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Panoptes

A mountain means landscape. Tranquil, steady and sublime. But periodically, through the ages, the land permutes and transmutes its shape and appearance. Unlike time, the mountain will not last forever. Folds pile up boulders and rocks, water insinuates itself, erosion shatters, ruts and splits the earthly domain. Whirling, scattering masses. The mountain is riven by forces we cannot see; they run underground, forming it. They are energised and ripple outwards, wave after wave. And although the mountain may defiantly raise its countenance to the heavens, it is still beholden to those forces. To see what they can do, we have to scale the mountain, to find that last, highest place furthest away from them, that maintains the greatest distance to them. And it is just such a place, where the interplay of different forces and currents comes to an abrupt, if only temporary halt, that Peter Stoffel's paintings imagine.

Over and above the bewildering density of the colour spaces, it is this distance that crucially shapes our perceptions as we encounter these paintings. At first rather paradoxically. Walking towards the paintings, it seems that we would need to get very close to properly see what is depicted in them. Try this, however, and the paintings mediate a distance that we, as viewers, are hardly likely to be able to cross. Our observations are constrained by a fundamental contradiction: the closer we get to the paintings, the more the subject matter eludes us.

Even before we see that different views and prospects of mountain landscapes interlock in these images, so that different spaces and dimensions merge into each other, we have been ensnared in the depth of the pictorial space and are struggling to keep our bearings. The pictures work with this. On the face of things, they convey an Alpine view and induce in us the feeling of having arrived at a summit of some kind, and of seeing nothing but depths and vast expanses. Flattering the beholder's eye, they lull us into thinking that everything

is as it should be. A distinct horizon, perspectival distance and proximity, rocky outlines.

The barely calculable, perilous depth of the yawning spaces is outweighed by the actual size of the painting, which establishes a fixed framework for optical perception, not least by means of the panoptic vastness of the view as it is presented to us. But in reality nothing is as it should be. And nothing can pin this view down. As though the paintings were reluctant to yield up their landscapes, they interlink and interconnect visible components in a complex architecture of internal correlations. Identification of the place and its nature by its visuals becomes increasingly difficult, even impossible.

Our initial impression of a homogenous, coherent landscape – seen from our lofty perch – does an about-turn. Under the colours woods, meadows and rocks coalesce, run into each other. Boundaries and markings lose their definition and intermingle. Deceptively real spaces implode into each other, luring our gaze into unknown valleys with lightsome guile. Bizarre rock formations stand out, interspersed with glowing colours in convulsive rhythms. Before our very eyes colours and forms swirl into a dizzying vortex. The place that looked so secure a moment ago has changed, has somehow disengaged. What seemed so far away is almost on top of us, seems threateningly close. Our gaze turns out not to be reliable, caves in. More than that, it seems as though the picture, the landscape, is sucking our gaze into the inner workings of the composition. And it is only when we take a step backwards, resisting this pull, substituting observation for captivation, that we are able to separate different levels from each other and, applying our visual comprehension, step back out of the paintings again.

What has happened? What are the pictures talking about? What do they do to anyone who looks at them, where do they want to be viewed from, and what is expressed through that gaze-deluding yet distanced spatiality of the motifs?

It's easy to put something into words. You just have to move from the thing itself to an account of it, name the object, describe it and reduce it to a collection of words and

sentences. The trouble starts when you decide to choose a different path. When you abandon the given order. Then you find yourself in step with the pictures, following their making. The landscapes have no name. They have shaken off the designations that caused them to rigidify; they have freed themselves of the husk of terminology and have in effect side-stepped representation. Now – in sporadic, clear, coloured light – they show their true face. Now, disposing of the notion of one order in one place, they posit a multitude of orders and localities. In a milieu of circumstances and neighbourhoods, connected by paths and intersections, nodes form, where new places arise, which in turn generate new neighbourhoods. A fluctuating web of colours and forms emerges, creating connections, groups and many-layered networks. Living landscape. Fields, villages and towns. Everything is in motion, growing, flourishing, interchanging, withering and dying. Where is the safe, steady place where we could observe all of this in peace and without risk? How much distance does observation actually require?

