

Robert & Shana ParkeHarrison

Herausgegeben von Erik Stephan
für die
Städtischen Museen Jena

Foreword

These pictures by the American photographer couple Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison present a cosmos of surreal and symbolist imagery into which Robert ParkeHarrison always, in varying ways, integrates his own person. Wearing a black suit and white shirt, he embodies modern man, a contemporary shaped by urban life who retains very little bond with nature and the soil; one who has perhaps lost the capacity to live in individual balance with his natural surroundings. It seems poetic, almost affectionate, when ParkeHarrison – the „Cloud Cleaner“ – wanders through a barren landscape in order to clean up a cloud, or when – employing a huge auricle in the picture „Listening to the Earth“ – he listens at a crevasse in the split, cracked earth to ascertain its concerns. In „Oppenheimer’s Garden“ we experience the landing of mysterious capsules from somewhere or other, while ParkeHarrison calls upon us to sow seed in the picture „Pollination“ – as if the only sensible solution were that of a universal new beginning. Occasionally, as in the picture „Mending the Earth“, ParkeHarrison also refers to the history of photography; in this case to a photograph by Timothy O’Sullivan from the 19th century. Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison combine the aura of early photography with current themes, and their views anticipate our own times.

The couple have focused their artistic work on a rediscovery of our lost relation to nature, to the earth and the unwritten laws of life, and thus they inevitably thematise the limitations of a civilisation whose growth is almost exclusively due its exploitation of resources. The earth is worn out, lies barren and exhausted; representing us all, ParkeHarrison gives his blood back to dried-up plants in the image „Exchange“. In the photograph „Flying Lesson“, we are witnesses to a hopeless attempt at flight using captured birds, an experiment with a probably symbolic significance in the image „da Vinci’s Wings“, that could scarcely offer a clearer metaphor of human strivings. In post-apocalyptic landscapes, Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison are searching for a new contact to the earth: they invent shocking and at the same time beautiful metaphors conveying the state of our planet, which is slipping away from us more each day, and draw the content of their images from their own personal consternation. Literature, philosophy, ecology, religion influence their images in a cryptically productive way, as does their knowledge of the rites of the original American population or other archaic social forms with their often complex and deeply characteristic relationships to the natural world.

It is precisely the combination of an artistic signature – in the positive sense – peculiar to these works and the introduction of ParkeHarrison’s self that gives the pictures character, clearly raising the images above the mainstream of current photography. Their charm is also far more reminiscent of the slow development of the image when painting on canvas than of a „quickly produced“ photograph. The foundation for all these images are ideas which the artists, quite traditionally, originally jot down in sketchbooks. The machines, apparatus or equipment are usually made from waste material in the studio or on the spot in the selected landscape, which plays an essential role in all the works. The staging and choreography are exactly planned and experience numerous alterations in the course of their realisation. Using a perfected technique, the artists first produce paper negatives, then process these and photograph them once again. Finally, the pictures are painted over. All this is a painstaking process, requiring around fifteen months.

This catalogue is being published for the exhibition „The Architect’s Brother“, the first comprehensive show of work in which Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison introduce themselves as a collaborating artist couple, and it is based on the selection of works made by the George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester, New York. Jena is the exhibition’s only venue outside the USA.

„We know that the white man does not understand our way of thinking. To him, each part of the land seems to be the same. He is a stranger who comes at night and takes from the Earth whatever he needs . . . he treats his mother – the Earth, and his brother – the Sky, like things to be bought and plundered, or sold like sheep or glossy pearls. His hunger will devour the Earth and leave nothing behind but the desert.“

A century later, the visionary words of Chief Seattle, originated in the famous speech addressed to the president of the United States in 1855, seem to have proven true. They acquire its visual counterpart in the images of the artist couple Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, in their world elaborately staged to the last detail.

