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NOÉMIE GOUDAL

Interview by Joël Vacheron

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CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND AND WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO BECOME A PHOTOGRAPHER?

I have the impression that photography has always been part of my life. At the age of fifteen, I began developing photographs in a darkroom. I considered it primarily a hobby and at that time I could not imagine becoming a photographer at all. It all became clear later on, especially during my studies of graphic design in London at the Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design. The college had a well-equipped darkroom and, since I already felt comfortable with photography, I somehow managed to always include photography in the assignments we were given. After three years of study, my portfolio comprised almost exclusively photographs and it was at that moment I realised that I had a real affinity with this medium. But it was only during my master's degree at the Royal College of Art that I really considered photography as my favourite creative and artistic medium.

DID LONDON HAVE AN INFLUENCE ON YOUR WORK?

I moved to East London in the early 2000s and this part of the city seemed to be in a process of rebuilding. Buildings were being erected at a frantic pace, restaurants were popping up overnight. I had always lived in the centre of Paris and this context of permanent transformation was quite striking for me as it was for the people who had lived in these neighbourhoods for a long time. At the same time, I remember a lot of vacant plots of land, especially around Brick Lane, which had been left undeveloped since the Second World War. This part of London had been particularly affected by the war and it was really surprising to still find areas like

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Photomontage of *Démantèlement III*,
from the *Démantèlements* series, 2019

this almost half a century later. There were still ruins of destroyed buildings, but on the whole, nature had regained control and there were many trees and an abundant vegetation. This transient urban environment was totally new to me and it was a big influence for my first series. I quickly started using these wastelands to take my photographs.

WHAT PART DID HISTORY PLAY IN YOUR FIRST SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN IN LONDON?

I was not trying to make specific references to this period of time, my intention was rather to take advantage of the generic and indefinable character of these places. In general, my work tends to remove any temporal and geographical information. You never know when or where the photograph was taken. My starting point is rather philosophical, offering the viewer the possibility of interpreting the image in their own way, according to their own points of reference. Some people recognise a place immediately, others make associations with known or imaginary places, etc. I like to play with the interpretation codes that the viewer uses when confronted with an image, without trying to give too many clues that would influence their interpretation. In my opinion, a photograph must preserve a certain amount of uncertainty. An image shows the world in an imitative way, it's not an abstract painting. When you add too much information, it limits opportunities for interpretation, and my goal is to give the viewer the chance to fully engage with the image. I think this desire to create generic and open images is a prerequisite of my work.

EACH OF YOUR PROJECTS IS BUILT AROUND A SPECIFIC REFERENCE FRAMEWORK. HOWEVER, ARE THERE

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ARTISTS, THEMES OR OTHER DISCIPLINES THAT INFLUENCE YOUR WORK?

Indeed, I don't like undertaking a project that I feel I have already done before and I continuously renew my references according to my work or my interests at the time. As such, I cannot highlight a specific artist, but I do have some essential references. For example, the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher interested me to a certain extent, especially their use of typologies and their questioning of how an architectural form becomes a sculpture. The same is true of the American tradition of Land Art: some artists like Donald Judd, Michael Heizer or Carl Andre have particularly influenced me in my most recent series. However, in recent years, my sources of inspiration have come from literature or scientific publications, particularly in relation to the history of science. For example, my most recent series *Observatoires* (2015), *Towers* (2015) and *Southern Light Stations* (2016) are a direct result of research on the different methods developed over the centuries to observe, represent and interpret the cosmos. This theme interests me all the more because it is intrinsically linked to the history of perspective and, more generally, to the development of our understanding of the world around us. In Antiquity, it was thought that there was a heavenly vault and that people lived in a closed world which, like the sky, had an end. This idea was challenged during the Renaissance, when Copernicus discovered that the Earth was not the centre of the universe and that the sky was much bigger than we thought. It involved new ways of looking at the world. These different visions of the world inspired me to create these images. These series act as invitations to look at landscape, but through different historical points of view.

**CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR
TELLURIS, SOULÈVEMENTS AND
DÉMANTÈLEMENTS SERIES, WHICH
WILL FORM A LARGE PART OF YOUR
EXHIBITION AT MBAL?**

In this exhibition, I have been influenced by a whole range of theories but more specifically by those relating to the history of the Earth. I became interested in Ancient Greece, as a way to see things from a slightly more distant point of view, and then dwell more deeply on the Renaissance. These different perspectives gave me a certain amount of information and ideas from which I could build my images. I was particularly inspired by theories developed in geology to explain how mountains were created. Scientists were more interested in discovering if the things that were in nature were the result of mathematical theorems. The series exhibited at MBAL will explore these issues through different perspectives. We are used to seeing landscape as something totally fixed, but it actually is in perpetual motion. Even massive rocks, which seem to be frozen in eternity, have been transformed via different geological processes. During my research, I found out that scientists had discovered fossils in rocks at the top of mountains, so they began to wonder very early on how they came to be there. The hypotheses were varied: maybe rivers had covered it all before descending again or part of the earth's crust had been lifted, which would have brought these fossils from the bottom of the sea to the top of the mountains. For example, the *Soulèvements* series (2018) was created by placing mirrors in a particularly spectacular rocky area in Brittany, in such a way that they reflected parts of the rocks. With the reflections created, I somehow gave another shape to these rocks to bring movement to the landscape. A very subtle change in orientation of the mirrors or the position of

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the viewer provides a totally different perception of the whole landscape.

