

## Suspicion: Edgar Martins' Forensic Landscapes

Where are the crime victims? For whose life, now summarised by starkly blown-up images on tabloid front pages, was this the last traumatic scene? Were their last fateful steps slowed in trepidation? Could this bland anonymous site have now become the focus of national attention? While not, of course, wanting to know the lurid details, what actually did happen here? These are the sorts of questions we are prompted to ask when viewing Edgar Martins' enigmatic photographs. Despite the absence of body, bloodstains or aftermath, there is a clinical and potent whiff of the forensic about many of Martins' images, they tell us little but demand a lot. Forensic science homes in on the minutiae of events, the chronicity of moments, the specifics of identity, Martins' images present us with banal sites, random moments and absent identities that beg all of those questions so familiar to forensic scientists. Whereas, however, the forensic photograph closes down possibilities, documenting and fine tuning their proximity to probability, Martins' images open up a proliferation of possibilities creating a divergence of suspicions, while nevertheless presenting us with all the auratic indications of scenes of crime. What is intriguing about these images is that they are all shot within 1000 metres of Martins' home, but the familiar is transformed here into the unfamiliar, disrupted by an intrusive veil of fog or whelming darkness. Consequently the prosaic reality is turned into its uncanny and often sinister palimpsest.

If, as Andre Bazin wrote in his 'Ontology of the Photographic Image', 'The photographic image is the object itself. The object freed from the conditions of time and space which govern it' [1], then the elusive narratives that we try to wrest from the slender clues provided by Martins' photographs are part of a reality that is more extant than we at first thought. Any cynicism or doubt on the part of the viewer should fall away like scales from his or her eyes. If only life was that simple. The photographic image is, after all, only a light trace of the object, preserved by light sensitive chemicals or electronic digital receptors and is freed from the strictures of time only by virtue of the archival qualities of the medium through which it is preserved – entropy ensures that it is changing, albeit infinitesimally, all the time. Any hypothetical narratives we might construct around the image are predicated on shifting ground. Just as advances are continually being made in forensic science in order to detect more accurately and reliably the circumstantial truth, given disparate clues from remote events in distant places, so conversely, advances in photography and the increasingly sophisticated processes of image production further remove it from its origins as a harbinger of truth, as an index of reality.

To give us breathing space and release us from the claustrophobia of the foggy suburbs, Martins takes us on forays into the less familiar solitude of empty forests. If these sites offer shelter from a fast moving world, they also offer cover for the activities of the criminal and the pervert, repositories for their illicit spoils or for the gruesome traces of wrecked lives left in their wake. These are exactly the sorts of sites where dogs and their walkers make those grisly and unwelcome finds that are daily bread to the forensic scientist. There is a strong sense of threshold in these photographs of the forest; we are on the threshold of something far bigger than the mundane scene before our eyes. Our emotions are on tick-over as we search the paucity of clues here for something that might lead us to the traces or remnants of some significant event. Will,

as Karl Heinz Bohrer posits in his book, 'Suddenness' [2], the instant without duration in its apparent insignificance, be transformed here into the instant with a claim to eternity, will some miniscule visual clue press a trigger that instantaneously converts this from tranquil to traumatic scene, thus affording it the duration of notoriety? Thus hooked, the gaze dwells more keenly. Perhaps this awareness of imminence is a throwback to those childhood adventures in woods or forests, when in our minds, as Peter Handke describes in his novel 'Repetition' [3], "the area became a refuge and hiding place for the creatures that bore its name, the 'woodsies'" these spirits of the flowers and the trees, the wood nymphs, have since matured in our minds, through the osmosis of the ways of the world, into something ultimately less wholesome and innocent.