Since his studies of Photography at the renowned University of New Mexico, where Robert ParkeHarrison graduated in 1994 with M.F.A. (Master of Fine Arts), the central theme of his work has been the modified, respectively destroyed nature. By using montages he creates realistic looking worlds of images in which he tells stories about „loss“ and „struggle“. Robert ParkeHarrison relates himself to his work by being part of the setup. In the slashing black suit and white shirt he represents the archetype of modern mankind. As „The Architect’s Brother“ (the title of the first comprehensive exhibition of his work) he takes on the attempt to save the world embodying the Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin figures which evoke the era of the silent film. His endeavors have immediate effect – touching and hopeful, when equipped with a ladder, rucksack and bucket he wants to clean the dirty clouds, or when he sits in the sparse and barren landscape with his sleeves rolled up and via canulae on both arms gives back a little bit of the previously detracted life-blood. Some of the images are very poetic narratives – for example „Listening to the Earth“ where with the antiquated phonograph amplifier he listens to the Earth and tries to understand and feel its needs or „Pollination“ where pegged to the stem of the oversized dandelion he blows its seeds into the space.

The images of Robert ParkeHarrison always point at the close relationship between humans and nature, at the unique interdependence, at the connection raising our awareness again and again. With their apparent naivety and at the same time irradiating inner beauty the images fascinate the viewers and bring them to both smile and reflect. Simultaneously, it forces the observer to question the reality or illusion of the scene. The images of Robert ParkeHarrison are not, as probably already suspected, computer generated or manipulated. On the contrary, the work process begins with the idea, very often springing during discussions with Shana ParkeHarrison. Almost resembling the techniques of old masters, the ideas are transferred into drawings in a sketchbook. After developing the final arrangement, the scene is recreated in studio conditions or on a particular location. Firstly, all the necessary props are created by Robert ParkeHarrison from waste or old parts and then follows an in-depth study of the right pose. Shana ParkeHarrison, a professional dancer, supports Robert not only when creating a concept but also during the actual implementation. The arrangements are photographed on a negative roll film – the base for the creation of the salted paper negatives, which are enlarged and printed as positives, also on salted paper. Inspired by this negative-positive process of Henry Fox Talbot, Robert ParkeHarrison then combines, in a series of complex steps, various paper positives – equivalent to the method Oskar Reijlander used in his image „Two Ways of Life“. From there the final image is printed. The aim is to achieve a perfect illusion where the rational thinking is overridden and the different reality is accepted. This is enabled by implementation of painting methods – an approach used by Arnulf Rainer, whom Robert ParkeHarrison always found fascinating. The photo is then varnished with beeswax.

A good example of technical and content-wise realization of 19th century photography is the image „Mending the Earth“. Robert ParkeHarrison reworked the photo of Timothy O’Sullivan from 1867 featuring the long, irregularly shaped chasm by Steamboat Springs, Nevada with the ascending

white milky steam. Like other photographers of this time, O'Sullivan pictures various natural wonders and beautiful landscapes of the American West he came across during his geological expeditions. Robert ParkeHarrison brings this impressive scenery into a new context, in which the „oppressed“ nature is „repaired“ again with the man-size needle and a thick thread.

The nature as the object of photography is, as seen in this image, nothing new. In the Nordic paintings the landscape became a separate theme already in the 16th century. In the same way, the return of ParkeHarrison to the 19th century techniques is not a singular phenomenon. In the USA a so-called „antiquarian avant-garde“ movement (mentioned by Lyle Rexer's publication holding the same title) has rediscovered the specific qualities of daguerreotypes, ambrotypes and the collodion photography and is applying them to modern imagery. Robert ParkeHarrison, whose processes and techniques and his unique approach to the theme nature, however, has no comparison in contemporary art.

The comprehensive exhibition „The Architect's Brother“, consisting of 47 images has been travelling through the USA since spring 2002. The first and the only stop in Europe is in the gallery of the State Museum in Jena (Galerie des Stadtmuseums von Jena). We hope this exhibition will attract as much attention as it has in the USA and that the visitors will leave the gallery with Chief Seattle's words in their hearts.

Notes

www.geh.org/parkeharrison/index.htm

Lyle, Rexer: Photography's Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes

Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison interviewed by Erik Stephan

The answers are joint statements by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison, unless otherwise noted.

How did your collaboration develop and what is it like?

We started working together about ten years ago, at a point when the work became more focused and directed thematically. At the time, we didn't realize that this would evolve into a collaboration. In fact the monograph and this exhibition, entitled *The Architect's Brother*, bear only Robert's name. That's because we did not fully acknowledge the collaboration until 2000. Our collaboration has grown organically, so for us it is difficult to make the distinction between when the images stopped being from a single source and started being a combined effort.