With *Telluris* (2017), I was interested in the work of scientists, especially their ability to understand a phenomenon from a mathematical model or a scientific paradigm. For example, when you look at the Himalayas from a geological point of view, you understand that the complexity of this mountain range stems from the slow formation of the different strata or from the action of erosion that determine its current state. Nowadays one knows that this is part of a long process, over a long period of time, but it was not necessarily the case in the past. For a long time, the landscape was considered as the result of a mathematical equation that led to its creation once and for all; this vision of the world is totally different from our modern view. What interested me was to question the influence of man who, through the development of different theories, always manages to give the impression of understanding and perfectly controlling the world around him. The *Telluris* series tackles these issues, beginning with the shape of the cube as it is a man-made form that has long been used as a symbol of order and stability. To deal with these questions, I installed cubes in the desert in different positions, as a way of studying the formation of rocks. These images question how a landscape made up of clusters of rocks, which are at first glance a solid and irremovable environment, can potentially be deconstructed and rebuilt ad infinitum. These cubes somehow become instruments for conducting an experiment on the evolution of mountain ranges.

For *Démantèlements* (2018), I photographed a mountain that I then printed on water-soluble paper, in other words, paper that dissolves when in contact with water. I then laminated this paper onto a transparent tarpaulin and cut around the edge of the mountain to obtain a reproduction of about 2 metres wide. I then

brought this reproduction into nature and placed it in front of another mountain, or more generally in front of a landscape. Thanks to perspective, the small-sized mountain blends into the landscape. From a technical point of view, I had to adjust the focal length so that the sharpness of the cut-out mountain in the foreground and the landscape behind it was more or less similar. For this reason, this work can only exist in a small format; any bigger and it would be out of focus.

WE HAVE THE IMPRESSION THAT YOUR SERIES ALWAYS RELY ON SPECIFIC TECHNICAL CONSTRAINTS. HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE RESEARCH PHASES AND TECHNICAL ASPECTS IN YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS?

My work involves a lot of research in order to understand the materials and to organise the shooting process. Each project involves particular areas of expertise and specific working methods. As such, I mostly work with specialised teams, notably in film making. It requires a lot of organisation and precision in order to invent and create original devices. For example, for the *Soulèvements* series, it took me several years to find a solution that allowed me to work with mirrors. This required an extremely complex support system, built using tripods, “magic arms,” etc. All this equipment is used mainly in film making. I recently worked on a project with ice sculptures in the studio. We were dealing with organic materials that react very quickly to the surrounding environment and this was particularly complicated, especially regarding lighting and heat issues. You must pay particular attention to all the small differences related to contingencies and tiny details. As such, the DIY aspect is central to my work, because for me it is a way of bringing viewers into the landscape so they feel

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engaged. If I simply edited it with Photoshop, the meaning would not be the same as the many “accidental” elements or imperfections give you clues so you become more involved with the image. The viewer becomes something of an actor and this effect can only be achieved by creating a “stage set.”

WITH THIS IN MIND, YOU ALWAYS EXHIBIT YOUR WORK WITHIN A STAGED ENVIRONMENT OR ON SPECIFICALLY BUILT STRUCTURES. DOES THIS MEAN YOU HAVE TO USE SPECIFIC WORKING METHODS?

I don't like the idea of visitors walking around an exhibition space simply seeing images on a wall. I prefer to consider the exhibition space as a comprehensive experience that offers a unique journey. For example, this entire exhibition will be installed in a wooden construction in which visitors can move around, similar to a labyrinth. Depending on how the journey unfolds, points of view change and this allows viewers to discover different associations between the images on show. You can then overcome the constraints imposed by traditional exhibition spaces, where images are shown side by side on a wall. In an exhibition context, installing a hollow structure made it possible to readily create random juxtapositions between images. I worked with a science historian, and we noticed that we were interested in the same issues but had different priorities. When she asks me for information regarding an architectural image, I usually don't know the precise references, because it is above all the formal aspect that interests me or the associations that it can generate. In this sense, I don't think that I undertake the research phases of a project with the systematic rigour of a scientist or a historian in terms of methodology. But each work



11 involves the installation of complex devices, which often requires collaboration with scientists or experts from different disciplines. I am currently working on a ceramic project with the Manufacture de Sèvres, a company specialised in this field. This is a rather unique opportunity, because of the extremely specific techniques and the very long production time. The idea is to produce twenty small models of the globe, about 25 centimetres in diameter, which represent the theories about the Earth as formulated over the centuries. In most cases, these theories exist in the form of texts with no images. My role has been to re-read these texts and thrash out ideas with experts in order to create these globes.

