

COULD
YOU
TALK
ABOUT

**MISHKA
HENNER**

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MISHKA HENNER

Interview by Joël Vacheron

**M 7 MUSÉE DES
B BEAUX-ARTS
L A LE LOCLE**

COULD YOU TALK ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AND YOUR JOURNEY TO BECOMING AN ARTIST?

My mother was a Polish refugee from the 60s, she knew of a lot of Polish artists in Paris where she lived and I grew up with a lot of Polish poster art. These posters were very bold and colourful and they were a way for the artists to make works in a politically sensitive climate. Later, I studied sociology and cultural studies which were theory-based. While I never formally went to art school, my girlfriend studied fine art and we spent a lot of time with her friends who were mostly conceptual artists. Later, I had a chance to do a PhD in cultural studies but felt I needed to get out of the university environment to experience “real life”, or at least to get to know something practical and not just theory. My first job out of University was for a branding agency in London, working with big corporations, conducting workshops with consumers about their motivations for buying things. It felt like I was in the engine room of capitalism, creating demand and desire and manipulating individuals. I became quite cynical about it and started writing short stories, illustrating them myself in the style of Joan Miró and distributing them in bars in London. A girl picked one up and wanted to make a play of one of my stories. She worked in the genre of physical theatre, a form of theatre that places more emphasis on movements, gestures, actions and less on words. She invited me to help direct the play and it was by doing this that I learned a lot about discipline and collaboration in making art. To some extent, it was a real art education. Not abstract but driven by a clear purpose and we had to work towards something. Unlike my degree in communications that was based on words only, with physical theatre, I learned it was possible to communicate a lot without words.

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AND WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO CHOOSE PHOTOGRAPHY AS YOUR MAIN MEANS OF EXPRESSION?

In 2003, I went to see *Cruel and Tender*, Tate Modern's first major photography show. It dealt with the history of documentary photography in the 20th century and I really identified with the works of Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. They each had a structure they worked within, finding a way to say something visually about the culture which remained ambiguous. The work and the method really spoke to me. These photographic documents encapsulated many dimensions: on the one hand they were very open and it was up to you how you wanted to read them. On the other, the way they photographed the bland and the banal was quite damning in a way. It was strong, powerful, even with the most dullest subjects like Lewis Baltz's industrial estates or Robert Adams' tract houses in *The American Midwest*. These works were about American culture and how empty it had become and I was really drawn to that.

DID IT BECOME OBVIOUS THAT PHOTOGRAPHY WAS THE MOST APPROPRIATE MEANS TO MAKE APPARENT THE DISCREPANCIES OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES?

I already liked the work of authors like J.G. Ballard and of Michel Houellebecq, they have an almost sociological way of looking at the cultural impacts of late capitalism. And I loved this intense focus on the present in order to reveal something specific about it. This is what Andy Warhol was doing in a sense, focusing on what was there in front of him. So, I first decided to

become a documentary photographer and my partner Liz Lock taught me to use a medium format camera. We moved back to Manchester in early 2000s, during the Blair era. *Cool Britannia* offered unending myths about progressive, exciting, regenerated cities but outside of these major urban areas, satellite towns were depressed and impoverished. My partner and I started documenting these suburbs mostly through portraiture and landscapes. In the beginning, I believed in the ability of documentary photography to change perceptions and have a cultural impact, but over time I lost faith about the prime concern of this kind of imagery. It bothered me that it mainly focused on the poor, the disadvantaged and the powerless. Over time I realised these photographs didn't seem to change much and it frustrated me. As a result I slowly abandoned this method. At the time, I was reading and watching a lot of news about Iraq and Libya. I had the feeling I was living in a country attempting to relive some colonial and imperial fantasy. I was also starting to become interested in working with the Internet and found that as a lone citizen, just by uncovering material online I could suddenly make work about geopolitical issues. That is how I ended up doing what I am doing today.

YOU ARE PART OF THE FIRST ARTISTS WHO PRODUCED CONSISTENT WORKS BASED ON IMAGES FOUND ON INTERNET. AT WHAT POINT DID YOU REALIZE THAT IT WOULD GAIN THIS ARTISTIC LEGITIMACY?

When you start opening doors, you realise there's a whole history of works based on found images or readymades. When I started I was learning a lot from the works of Joachim Schmid, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Robert Longo, etc. At the

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beginning I thought art had to be a certain thing, then I got into theatre and realised it could be something else. Then I got into documentary and realised again it could be something else entirely. Now I am aware that art is really about constant discovery and the possibilities are endless.

