

The Two Labyrinths, by French photographer Michel Le Belhomme, interrogates a key trope of photography: landscape and its representation. Conceived in terms of variation rather than as a series, Le Belhomme eschews narrative in *The Two Labyrinths*, both within individual photographs and as a relationship between the photographs. The photographs in this body of work are significantly different from one another, some are quite theatrical and evocative, others are very cool and analytical; some feel quite light-hearted while others have a more serious tone. Instead of a logical unfolding of an idea across a sequence of photographs there is choreography of associations and incongruities across discrete photographs.

I

There are two over-arching 'phases' or kinds of photographs that make up *The Two Labyrinths*: constructed images and interventions in-situ, in an existing landscape. Across all of the work, however, there is consistency in the 'protocols' employed, in the strategies adopted to make the photographs. One such protocol is the 'principle of construction', making visible, in one way or another, the agency of the photographer - whether by building a mountainous terrain with graph paper, completing a 'grand canyon' landscape through collage, re-engineering a globe jigsaw, or occluding all but the ribbon of road.

Another protocol is that each photograph 'function as a contradiction'. Within a photograph, this may be achieved through playing upon the dualities of artificial space and natural space, the constructed and the given, the breathtaking and the trifling, the familiar and the impossible. Within *The Two Labyrinths*, or between photographs, the play of opposites is evident in the relationship between the photograph of the road and that of the car in the trees, for example. The two photographs are allied through being 'interventions in-situ', photographs of a landscape, and at odds through the crystalline abstraction of the one and the absurdity of the other.

A further protocol in the making of the photographs is irony. Within each photograph, Le Belhomme creates and cultivates incongruity between what we expect to see and what is actually to be found in the photograph. Sometimes the *mise en scène* is one of detached analysis, at other times it is playful. In each case the consequent dissonance and strangeness is intended to reveal our investments in looking and demands critical reflection upon our assumptions regarding the nature of things, whether the artifice of representation or of landscape.

If together these protocols can be understood under a rubric of confrontation, their function is to produce instability, to act as a spur to going beyond one's comfort zone. For Le Belhomme this involves a move away from the theatrical and toward the analytical. *The Two Labyrinths* follows from *and* stands in conflict with an earlier body of work entitled *The Blind Beast*. *The Two Labyrinths* follows from *The Blind Beast* in so far as there is continuity of approach across the two bodies of work, both in terms of the fundamental protocols through which they were created and a commitment to making use of common materials (a kind of *arte povera*). Its confrontation with *The Blind Beast* is manifold: *The Blind Beast* was made entirely within Le Belhomme's home, *The Two Labyrinths* moves out into the world; *The Blind Beast* is an intimate, atmospheric exploration of ideas of 'place', *The Two Labyrinths* avoids affect, anecdote and emotion and strives toward something almost generic, a detached, even dry, photographic research into the visible and representation; where the first proposes and explores a point of view that is individual, the second engages and interrogates a point of view that is collective.

Turning to the photographs, the movement from theatre toward analysis choreographs a series of moments across the work: from the scenography of photographs such as the road, the car in the trees, the forest constellation, the grand canyon collage, and tiered lake; to the intersection of rock and scrubby plane; to the manipulations of the globe jigsaw, the neatly compressed inflatable globe, and the disrupted book; to the diagrammatic rendition of the atlas-mountains, the squared-paper mountains, and the coloured line contours.

Within *The Two Labyrinths*, a sense of this counterpoint between individual and collective points of view can also be discerned in the contrast between particular images, such as that between the photograph of the woodland overlaid with a constellation and that of the atlas-mountains. In the former, there is a sense of grappling to move beyond a personal point of view. A curtain of white pinpoints, within which one way of reading the scene is constellated and other constellations seem possible, disrupts the equilibrium of the woodland. By contrast, the atlas-mountains invoke a collective point of view through the use of schematic road maps and a supplement that, although it disrupts the two-dimensionality of everyday cartography, does so through a simple isomorphic schema that is generic rather than specific.

II

The title of the body of work proposes an exploration of two labyrinths. The primary labyrinths explored are landscape and representation, with landscape further devolved to two additional labyrinths: landscape 'as vision' and landscape 'as a product of space'. Metaphorically, a labyrinth can serve as a means to hold or contain something undesirable or as a situation that is difficult to extricate oneself from. On either reading, what is at play in this body of work is an exploration of the assumptions that structure our ideas on landscape and representation.