Welcome to Dystopia where suspicion rules the roost, and fear attends every decision, where the sideways glance is the norm, and reality has many guises. The light here, either diffused by persistent fogs or suffused by harsh sodium lights is imbued with a sinister hue. This Dystopia is a land inhabited by the 'other', a land whose ominous topography casts an emotive shadow which throws our so familiar and comfortable lives into sharp relief, showing the events of our 'eventful' lives to be benign, relatively predictable, and trauma free. These are film noir stills where the obfuscation caused by fog and mist in Martins' images replaces the aura of unease generated by the chiaroscuro of highlight and shadow in those films. The fidgety flicking from urban to sylvan settings, edges into the film directors territory where, typically, parallel narratives become interwoven to create a tension that demands resolution. The ambiguity here is just as demanding of resolution, inciting the viewer to jump to hasty conclusions. We need to take our time but we are still offered no easy solutions here.

As I write this the musky odour of dead moths permeates my room as it crosses the threshold of the open window from the crystal clear but parched meadow beyond. This aroma takes me back to the childhood days of caterpillars in jars and moths in old shoeboxes having hunted them down in meadows filled with the choral pursuits of grasshoppers and the harmonies of hover-flies. The landscape consists of a constellation of sound and scents as well as sights, so what range of sounds and scents, I wonder, permeates the fog-bound landscapes and deserted forests that Edgar Martins presents us with, and are they vastly different from those that the images of Nadav Kander, Rut Blees Luxemburg, Sophy Rickett or Todd Hido have left behind? The images of those artists that share certain visual ideas and themes with Martins' photographs nevertheless have their own unique ontological fingerprints, which include their quiescent scent and sound signatures. The clues to these signatures are fewer, but our memories of scentscapes, so to speak, are very powerful and are strongly evocative of the scenes that they excavate from the deepest recesses of our memories. I urge the viewer to search the visual clues here for those associations that might trigger the memories of compatible sound and scentscapes. The scent of the forest with its variety of trees and intricate layers of undergrowth and leaf litter exuding a rich damp composty smell, has a complexity and subtlety that makes the smells of the urban landscape seem coarse and brutish in comparison. These contradictory olfactory experiences might be compared to the startling difference between the bouquet of a fine wine and that of a spirit like vodka or gin. So why is Martins' offering us these very different landscapes, each as deserted as the other?

We are tempted to create narratives, weave our own stories around the visual clues to fill out and relieve the emptiness of these deserted scenes, to make the final move in the construction of the ontology of these images. From before birth until our

final dying moments during our conscious waking life we are ceaselessly engaged with the interpretation of our percepts, by which we are endlessly assailed, and every time we do so we add our own spin over and above our learned responses. We continuously trade off the instant against the constant. In the restless celerity of our culture, the constant becomes more and more of an anachronism and the instant comes to dominate our attention. No matter how much we try to share our perceptions of the world, words always fall short, the finer details, the subtle nuances of our personal picture of our world, are always held back and remain private, unique. Our own personal take on the cityscapes and landscapes in 'Diminishing Present' will rarely coincide with the way Martins conceived them. The interpretation of these images as forensic, sinister and uncanny is purely my own spin which might seem perplexing to others, but as Hans Robert Jauss suggested in his book, 'Toward an Aesthetic of Reception' [4], the moving out into the public sphere is 'the creative function of the work of art', its reception is a dialectical process that creates the work anew for each viewer. According to Victor Burgin, for the viewer "The photograph becomes the point of origin of a series of psychic 'pans' and 'dissolves', a succession of metonymies and metaphors which transpose the scene of the photograph to the spaces of the 'other scene' of the unconscious, and also most importantly, the scene of the popular pre-conscious: the scene of discourse, of language." [5]. This process of mutual input and feedback between our perceptual organs and unconscious mind based on our grasp of the nuances of language is a very personal one and goes a long way to explain why our own particular view and interpretation of an artwork is so unique and singular. Martins with his photographs of empty banal scenes, provides the bare bones of these artworks and we flesh them out through our own unique syntheses of experience, memory and imagination.

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- [1] Andre Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' in *What is Cinema?* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1967. Page 15.
- [2] Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness* [Trans. by Ruth Crowley]. Columbia University Press, New York, 1994.
- [3] Peter Handke, *Repetition* [Trans. by Ralph Manheim]. Methuen, London, 1989. Page 146.
- [4] Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* [Trans. by Timothy Bahti]. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1982.
- [5] Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory*. McMillan, London, 1988. Pages 69-70.