Robert: Shana has always composed and choreographed all of my gestures and poses while taking the actual photograph. I found early on that Shana's participation in these images was crucial and essential. Even the older images could never have been made without her. Over the years, it has grown into a complete collaboration. One in which the ideas go through such a dialogue that it is impossible to determine who had the concept first. Today we both enjoy the opportunity to work equally throughout the evolution of a body of work. We both bring a different sensibility and aesthetic together into a shared vision.

The major theme of your first comprehensive exhibition „The Architect's Brother“ is the relationship between man and nature. Can you give an insight into your ideas and feelings?

Robert: Man and nature is the basic theme of all the images in this exhibit. We use this theme as a way to explore and express our thoughts and feelings about how we, as humans, relate to nature, the earth and technology. Throughout the history of Western culture there has been a disconnection from nature and the earth. It wasn't until I began studying other cultures such as Native American culture and religions that I realized how disconnected our culture is from the forces of the natural world. For example, the Hopi perform seasonal rituals and ceremonies honoring the various spirits who control the balance of the earth. In their rituals they use water as a symbol and mystical element to bring moisture to a site to ensure survival in the dry desert. Even a few generations ago, humans were much more connected to the changes in seasons and balance of nature. I believe that this disconnection from nature has led to great damage to our earth and our own human spirit. In our images the constant protagonist, the black-suited, solitary man tries to rejuvenate the dormant earth. In his world the landscape is bleak and suffers from overuse. It is a landscape that could be thought of as postapocalyptic, destroyed by civilization. In our images, he finds abandoned objects from our time and creates absurd tools and machines to repair and rejuvenate this earth. Trees, water, air all become elements of salvation, representing nature, the only thing left to sustain.

We hope for our images to be metaphoric, not just surreal illusions. We attempt to discuss issues about the isolation of man from nature and from others. While these images look timeless in their presentation, they are very much a commentary and contemplation on the present time and state of our world.

Your photos show a depopulated, exploited and deserted earth – an apocalyptic state. Just one man dressed in a black suit cannot face up to this and is trying to mend the earth with his archaic tools and machines. This seems rather naive, touches one – a lost cause, however. Do you believe that this process is reversible? Is there still time to have a change of mind and new strategies to save our environment – to restore the balance between man and nature as already mentioned?

The mood and content of our images is, as you say, apocalyptic. We actually see the landscape as even postapocalyptic. In each image we create an ongoing narrative about a solitary man finding his place in this scarred and barren landscape.

Perhaps he is the only surviving human? We see him as a stand-in for the modern person, and that is why he wears a standard generic black suit. Throughout the images he finds remnants from our present day technology and material culture. He tries to make sense of this world. He creates idiosyncratic tools, technologies and rituals that enable him to reconnect and heal the lifeless land he inhabits in isolation. These are absurdist solutions that become more futile than possible. We interpret the acts this character performs as being an alternative approach to existence: archetypal, ritualistic, sometimes offering possibilities for rejuvenation, sometimes destructive in their attempts. This black-suited character attempts to reconnect to the ancient and spiritual language representing the solutions to our own present day environmental disasters attributed to our lost connection with the patterns and cycles of nature. We create our images as a poetic and metaphoric message that echoes our concerns for the environment. We do hope for there to be multiple interpretations of our work. While his actions are futile, hopeful and existential, we try to connect his actions to larger issues as a kind of poetics of existence and as an expression of our beliefs and interests. When we create an image we strive to convey a feeling, a thought which most often comes back to the relationship between humans and the earth and technology.

In answer to the second part of the question about the reversibility of environmental destruction: We see that nature can eventually repair itself, but only to a certain extent and only through careful consideration on the part of countries, individuals and corporations. We must institute measures to curb the increase in population. We must come to some difficult conclusions as individuals and as countries regarding consumption, overuse and the negative aspects of technology. Rejuvenation is an inherent characteristic of nature. But clearly it will not repair itself to its former state of being. The probability of reversing the destruction and future destruction to the earth looks grim. While nature can repair itself, the reversibility appears unlikely, or things have to get a lot worse before the those in charge wake up and realize that the damage that our greed has inflicted on the earth is leading to a planet incapable of sustaining life and balance. We are not experts in this area, but we feel strongly about the fate of our earth. So much has been destroyed in our own lifetime.