INTERNET WAS STILL A VERY YOUNG INVENTION THAT IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING. HOW DID IT AFFECT YOUR WORKING METHODS?

At the beginning, I was working very quickly and did about eight projects in the first year or two. Part of the urgency was that nobody knew how long the information available online would be around for, or how long Google Earth would last given the issues around privacy. Would these issues lead to censorship? Would it get closed down? On the Web, you are only ever one search term away from some pretty explosive material that not even journalists would necessarily know about. There were many uncertainties and I just worked non-stop for two or three years to discover as much as I possibly could, working with a real sense of urgency.

WHAT WERE YOUR INITIAL INTERESTS WHEN YOU WERE SELECTING YOUR INFORMATION AND WHAT WERE THE VISUAL LANGUAGES YOU PRIVILEGED?

I liked coming across really technical details, such as the structures of military installations or the planning involved in military operations. I learned for example how to differentiate between a *Forward Operating Base* and a *Permanent Base*, and how these would affect the infrastructure of military installations. The research

educated me about logistics and strategy in other areas too, such as subjects relating to environmental concerns. I would learn how oil is taken from the ground and turned into a plastic bottle and this kind of thing gives you new perspectives on how to read landscapes. Working on the series *Feedlots* (2013), I realised I was involved in an informal gathering of geospatial intelligence. For a long time I didn't know that field of activity existed but then I realised that's what I was doing but with artistic and critical motives.

WHAT CAN YOUR METHODS TELL US ABOUT THE SHIFTING STATUS AND METHODS OF PHOTOGRAPHY?

There is huge amount of research involved in documentary work. Getting access to first hand information is about 90% of a photographer's work. Trying to meet the right people to get access to the stories you think are interesting. With this work (*Field, North Ward Estes*, 2016) it was a similar method. I was doing a huge amount of research to understand the terrain. The image is really only the final piece of a vast puzzle. I think the reason I lost faith with documentary was that I was controlling the camera, so I was imposing a fixed style on whatever subject I was working with. The style was completely consistent and it neutralised in some way the reading of the subject. Whereas when I was working with the aesthetics and the optics of the subject I was looking at, whether it was Dutch censorship, feedlots or Google Street View, each technology brought a new type of reading to the subject. As a viewer you engage with it differently because you are introduced to new ways of representing something you might only know as a cliché or you might only have a particular way of thinking or seeing something. The aesthetic of my series *Dutch Landscapes* (2011) was so absurd but funny. It revealed

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a level of paranoia that my own visual style of documentary could not have conveyed as well. Surrendering control of the camera was a big deal for me – it suddenly opened up a whole set up of aesthetic possibilities.

HOW DID THESE DIFFERENT OBSERVATIONS CONVERGE IN *FIELD, NORTH WARD ESTES* (2016), THE PROJECT YOU DEVELOPED FOR THE MUSÉE DES BEAUX-ARTS DU LOCLE?

I spent about two years studying the American landscape through satellite imagery, finding a number of engrossing industrial subjects that I felt needed to be focused on from the high altitude of space. The extent to which industry had made its imprints on the American soil was clear to see. In particular with the oil industry. You can see how America has exhausted its land of oil and minerals. Three or four generations have mined the same tracts of land and still they try to squeeze out as much gas and oil as possible. As in Europe, intensive agricultural farming has also left its mark and what we see is a landscape absolutely drained dry. Another particularity of the American landscape is its grid-like design. The entire land is divided into 1 mile by 1 mile parcels of land and this commodification of the territory is glaringly graphic when seen from above. For *Field*, I took a specific section of North Ward Estes Field, a huge oil field which is one of many gigantic oil fields in the US. Data exists online that maps the distribution of active and inactive, oil and gas wells across the area as well as the distribution of transmission lines across the landscape. This data is another layer that has been added to the industrial and agricultural layers of the terrain, and which is only visible in online databases. That data is found on the website of the Railroad Commission of Texas and allows us to “see” who the companies are that

operate each and every pumpjack, how productive the wells are and how deep into the ground they go.

HOW DO YOU GET ACCESS TO THE DIFFERENT RESOURCES USED IN FIELD?