Argus, who saw everything, had two pairs of eyes, some say. One pair in front in his face, the other in the back of his head. So he had no blind spots. In order not to miss anything, he only slept with half of his eyes. Half sleeping and half waking he always had one pair of eyes trained on things. Controlling and watching over his circumstances. As a spherical form, now covered all over with eyes, Argus became the universal watchman for people and things. The panoptic gaze is regarded as the epitome of a never-flagging, all-seeing eye-body. The power-drenched expression of a totalitarian, archaic structure, with constant, reliable access to the world in the dimension of seeing.

In the act of detaching themselves from a specific, geometric place, Peter Stoffel's landscapes rid themselves of the irrational core of such optics. As such this detachment from place also instigates the detachment of the gaze from the interconnections of individual elements, shifting it towards the elements themselves. These come to the fore with exaggerated clarity, so that on the surface of the paintings – as though they have far exceeded their representational remit – the visible seems to be eddying down into itself.

These landscapes speak through their colours. Through the skin that sheathes the painting. A flickering, oscillating surface organ. Hues mutate, nuances melt away. Fluids become viscous, immobile, and solidify. Outlines meander along flowing edges. Elsewhere zones extend and turn deep in on themselves. Islands form. Rivers come together, merge, and form small lakes of colour. Sense organ. Transition from outside to inside, from network to point, from global to singular. Now the flood of data is at its densest. The first factor is sensory. I see a landscape. Manifold impressions. The eye is a slim partition wall, a sparkling membrane. Behind it is another network, a new web of tracks and junctions that, as an entity, has a name, bears my name.

Things are not at rest. You have to look for them where their inner forces are at their most productive. A whirligig, a child's spinning top remains upright because it is revolving at speed. Given a particular relationship of weight to size to speed, it will not move from the spot. Everything is moving. Everything is spinning around an invariable, stable given. Active contemplation seeks a peaceful place. I. Stability through rotation.

Peter Stoffel's pictures are painted from this point of rotation. They communicate a simple, seemingly trivial motif. Alpine view. Faithfully depicted landscapes, atmospherically illuminated. Viewing platforms high up in the space. From here you can either look downwards or into the distance. The Lord's view. The pictures utilize this view specifically where it has become a cliché. When we can see everything, we ourselves are not visible. The cliché proves to be a welcome schema, because it avails itself of and affirms its surroundings by circumventing reflection and critique. Applied adeptly and functionally, it provides a bridge into the inner workings of the landscape. But the inner realms of these pictures demand a different kind of perception. Delusions of dominance collapse. The gaze is transformed into something entirely non-schematic. It can no longer hold onto the landscape; it has to let it go.

At the heart of the pictures, a place that belongs to no-one sets itself apart. From there an unfamiliar, ownerless gaze looks back at us and casts its spell on us, drawing us towards it.

Tumbling head over heels we see everything and nothing. Maelstrom. Hamlet's Mill. The gateway in the ocean floor through which the dead pass. Gaze plunging from the highest heights, from the totality of seeing to the absolute zero of sight. Where there is no seeing any more, just coming or going, for good. And with it the sound of shifting masses. Boulders and rocks. Bass tones in infinite depths. Here, in this alien place, the I of perception puts in an appearance. This place is also envisioned in the paintings of Peter Stoffel. Here, where the picture is no more, the voice finds a way in, acoustics add to the perception-filling data – silent is the song of the mountain peaks.

Do the paintings speak from within, even as they make a show of exteriority? Maybe. Is there a murmur from an invisible source emitting from the depth of the space and the bodies? What first strikes us is the artist's own realisation: the motivation for his paintings is beyond his control. It, too, is energised. It reforms his notion of himself, and of the world. It is a quake that passes through his persona. He knows this and the paintings say this. Art means replacing fiction with reality. Stability is ideal and abstract. The visible only shows itself where the invisible remains hidden. Reality means deviation. Reality itself remains unseen. The invisible may be communicated but may not be represented. Behind perception, away from the senses, visible and non-visible intersect. From their mixture come the paintings.

The multiple, the mixture, conceals many a secret; it shrouds the visible and it plunges the invisible into darkness. It sees to forgetting. Snow-covered planes. Ice age. The home of memories that seem, of their own accord, to fight shy of the present. They talk with many voices. Where is I? Not here, in this place, Not now, at this time.

Translation Fiona Elliott
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