

## Coloured Mirrors, Pink Clouds

Dr Matthias Harder

Landscape photography has been experiencing a renaissance in recent years, but in quite different manifestations. When we are confronted with an uninhabited, inhospitable ice-covered landscape in which a mirror reflecting the surrounding landscape is unexpectedly glimpsed in the snow, this is clearly something special. At first, the reflection appears to be an image within an image, yet at the upper left corner of the mirror there is a flash of light, which could be from the rising or setting sun or maybe a camera flash. Occasionally, it is only mirror fragments situated in the image centre, which reflect the surrounding landscape – repeatedly refracted in the most literal sense. The art of Inka Lindergård and Niclas Holmström represents an playful-artistic intervention, but one which is only carried out with and for the camera.

In this respect, the Scandinavian artist duo espouse more closely the values of Collier Schorr, or Andy Goldsworthy who arranges meticulous, temporary sculptures in ice or wood for his landscape photos, than the approach of their considerably more radical American Land Art colleagues, who sometimes even blast away whole sections of mountains in order to stage a parallel formality within the landscape.

In other pictures in the “Saga” series, which we are discussing here, we observe a grey, oily liquid exuding from the Earth and bubbling to the surface or pink clouds drifting by. It soon becomes clear that most of these situations are not pre-existing, they have been staged even if in this case the coloured clouds are merely an artificial intensification of the normal expressive colouration of midsummer night sunsets in northern Norway. The two artists, who simply call themselves Inka and Niclas, alter the landscape only briefly with slight interventions, according to their own very personal visual concepts. This also applies to the strange colours of the rocks in the snow. We are witnessing neither chemical accidents nor climate irregularities; this is nothing more than colour from a spray can or pink smoke, which tints the landscape for the duration of a photo exposure. Sometimes, it is merely colour filters placed over the flash, which falsify the existing colours. Yet even given this background, the fascinating images lose nothing of their radiance and impact.

Inka and Niclas always work together on large-scale series of exposures where intention and focus are different each time. If one compares, for instance, the individual images in the sequence “Watching Humans Watching”, it becomes apparent with what restraint and stamina the two photograph their fellow humans; usually from behind and thus de-individualised, in a number of locations, mostly in the Far North. This is the destination for many, particularly at midsummer, in order to experience an exceptional phenomenon of the light. During these “magical” nights, the sun rarely or never sets, producing a sunset with a corresponding intensity of colour – myriad red and golden tones - which lasts for hours. To shoot their photo series, mostly during daylight hours, the two photographers sometimes waited a very long time until the emergence of a particular colour combination of the protagonists’ clothing within the frame. It sometimes strikes one as slightly absurd that people should gather at this spot, and the question arises as to what they are actually looking for. Inka and Niclas investigate human behaviour with a subtle voyeurism: it appears almost like an open air theatre performance, yet in reality no one has been cast in a role and nothing has been added. Both series – “Watching Humans Watching” and “Saga” – are linked by the subject of unspoiled nature and it is

surprising to learn that most pictures in both series were taken at the same locations. And so, as a logical consequence, they are closely interwoven in this book and – in spite of their heterogeneous nature – form a kind of entity.

By contrast, practically everything in “Saga” has been contrived. The word “Saga” happens to mean “fairy tale” or “myth” in Swedish, and according to the artists, it functions as a kind of umbrella term under which various approaches to a series of pictures can be summarised. The two do, indeed, transport us to an enigmatic world of visual surprises.

Some things, such as the mirrors, were added to supplement the picture; others are somewhat more complex in construction, such as a sort of wooden structure made up of thin, pale wood slats which, tapering in several layers into the picture’s depth, is held in front of the camera. This construction suggests an image depth, and our gaze is directed towards the blue sea’s horizon in the centre of the improvised framework – which is the latter’s actual purpose. It is as if we are standing next to the photographers on a pebbled beach, somewhere at the Baltic coast maybe, with the sea stretching out before us beneath a cloudy sky. Only with the unusual combination of the two pictorial elements – northern European coastal landscape and “floating” wooden slats – does a tension and explosive force emerge. Inka and Niclas act out this visual idea in the same or similar locations with wooden frames of various sizes, sometimes stacked, so that the vistas suggest independent pictures within the picture. In this particular case, the whole scenery is tinged an unreal shade of blue.

We find also in the series light-coloured ropes, fixed at several points within dark landscapes, which seem to trace the outline of a hill. Here too, we are being presented with a particular direction in which to read the image, one which we automatically follow and which simultaneously gives substance to the hill. Were we to come across such a “tension” when walking through an unspoilt natural landscape, we might imagine that we had found some primitive geological survey or traces of extra-terrestrial visitors. Without a scale for reference, some proportions remain a mystery. In the case of the hill, for example, it could just as easily be an enormous mountain viewed from a greater distance.

In “Saga” the interesting (and absolutely essential) fact is that the artists never modify their interventions with Photoshop afterwards. Digital post-production is only carried out in the form of the usual contrast or brightness adjustments, never to enhance pictorial elements. The material used for the interventions in nature is removed after shooting the picture or pictures; none of the open-air settings remains for longer than an hour. Both the arranged objects and the natural setting are objects and motifs of equal importance in the picture. By contrast, in the previously discussed series, people who were until recently active subjects only become objects once the image comes into existence. As the artists themselves say, they dispense with labelling the location and date so that the series retains an air of enigma; on the other hand, the “Saga” picture titles are simply numbered throughout. The photos were actually taken between 2009 and 2011 in a number of different national parks in the USA, Iceland and northern Scandinavia. The (as yet unfinished) project remains an ongoing process within which very little is predictable and allows both artists – with the exception of spontaneous reactions to particular situations – to also work in a considered manner.

Behind the surprising, apparently scientific natural phenomena is hence an ironic comment. The added objects or natural materials collected nearby turn the concrete image into a thing of mystery, something imbued with symbolism; occasionally resulting in a pseudo-romantic transfiguration. While

in one series, people seem to be on a romantic search for the sublime in a perfect landscape, in the other this longing for edification and pathos is paraphrased. A common thread can be sensed throughout: the photographers' own real fascination with nature.