In our images there are speculations and questions raised. The landscape we represent is lifeless except for one detail of hope and salvation represented in the form of water, trees, twigs or clouds. We hope the solitary man represents all of us, our hope, our foolishness. He presents the poetics of our existence. The poetics of finding balance.

Does the title of the exhibition „The Architect’s Brother“ describe a person who is capable of building an earth where man and nature are united in balance?

The title *The Architect’s Brother* is meant to have multiple interpretations and meanings. Your interpretation furthers the meaning of the work. Although we would not say he is capable of building an earth. But he seeks a balance, as hopefully we all do. The title originates from an earlier piece from 1994. This image is not in this exhibition, but is reproduced in our monograph. Since then the title has evolved in describing the protagonist of these images, a person healing/reshaping what is left of our world. The varied interpretations of the title have been interesting. Some viewers have interpreted a religious connotation such as equating this character to Christ. While we can’t control anyone’s interpretation, we feel strongly opposed to this particular one. The protagonist is very human, displaying both attempts at good and evil. His actions, while ritualistic, are not always positive. They are daily, futile acts. They mirror our daily existence; our own struggles with the pressures of living with technology, with questions of balance, with issues of isolation, with issues regarding our level of connection to the earth that sustains us all.

Your photos are narrative, and their production very often involves a great piece of directing. What is the relationship between content and form? Are you working out the content to transport a certain idea or can the „messages“ be seen as the natural outcome of the process of creating a poetic image?

The production of our images is a complex combination of choreography and staging. Throughout the process of creating, our ideas change. Even when photographing, there are spontaneous decisions that change the narrative of the image. We work in an organic manner.

Our ideas begin as drawings and discussions and are then put into action through building props, but the moment of documentation via the camera is when the ideas come together and often take a different direction during the intensive moment of actually putting them into reality. It is interesting to us that some people have commented that they see in some images metaphors about the creative artistic process.

We hope for multiple readings and interpretations of an image. Throughout the process of actually creating the images, the labors and actions are very interconnected with everyday experiences. So the images could exist as a struggle of the creative process and as a struggle with a lifeless landscape. This is where we believe the creative production of our images is so closely linked with the content. The images we make are a reflection of the human condition of struggle, and attempts at connection and change.

I would like to come back to the „process“ of creating an image of your ideas. You follow the classic principle by starting with a drawing which you discuss, afterwards you build the props. How long does it take to create an image? Where are they created and how does the chosen environment influence the works?

Actually we start with research into areas of interest. Often our interests will include history, rituals, environmental studies, science, theater and literature. We research for several months as we begin to work on drawings. We work on groups of images at the beginning of this process. We build up ideas for interconnected images, usually totaling between 9 and 13 images. Once we have gotten the drawings to a certain level of clarity, we begin to build sets and experiment with various settings for the scenes. Once we begin photographing, the images change dramatically according to various limitations, changes in our ideas, etc. We spend a lot of time redefining our ideas, the props, the locations, the purpose of the actions. After many months we begin assembling the images in the darkroom, where they often go through another series of changes. From there we print the final images. We then mount them on panels and paint them. In all, a series of images takes about 15 months to create.

The environment for each image is extremely important. Because our work deals with landscape and the environment, every consideration is given to the relationship between the purpose of the images and its setting. With every relocation, we have experienced a new relationship to our surroundings. These moves have greatly affected the tone of the works created in these various places where we have lived.

Most of the props appear like bits and pieces of former times and witnesses of past days. The tone and atmosphere of your works call back the time when the first photographers in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century accompanied expeditions to faraway countries and documented those. These images seem exotic, far-off and clearly talk about another world. However you make use of the illusion of this different reality to describe our world and time today. What part does the reception of the content and the technology of the early photography play?

