authors, Martins is trying to make sense of this landscape of self-similar airports, highways, and bland commercial development—what he has ‘reluctantly’ termed “non-place space.” To some degree, he is examining it within a familiar framework of oppositions, or what he calls “polarities of natural and constructed space.” This strategy is apparent especially in his daylight images of runways set against the ocean. But is Martins really positing polarities in these images? Or are nature and constructed space colliding, overlapping, and blurring? There are subtle but unmistakable tonal and textural comparisons between the runway and the ocean in one image, where asphalt appears to be cantilevered out over the water. In others, especially those taken at night, sky and constructed ground merge in darkness, with only the lights and airport hieroglyphics to orient us. Yet these are hard to decode: this is a landscape of signs that can be read by the knowledgeable—pilots and air traffic controllers, for instance—but which remains perplexing to the uninitiated. The juxtaposition of sign and shape are at the heart of some of the most arresting of these airport images, notably one of a large triangle under a distant hanger. The vantage point renders the former huge, the latter tiny, reinforcing the sense of disorientation that is so characteristic of these photographs. Martins seems to regard the airport with the same kind of fascination and horror as Koolhaas, and equally as representative of placeless, generic space.

There is a similar ambiguity in Martins’ images of highway barriers. On the one hand, the photographs convey the spatial damage done by these structures, particularly the way they rupture and uproot communities. Martins has said that there is a specific political context to these images: after Portugal—poor by European standards—joined the European Union, development aid flowed south, resulting in new highways, ports, leisure communities, and shopping centers, all of which contributed to the creation of the kind of “non-place space” that Martins finds so compelling. On the other hand, he clearly finds these structures appealing from a compositional perspective. Like abstract geometric painting or minimalist sculpture, these photographs are all crisp color and hard edges, setting vertical striations of pavement against horizontal bands of guardrails and sound barriers. Martins also achieves some of his most subtle chromatic effects in these pictures, as in the image of an orange and lavender wall melting into pale blue sky and grey pavement.

Martins’ photographs of highway barriers and airports are seemingly a long way from his beach scenes, and still farther from the images of Iceland. But all register as topologies of place. In the photographs of Iceland, topography reveals the history of what we might call first nature: geology, geography, botany, and climate. If the beaches seem to register the landscape of dreams, then the images of fires, highways, and airports represent the ambiguous history of human impact on nature. In an era of climate change, it is increasingly difficult to isolate any landscape—even Iceland’s—from human intervention, and some of the Iceland images register tire tracks and roads that are the signs of larger transformations. Moreover, the various natures presented in Martins’ photographs are connected by social and spatial infrastructures—by trade, tourism, and the transportation facilities that are among his other subjects. It is worth noting that the topologies Martins represents are found in the world, that unlike some of the most celebrated contemporary North American photographers—Jeff Wall, David Levinthal, Laurie Simmons, Gregory Crewdson—Martins discovers rather than stages or

constructs his histories. In this, he bears a connection instead to a previous generation of American photographers who found and depicted man-made landscapes and sites of ruin: Ed Ruscha's parking lots, Robert Adams' Colorado subdivisions, Lewis Baltz's industrial parks, and—especially—Richard Misrach's desert fires, bombing ranges, and nuclear test sites.

Just as Martins confronts a wide spectrum of natures, so he deploys an equally wide range of tactics to represent nature, from the sublime to the post modern. Both the breadth of his conceptions of nature and the range of his representational techniques signal a theoretical self-consciousness that lies at the heart of his success as a photographer. He is interested not merely in how photography is made, as every photographer must be, but also in how it is received, in how his images are read. "Photography is a process that should be questioned every step of the way," he says. Whether evoking history or facing ruin, Martins has a deeply considered way of making pictures; he deploys the full range of responses available to us in reading and recording landscape. It is this quality of knowingness that makes looking at his photographs so rewarding.

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