It was a big deal for me to find it freely on the website of the Railroad Commission because it suddenly provides a way to read the landscape completely differently. Not in the way Yann Arthus-Bertrand might look at the land and its geometrical shapes as something solely beautiful. The data reveals the industrial rationality that creates and manages the territory. This logic is made visible in the way those systems and networks leave their imprint on the land. I was only really able to understand it once I began to excavate and examine the data layers. The data is a raw language and the question is how you integrate it in an artistic project.

WHAT KIND OF CHALLENGES DID YOU HAVE TO FACE?

Having a single 13 meter print could risk becoming a purely aesthetic exercise. You could easily think that you are looking at a Jackson Pollock for example. However, when you look closely at the print you realise you are not looking at an abstract painting at all but something very clear and precise which is great. This is what the work is about. But what I hold back on is including the data layer on top of the landscape. One reason not to do it is a fear that the work might become too didactic, serving an educational purpose and nothing else.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO INTERPRET THESE DATAS WITHOUT BEING AN EXPERT?

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Yes. On a basic level it helps you to understand what you are looking at. For example there are two types of pumpjacks: a type that takes the oil out of the ground and another one that pumps carbon dioxide into the ground. That carbon dioxide pushes the oil into the vicinity of the pumpjacks that extract the oil. So when there are 600 pumpjacks and 300 are pumping oil out of the ground and another 300 are pumping carbon dioxide into the ground you realise there is a huge amount of poisonous carbon dioxide going into the ground. You don't need to be an expert to understand that. Then there are also the pipeline systems which are transporting crude oil, gas and volatile liquids across the country. Once you know these basic things, you can have a specific reading of the landscape that provides another level of understanding of the work. But I think much of the toxicity of the process is visible in the landscape itself.

YOUR WORKS ALWAYS FLUCTUATE BETWEEN THE STRIKING BEAUTY OF THESE IMAGES AND OBJECTIVE FACTS AND OBSERVATIONS. HOW DO YOU FIND THE BALANCE BETWEEN THESE TWO REGIMES?

In the first instance, there is indeed the power of the image itself. People see it and they are immediately drawn in. They want to know more about it. That is why I try to describe in very simple terms what they are looking at. For example, this is a feedlot, this is how it works, this is why it exists, etc. People can then add their own interpretations to these basic descriptions. There is tendency nowadays to interrupt the perfection of these images, to reveal the production that goes into them whereas my work is more about hiding the production to make it look seamless. In *Dutch Landscapes* (2011) for example, a lot of work goes into stitching

these images. I had to remake the polygons to make larger prints as the resolution was not good enough. I found myself asking why I needed to repaint them and realized I didn't want the viewer to be distracted by the construction of the image. Instead I wanted the viewer to be engrossed as much as possible by what they see. When you start to allow the production process to be visible in the work, you are directing the viewer to somewhere else. You are making a statement that all imagery is produced, that there is no objectivity, but to me that is basic. Of course there is no objectivity, it is all produced. I don't want the viewer to be thinking about that. I want the viewer to be thinking about the larger cultural environment that allowed this to happen. That is why I try to leave it as clear as possible.

MORE GENERALLY, WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGIES SUCH AS GOOGLE EARTH OR DRONES ON THE EVOLUTION OF LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY?

If there is a TV news item it starts with a satellite image and then we zoom into the image. It has become part of the 21st century visual vocabulary. But six years ago when I started to work in this way it was still a new and fresh way of representing things. For me it was exciting because it could surprise the viewer but that is less the case now. Satellite imagery has become part of the culture. When I first started out working with this imagery, I was looking at abstract expressionists. People like Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. They were not so interested in the representation of the real but in energy and a dynamic way of seeing the world. When I saw the American landscape from above, it was the same landscape the abstract expressionists lived in and painted, only they couldn't see it as it was impossible

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to get that perspective in 1950s. So for me it was almost like a game. I wanted my pictures to evoke the abstract expressionists but on closer inspection, for you to see they were satellite images of landscapes. The panoramic format of the oil fields was based on many of Pollock's paintings so in a way, I was playing a game.

DO YOU THINK THAT THESE NEW RANGE OF AERIAL REPRESENTATIONS CAN HELP US TO PRECISE THE IMPACT AND THE COMPLEXITY OF THE GLOBALISATION PROCESS?