The primitive look of early photography interests us and was especially evident in our early pieces, but not as strongly in our present work. The ambiguous timing of our work is what we refer to as a feeling of both ancient and future. In other words, the technique of our images is reminiscent of early expedition photography, but the content is based in contemporary issues. Even the technologies we build and the objects used to make them have a quality of both old and futuristic.

An example of this is found in the image entitled „Breathing Machine“. The machine pictured in this image is constructed from a wooden box, canvas bellows and a metal film reel, but the function of this machine is to provide oxygen by way of a maple leaf located at the top of this contraption. We

are interested in creating a historical ambiguity, where elements of air, water and foliage are elements on the brink of extinction. This salvation machine is constructed of found objects from a past society, but has been constructed for present/future use.

Looking at your works, one question comes to mind. How are the photos made and do you use the possibility of enhancing the image by montage and later preparation by computer?

Robert: This question is raised often, and we resist an explicit explanation due to the mystery of the images being lost through technical discussion. We do not use a computer to create the imagery, we use a hands-on technique employing both paper negatives and painting. Our desire is to distance the photographic documentation away from the rational descriptiveness and into a realm that is more of a dream-like image based in imagination.

Shana: There is a wonderful quote by Man Ray, which perfectly describes our feelings: „Of course there will always be those who only look at technique, who ask „how“, while others of a more curious nature will ask „why“. Personally I have always preferred inspiration to information.“

The philosopher Martin Heidegger defined technique not only as an instrument, as a means to an end, he also saw the relationship between man and the world reflected by it, based on the constitution of nature and reality. The making of paper negatives, combinations and painting refers to techniques that were introduced to photography in the middle of the 19th century. How did you discover early photography and how did delving into it change the view of the present?

I discovered working with paper negatives by experimenting and working with a pinhole camera. I approached making images with a painterly sensibility. There is a different intention and result when an artist works with photography versus a scientist or photographer working with this medium. I was aware of 19th century techniques from art school, but I was more interested in experimenting with drawing and collage to create photographic images that had a primitive and atmospheric quality. I was drawn to the dream-like and other-worldly feeling that the paper negative conveys. It is a slow, hands-on technique where the image is broken down throughout the process and gives life to my ideas. I believe the image is transformed and distanced from the precision of the mechanics of photography. I enjoy that ambiguity of time and history that the image has from this process. I did not follow a textbook. I created my own system and process that worked for me. Without sounding too cranky, we continue to be less than interested in describing our process in detail. To us it is just our working method to explore the ideas that fascinate us.

When you mentioned your techniques, the names of William Henry Fox Talbot and Oscar Gustave Rejlander came to mind. Which photographer influenced you, and what exactly excites you about his work?

People/historians viewing the work at times assume that we research 19th century processes and study the work of Talbot and Rejlander. Early on we were more interested in contemporary artists such as Ruth Thorn Thompson's pinhole images and Arnulf Rainer's manipulated self-portraits. We are drawn to contemporary artists who use mixed media and alternative documentation for creating images. We are especially interested in artists who explore their own imaginations and those that juxtapose their imaginations with interpretations/responses to our current state of existence. These people, most often, are artists who turn to photography and make it their own by exploring, manipulating and transforming this medium into personal expression. For us this is similar to the way a painter works.

Your works are, contrary to the works of Arnulf Rainer, distinctly characterised by their content and go far beyond creating an original image. You are working with different artistic modes of expression, dealing with philosophy, religion, ecology, history while building your own cosmos of images in the

most positive sense of the word, all in all a unique approach within contemporary art. How do you feel about contemporary art, which seems to be so rarely linked to understanding and realisation in such a comprehensive way?

Robert: In response to your insightful comments regarding Arnulf Rainer's work, clearly our work is dramatically different in many ways. My point, within the context of the original question, was that during the formative years of the work I was more inspired by artists such as Rainer, for his aggressive, non-traditional interaction with photography, than by the techniques of Talbot and Rejlander. Also, Rainer's explorations into his own psychological states and seeing his manipulated photographs in the late 80s was a turning point for me artistically. To see his use of raw, distressed, dust covered, underdeveloped photographs with aggressive and expressionistic marks, hit me with such immediacy and emotion. It was the first time I realized that photography could be something more than just a photograph on photographic paper. I could see the possibility that a photographic image could be like an artifact or talisman from one's own personal cosmology. These are the reasons I refer to Rainer's work in this context. I think you understood that, but just in case that was not clear ...