ANOTHER THING IN COMMON IN ALL YOUR SERIES IS YOUR NEED TO QUESTION REALITY THROUGH DIFFERENT WORKING METHODS. TO WHAT EXTENT IS PHOTOGRAPHY A MEDIUM OF CHOICE FOR YOU TO ANALYSE THIS CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY?

In my opinion, the magic of photography is precisely its ability to “frame” reality with great freedom. A photograph can be considered as a completely flat two-dimensional object, but it can also be seen as a succession of layers. My job is to carefully rework the different layers that make up an image. How do the different layers interact with each other to produce perspective? How does our eye switch between the different levels of interpretation? How can you “enter” into a photograph? I constantly wonder about the different layers that overlap and juxtapose within a photographic image in order to create what we consider to be an accurate representation of reality.

**THROUGH THE THEMES AND DEVICES
USED IN YOUR SERIES, YOU SEEM
TO WANT TO RAISE AWARENESS.
WHAT IMPORTANCE DO YOU GIVE
TO THE EDUCATIONAL DIMENSION IN
YOUR WORK?**

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Even if my images give the impression that we see the world in a certain way, what interests me the most is to challenge our visual habits. The effect of illusion is fundamental to all my work, which I continue to explore from one project to the next. It is an open question, requiring ongoing research. As such, taking photographs in a place, both real and generic, is even more important. Through my photographs, I somehow try to thwart the status quo by showing that it is possible to lose one's bearings while keeping one's roots in place. We are never immersed in a totally virtual or totally abstract world. I try to remain in this area of confusion, offering enough obvious elements so that viewers always know, at first glance, what is before them. You know more or less where you are, even if at times you can be confused. There are always elements that cast doubt on the certainty of our interpretation, adding subtle levels of complexity, for example by changing scale or including reflection effects. It is a kind of hallucination as it is sometimes difficult to ascertain the authenticity of what you are looking at. It is not really a question of trying to create awareness, but the more questions an image raises, the more interesting it becomes. As far as I'm concerned, I try to create something as open as possible to allow viewers to ask themselves their own questions.

**YOU HAVE ALSO MADE SHORT FILMS TO
ACCOMPANY YOUR PHOTOGRAPHIC SERIES.
DO YOU PLAN TO CONTINUE USING THIS
MEDIUM?**

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The idea of making films was part of my *Observatoires* project, but since these are unscripted still shots, it is more like an animated film depicting a performance. Through these short films, I wanted to evoke repetitive and circular movements between the sky and the Earth. This idea was directly related to the photographs in the series that featured observatories with potentially specific points in the sky. The short films are based on this idea of ascending up to the sky and descending down to the Earth, through the movements undertaken by characters so far away that they are almost silhouettes. For example, for the film *Diver*, I worked with professional divers who seem to be training. As the film unfolds, you begin to wonder where the training stops and where the fiction begins. I was particularly interested in questioning this gradual change of perception, as a similar process happens with my photographs. There is always a gradual development between a scene or an ordinary environment and the progressive understanding of my involvement in creating the scenario. I was also selected with other artists to participate in a program organised by Greater Paris as part of the extensive work on the public transport system in preparation for the Olympic Games. The objective is notably to create sustainable works in train stations and I'm going to be working at Blanc-Mesnil. In my project, there is the idea of circular movements I used in *Diver*. You will be able to see workers filmed in day-to-day situations. Over the course of the sequence, an action takes place that makes you doubt the reality of the whole scenario.

**URBAN LIFE, THE ENVIRONMENT, THE
AMBIGUITY OF REALITY, ETC., DOES
YOUR WORK HAVE A CRITICAL APPROACH?**

I don't want my work to be considered a criticism of anything, because it is not political at all. My goal is

simply to create the visual conditions from which one can question the nature of a landscape without imposing a point of view or offering any political bias. I want to stimulate questions that can show and allow us to see the world around us from different points of view. To do this, I focus mainly on historical references as it allows me to look at the contemporary landscape with some hindsight. This approach seems all the more crucial in a time when one often has the impression of knowing everything about the world, while our understanding of many phenomena is still in its infancy. It is a way of reminding us that the knowledge we consider today as faultless data will be different for the next generations. Science is changing, so is our understanding of the world, and our ways of thinking today will probably be naïve and out-dated tomorrow.



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Telluris I and Telluris IX, from the series Telluris, 2017