I think so. Just look at the Panama papers. You have individuals and companies around the world that hide vast sums of money secretly through networks and tax havens. We always knew it but we never saw how it worked until somebody leaked the papers and helped us understand and "see" these international operations. It is the same with oil fields. I knew about Edward Burtynsky's work on oil fields but to me the way to truly represent them is only through satellite imagery because it's only from that height that you get a sense of the scale of the phenomenon. This is also the case with the series *Feedlots* (2013). From space you can very clearly define the boundaries of gigantic feedlots and within that see all of the structures, the networks, the configurations, the templates. It's a bit like retail parks, they follow a very particular template. If you understand the template, if you have an overview of the plan of the building, you can understand how the building works and why it was created in a certain way. It is the same with the aerial perspective; it is a form of mapping that allows you to see strategies that are difficult or impossible to understand from the ground level.

BUCKMINSTER FULLER COINED THE TERM COMPREHENSIVE DESIGNER TO DESCRIBE AN EMERGING SYNTHESIS OF ARTIST, INVENTOR, HANDYMAN, OBJECTIVE ECONOMIST AND EVOLUTIONARY STRATEGIST. DO YOU THINK THIS COULD DESIGNATE THE WAY YOU APPROACH PHOTOGRAPHY?

Yes, I'm part of this generation of late 20th century capitalism that had absolutely no stable future, that grew up without the promise of a stable employment. When I was 22 I was working for a branding agency and had to come up with a strategy for a work place for an influential chain of supermarkets. In my research I had to read a lot about the latest trends on how to design offices and one of the really big ideas at the time came from a business thinker talking about the portfolio career. It means you are not a specialist in one thing, you might have worked as a cleaner, in a call centre or as a builder. It shows you are flexible, you can move easily from one thing to the next and are not scared of instability and impermanence. Almost with a zen Buddhist approach to employment and economics. Somehow I found a way to exist without knowing a great deal about anything specific. As an artist, you have a role in society but you are not part of institutional structures, you kind of float around. There has been a lot written about the exploitation of that role but I have been always comfortable with this precarious existence. My dad used to tell me I was jack of all trades, master of none.

YOUR WORK SEEMS TO BE DRIVEN BY A HUMANIST APPROACH. IS IT YOUR MAIN INTENTION TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE?

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I guess so but at the same time I really like the idea of art for art's sake and not just making work that is political. Though it is a problem at the moment because I feel I have become known for precise, potent, politically charged, controversial works. Actually I'm trying to get away from it. I'm interested in other things and I want to develop as an artist, not be constricted.

IT SEEMS THAT RECENTLY, MORE AND MORE ARTISTIC WORKS ARE DEALING WITH ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES, IN PARTICULAR THE ANTHROPOCENE. DO YOU FEEL PART OF THIS MOVEMENT?

It is inevitable, we are the generation that is growing up after a generation that has built the highest standards of living in human history in terms of production and consumption. And we are seeing the impact of those ideals. Countries in the developing world are following them too and we are experiencing the environmental consequences of those models on an everyday basis. It is unavoidable that artists are reacting to this. You would not be performing a very critical role if you were embracing late capitalism as an artist... Artists should be engaged in something very different, something much more critical and reflective about cultural issues, and it is very much happening today. Of course curators have their own agendas and institutions that support curators also have their agendas. I'm not sure there is a great deal artists can do about it.

MOST OF THE IMAGES PRODUCED NOWADAYS ARE SO FAST AND MECHANICAL THAT IN A VERY TANGIBLE WAY THEY ARE OFTEN BEYOND HUMAN PERCEPTION. DO YOU FEEL THAT YOUR IMAGES ARE ON THE VERGE OF VISIBILITY?

There is always the fear with these shows and installations that it becomes just another part of the spectacle and doesn't result in anything significant. So, I step back from the idea and ask myself: will this idea or image endure and last or is it just going to be more noise in an already noisy environment? Is it just killing time? Does it have any purpose or longevity? It is impossible to answer these questions as an artist. I had a great chat with Richard Misrach about these issues. He told me that he made a work when he was much younger which at the time he thought was irrelevant but it turns out it became one of his most important works. You just cannot know how your work will be received in the future. Having said that I want to put images out and I want to create things that stop people in their tracks. In this world of rapid, constant information, I think art can be the place that helps people to get out of their daily routines, also because their function is often not clear. When you go to the cinema, to the supermarket or to work, you know what you are getting. When you read a book, or listen to a song sometimes they can stop you in your tracks and things can happen that make you change the way you think about the world. That is what I'm aiming for but it is bloody difficult.

Interview by Joël Vacheron