Now to your question. We are fascinated and frustrated by contemporary art. It challenges the viewer, which all art should do. But at times one feels they need to have read several texts in order to appreciate and understand the work, let alone connect to it. Then there is the contemporary art that screams, shocks, loads on the grotesque and twistedness as though the viewer is looking at the remains of a juvenile delinquent's lifestyle, narcissistic and overly indulgent. This kind of contemporary art furthers an anti-aesthetic sensibility which appears to be fed by a constant diet of television, pop culture and obsession with fashion and consumerism.

The contemporary art that we appreciate and that we feel we share a connection with usually has a contemplative and intellectual sensibility. We appreciate artists who work to build on a strong and defined trajectory that is both personal and poetic, yet explores common and universal depths of humanity. These artists create work that is so closely linked to their lives and they live through their work. We appreciate artists such as Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Wolfgang Laib, Rebecca Horn, Agnes Martin, Robert Wilson, Louise Bourgeois, and the films by Andrei Tarkovsky.

At times we feel that our work does and at times does not relate to the contemporary art world. We don't have a dialogue with the pop culture world. As young people, we saturated ourselves with television and pop culture. Developing our own artistic voice was a choice to turn away from this world because we found it shallow and devoid of personal meaning. So what is reflected in the content of our work is our love for the things you mention such as history, science, ecology, religious rites and psychology.

We intend our work to be slow, sometimes quiet, meditative and poetic. It is more about exploring a psychological state of mind and imagination. At times it can be disconcerting that these are not common and certainly not fashionable characteristics of contemporary art. But for us we will continue on this slow, contemplative path because it is honest and true to us and to our vision for the work.

Many of your photographs are metaphors, images that are like symbols of timeless, extraordinary intensity – far beyond being coincidental. One feels the density and the soul, gets to know contents, imagines relations, while the images cannot be linked to current affairs. How current is art supposed to be so that it remains relevant beyond our times, and how current does it have to be to interfere? How important is topicality, duration and interference?

In our work we try to maintain a balance between constructing a metaphoric, imagined world and addressing issues from our present time. We don't think there is any kind of precise recipe for art, but we do believe powerful art raises questions about the time in which we live. An artist working today should respond to what is happening in his/her own world beyond the studio. When an artist is tapping into this pulse then the work naturally relates to the moment, while it may speak of other times, past and future as well.

It is hard for me to pick „favourites“, but „Tree Sonata“ and „Mending the earth“ surely belong to those. Taking those two images as an example, can you describe what inspired these images and how they developed?

It is difficult to chart each image and the inspiration behind it. The inspiration can come from such diverse experiences as something read or from drawing or daydreaming. These two images you have chosen do actually come from the same body of work. Within this group of images entitled *Earth Elegies*, we were interested in strengthening and defining our message within the images to speak about our views and concerns for the environment. We researched various sources such as Gaia Theory and other ecological texts concerning current threats. The landscape dominated this solitary man. The spaces around him became immense, more operatic. His role in the images was transformed into acts of renewal and redemption. With the tools of his own making from our discarded junk, he plays a lamenting sonata to a vast flooded landscape, while impossibly perched on a tall tree.

With the „Cloud Cleaner“ we encounter a person that is trying to manage an impossible task in an endearing and comical manner. „Flying Lesson“ and „da Vinci’s Wings“ also show attempts to fly that appear to be rather impossible. Is the person trying the impossible, a comedian in any case? – or: How important is humour when one is trying to master impossible questions? Which role does humour play in your works and how do you deal with it?

This sense of humor comes from our affection for melodrama and black humor. Heavy issues and politics can be explored without being too overdone and overworked when combined with this sensibility. We don’t always intend for this humor to be present in the work. We are fascinated by the tension that can present itself when existentialism, absurdity, futility and humor combine in the same image. We find this in the work of such art and artists as Marcel Duchamp, David Ireland, Spalding Grey, and Fluxus events.

