

After Landscape

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IMAGES FROM THE POST-NATURAL WORLD

By Harry H. Cornelius

Scientists declare that we are now well into in the age of the Anthropocene, the geological epoch in which nature has become reshaped by man.

The fundamental subject matter of landscape is the relationship between man and nature, revealed topographically – whether the topos in question is a Continental pastoral, a sublime American wilderness or the rapturous desolation of manufactured landscapes.

But with “nature” as we traditionally understand it out of the picture, landscape as a genre must rediscover and redefine itself. This is where my work begins.

The assertion that nature itself is effectively “over” may appear contentious until we differentiate the aesthetic concept of nature – an idea perhaps born out of the Renaissance poet Petrarch’s telling of his Ascent of Mount Ventoux – from the underlying processes and materials of physics, geology and biology. These will endure long after humankind has departed from this Earth.

Nature is a category of culture with a long tradition. Sadly, nature has become cliché, nostalgia or cant. The cherished concept of “nature” has been killed off by human encroachment, the ascendancy of science, the creation of virtual space, the mass production of fine art and tourist postcards, the ubiquity of digital cameras and the onslaught of political agendas of every stripe.

Landscape is presented as a space spread out before us that we can appear to enter, physically or spiritually. But before it is a real space, landscape is a space in the imagination. To break fresh ground in landscape art necessitates breaking free of the assumptions built into landscape or at least exposing and exploring them rather than remaining naively in their thrall. So, instead of using art to reveal the world before us – as is the custom – my work uses the world before us to explore the ideational projections we impose on subject matter.

By adopting a truly un-heroic space – the laneways of our aging urban centres – and by shrinking the topography from vast distances to a few inches or feet, these micro-scapes leave us with what we bring to the aesthetic experience.

My work seeks the same kind of beauty, ecstasy, monumentality, nostalgia, order, loss or sublimity in an image of a downspout... a sawed-off water heater... a bit of corrugated fibreglass... or a stretch of chain link fencing... as we derive from grandest images of Monument Valley, the subtlest sunset or the saddest ruined plain.

My aim is not only to bring pleasure or solace though the immediacy of aesthetic experience; it is also to prompt re-examination of our experience of landscape, both retrospectively and prospectively. It is to recapture a sense of mystery lost to us in the overly familiar.

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PHOTO-BASED ART

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