A range of ideas originating with nineteenth century Romanticism have, in significant measure, come to shape how we understand, view and value landscape. And it is these ideas that *Le Belhomme* explores through the motif of 'landscape as vision'. The photograph of the rocky gorge or 'grand canyon' can be seen to play upon two such romantic assumptions. First and foremost, is the idea that concepts of beauty, the sublime and the picturesque are inherently applicable to nature and fundamental to the experience of landscape. What puts this into question is that the sublime landscape to be appreciated is a construct, a collaged improvisation upon a cliff face that undoes 'the sublime' at the moment it inscribes it. Second, is the assumption that the ideal landscape is somehow pure and unsullied by human influence; a possibility that is queried by the 'DA' graffitied on a rock in the foreground, and given the lie by the magazine cover that forms another part of that rocky foreground. A further assumption made light of through the work is that nature and her unsullied landscapes are an antidote to the lure of excessive materialism. On the one hand, the car parked improbably midst the boughs of the trees is clearly not an image of unsullied nature, nonetheless it does rather make you wonder about the very possibility of 'getting back to nature' - not only in terms of the toxic impact of how you actually get there, but also in terms of the fantasy that is being sought in the first place. And finally, a fundamental *practice* of landscape, the everyday-heroic pursuit of 'a view', an ideal vantage point from which to experience, value and most fully understand the nature of a particular landscape or feature, is made an object of enquiry rather than a natural behaviour through the gentle irony of the photograph of layered photographic images of a lake.

Space is an oddly slippery concept given that it is fundamental to our experience of the world. So, leaning heavily on geographer Doreen Massey, I will set out some general assumptions about the nature of ordinary space before exploring ways of extricating oneself from the labyrinth of 'landscape as a product of space'. Firstly, space is, first and foremost, pure extension, a matter of coordinates in three linear dimensions.

Secondly, space and time are opposites; where time unfolds as change, space is a closed structure. Thirdly, space is the sphere of a multiplicity of (relatively) inert *things*. Fourthly, space is an interconnected, always-already territorialised whole. But what if, instead of conceiving of landscape as a product of space, we propose space as a product of landscape? What if, as suggested by Massey, space is profoundly dynamic, a product of relations rather than coordinates? On this reading, landscape is not so much a description of how the world is, as an image in which the world is being made. Le Belhomme's photograph of a jigsaw globe incorrectly assembled so that vast swathes of continents are missing effectively proposes an understanding of space as 'a product of material practices of power'. In addition to disrupting systems for representing space, Le Belhomme's erasure of certain countries from the jigsaw redraws the globe in line with national policy, whereby visiting certain countries to do research and make work requires special permission from the French government.

The labyrinth of representation is a familiar terrain; many artists and writers have challenged assumptions regarding the possibility of an unalloyed 'mirror of nature'. Across many spaces of contemporary discourse representation is understood as an element in a continuous production and reproduction of systems of knowledge. The artifice of landscape as a system of representation is acknowledged in all of Le Belhomme's work. For him, photography is always an interrogation of representation. Within *The Two Labyrinths*, for example, the photograph of squared-paper mountains points to the imposition of coherence in depictions of landscape, both through its allusion to systems of perspective that order a scene, and by resisting *seamless* coherence. In another image, the role of representation in mediating knowledge and in bolstering a will-to-mastery is explored in the photograph of the rolled pages of a photographic book. Rolling the pages created juxtapositions that collapse scale and vista (from the quantum to the cosmic), undid the controlling narrative, and yielded partial views. As a final example, take the photograph of a photograph of a rock set at an angle into a photograph of a scrubby plane. The 'original' photographic landscape is disrupted and rendered as artificial space by the massively disproportionate detail of a rock-face. Despite the consequent failure of scaling for distance, continuity between the two spaces is suggested by the alignment of shadows between the plane, the rock-face and that cast by the inset photograph. Uncertainty regarding space is further compounded by the ambivalence of the inset photograph (aligned with or intersecting the savannah photograph). We are thus confronted with an impossible space, and by an internal conflict between the desire to recognise something and the desire to be surprised.

III

The title of the body of work, *The Two Labyrinths*, is taken from a (very) short story by Jorge Luis Borges. The tale compares two types of labyrinths - one complex, full of tricks and devices, and one deceptively simple - and is a tale of hubris. A Babylonian King, of overweening ambition, built the first labyrinth in a bid to create fear and inspire awe. The second labyrinth was the downfall of the Babylonian King, a desert in which he met no obstacles and perished.

Within Le Belhomme's investigation of photography's 'blatant legend', each labyrinth was revealed as full of tricks and devices. Rather than a tale of hubris, however, *The Two Labyrinths* offers a playful interrogation of the grammar of photography, perpetually calling its procedures and techniques, and his own habits and sensibility, into question. For Le Belhomme, photography is a space of fiction, a space in which to encounter and engage with different visions, to confront different ways of thinking and seeing.

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