The series „The Exhausted Globe“, 1997, was inspired by the book „The Little Prince“ by Antoine Saint-Exupéry. What fascinated you about the book? Are there any other literary inspirations in your work?

What I find so fascinating about this story is how the main character, the little prince, lives on a small planet and he must continually take care of it, a powerful metaphor for our existence. Each day he cleans out the volcano and guards over a rose under a bell jar. If he neglects this task of stewardship his little world will self destruct. The metaphors this story evoke about our own existence and how we must take care of the earth we inhabit are profound. Within the series of prints, I am shown patching a tear in the sky or stuffing branches into a large funnel in order to feed the small planet he inhabits.

Other literary influences exist throughout our work, but they are not as direct or literal as this influence. These include the plays by Samuel Beckett, especially *Waiting for Godot*, in which the characters continually search for something that may not exist. The crazed father who was obsessed with birds in Bruno Schulz’s *Street of Crocodiles*, characters in various books have inspired our images such as Winston in George Orwell’s *1984*, the young boy in Russell Hoban’s *Ridley Walker* and the boy who runs away to live in the treetops in Italo Calvino’s *Barren in the Trees*.

We already spoke about the combination between the present time and the past. Your directing and positioning of man and space reminds one of the illusionism of film and theatre. What do you think?

As we create our work we continually think about how the images exist as documents from an ongoing moment or action, like a film still. When the work was beginning to develop we were influenced by the photographic documents from performance art which are so intriguing as images. These include the documents from performances by Joseph Beuys, Marina Abramovic and dance pieces from the 1960’s postmodern movement.

You spoke about „dream-like and other-worldly feeling“ all through the working-process of an image. At times your images bring to mind the landscapes that Timothy O’Sullivan made in the Southwest of the US. Devoid of any human life, serene and beautiful, those images make us reflect on ourselves and seem infinite. How did this environment influence your work?

We use the landscape as a symbolic element throughout the images, it is represented as vast and void of much life and dormant. We have lived in the vast landscape of the desert in the southwestern United States. We enjoy this environment for its sublime vastness and minimalism. Sky and earth exist with no interruption from trees or civilization. This emptiness can be overwhelming for some people. We find it inspiring and beautiful. In our images we utilize landscape as an expressive element in which we represent the land as either destroyed or beginning. We have created our images away from this desert-like landscape, but we find ourselves continually reflecting on it and replicating that empty and isolated feeling. Even if we are staging on the water or in a forest we still explore a feeling of vastness and emptiness.

Mainly through films, the American West is known as a metaphor for boundless distances and great resources, just waiting to be discovered and captured. Are you touching a very specifically American idea by showing the last days of these opportunities?

This is an interesting interpretation. We are interested in exploring and reflecting on how in American culture the landscape is continually being manipulated and overused. It is seen as a resource/commodity to be owned, and used for our benefit. We have experienced in our own lifetime such drastic changes to the American landscape. Here in America and especially in the vast West there is the misconception that space is so vast that there is room to store the excesses of the nuclear age or test bombs by detonating them in the vast western desert. The general mentality is „out of sight, out of mind“. Jean Baudrillard expresses so eloquently in his book „America“ our warped and destructive attitude in the American West. Baudrillard’s writing helped us to see the irony in our own culture.

Robert, in the image „Garden of Selves“ you have multiplied your presence countless times. What was your intention?

Our intention was to convey a disturbing and existential feeling within this image. We wanted to create a landscape that was like an endless hive or a city crowded with people and that feeling that we are like ants or just a number. The meaning came together for us once I rose out of one of the small contained boxes only to realize that I was among thousands of others identical to me. At the same time, we were interested in the scientific and ethical issues surrounding cloning.

After several exhibitions in the US, your works are finally making it to Europe, to Germany. How do you feel about that? Do you expect a response to your works similar to that in the US?

We are so thrilled about our work being shown in Germany. We have been interested in this possibility for some time and are so honored to have this exhibition travel to your country and your museum.

We always try to remain open to the responses we receive regarding the work. We often learn so much about our work via the various interpretations from viewers.

Thank you for the interview. My best wishes for you and a successful exhibition in Jena.

Erik, thank you for all of the time and care you have given to this exhibition. We appreciate this opportunity to share our work with Jena and beyond.

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