

Patrick Shanahan

Paradeisos

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Contemporary landscape photography is becoming ever more concerned with the aftermath; the trace of some previous event or its effects upon the layout of the present. Work such as Joel Meyerowitz's images of Ground Zero and Sophie Ristelhueber's aerial photographs of the battlefields of Kuwait after the First Gulf War epitomize the shift in the emphasis of landscape photography from a decorative medium to a documentary one and a space in which to explore the spatial evolution and progression of Man.

Patrick Shanahan's current work *Paradeisos* is another attempt to use photography to explore a space which has undergone a transition, in this case from one industry (mining) to another (leisure): The Eden Project. Although the work does not have the attributes one might associate with a documentary theme – textual information, some kind of logical juxtaposition of images – *Paradeisos* does nevertheless tell the story (albeit concisely) of the Eden Project from an exhausted china clay mine to one of Britain's most celebrated tourist attractions.

Shanahan makes images at a deliberately awkward distance, rarely wide enough to give the impression of an objective, literal overview, and not really close enough to be defined as *studies*. These images remind me of the cliché of the photograph as a window overlooking the world. In this case, the window seems too restrictive and this is frustrating. The exhibition literature is proud of this "discreet" distance, however, I felt too uninvolved and detached from the subject by Shanahan's position of pure observation. This is highlighted by the fact that when there are people in the images, none of them are looking at the camera/viewer, despite the fact that he would have been very conspicuous lugging around his large-format camera.

Shanahan is very much concerned with spaces that lack definition. His previous work *Esperantis* (for which he earned his doctorate) was a collection of nighttime long-exposures made around coastal resorts of the Iberian Peninsular. The resulting images of surreal colors taken from interesting vantage points

present a very different face of the Mediterranean coastline. Aesthetically, there could not be a greater contrast between the two bodies of work. The images in *Paradeisos* are extremely understated, slightly washed-out and remarkably unspectacular. However, conceptually, both projects deal with ideas of the artificial space; specifically those designed for leisure, and in their own different ways, offer the promise of “paradise”.

The title of the work is presumably an ironic gesture towards the Eden Project. Shanahan’s stance is quite polemic, clearly negative towards this simulation of far-flung climates sold under an admittedly rather pretentious title. By photographing mostly on overcast days and employing very subtle over-exposure, Shanahan manages to capture the translucency of the Eden Project’s distinctive biomes most effectively. Almost blurred with the sky, their presence seems more alien – as if they are trying to camouflage themselves against the real world.

Indeed the “real” is integral to Shanahan’s work. Although he has his reservations about some of Jean Baudrillard’s ideas, much of the vocabulary describing Shanahan’s work comes directly from Baudrillard. The concepts of Simulacra and Hyperreality are integral to how *Paradeisos* is to be understood. The meaning of the work revolves around the idea of the Eden Project as a simulated environment, perhaps purporting to be something that it is not. However, I find this line somewhat tedious, since practically our entire landscape is a “cultural construct”, and has been for thousands of years. In *Esperantis* this appears to be celebrated to an extent. Why should the Eden Project be presented so blandly?

Paradeisos does indeed go beyond a linear documentation of the evolution of The Eden Project. However, its very fragmented arrangement makes the meaning of the work to the unmediated viewer quite unclear. It relies too heavily on theoretical concepts, and not enough on originality and craftsmanship: A rather disappointing development from *Esperantis*.