

Severo, Fabio. "Chi ha inventato la fotografia?: Domingo Milella – On landscapes" Hippolyte Bayard, January 28, 2010, <http://www.hippolytebayard.com/search?q=domingo&x=0&y=0>

## Hippolyte Bayard

Chi ha inventato la fotografia?

Thursday, January 28, 2010

Domingo Milella – On landscapes



Acitrezza, Sicilia, 2008

*At the end of 2009 I asked **Domingo Milella** if he was interested in an interview for Hippolyte Bayard, and he immediately agreed - even if I forced him to write his answers in English, for which I send him a special thanks. We talked about a lot of things, but especially about why and how young photographers today should embark in a photographic research devoted to an analysis of the landscape, with hundreds having produced so much in the same line over the past decades. It came out that for a photographer sometimes cinema and philosophy can be even stronger influences than most of photography around, and that classicism is still a valid aspiration for a work of art.*

*Enjoy the read.*

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*FABIO SEVERO: You graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York, where Stephen Shore was one of your professors. You also worked as assistant for Massimo Vitali. What was the most important experience for you between the classes and the field, and what did each of them teach you?*

DOMINGO MILELLA: I left my hometown, Bari in southern Italy, when I was 18 to move to New York City. I suffered a subtle and long cultural displacement. This gap of time when I was not at home anymore and had not yet 'arrived' in America was utterly important to my growth as a person and as an artist. This contrast between the Mediterranean provinciality and the American centrality and emancipation gave me a chance to fine-tune my own cultural identity, to influence it and inform it. The academic environment at the School of Visual Arts, and New York itself, provided total access to contemporary art and photography in the best possible way. Stephen Shore and his book *Uncommon Places* made a huge impact on me, both as a lesson of visual content and as a formulation of style. The work's search for a new formulation of individual and cultural identity through the vernacular and the anonymity of the American landscape was an interesting lesson for me. Working with Massimo Vitali has been an experience about discipline and intuition, where the rules need to be broken in order to let your own vision evolve. These encounters and their lessons helped me to develop my own intuitions and recognize the needs that I already had in my heart.



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*Cuautepec, 2004*

FS: *Your work does not evolve in series but seems to grow one image after the other. How did you get to choose this line of work, what made you feel your own way was to create one image at a time?*

DM: It's a question of personality, maybe... I remember very well during the early stages of my first projects with photography that I did not really know what would be the right way to go for me. A typology like the Bechers? A collection of variables like Gursky's early work or Struth's evolution? I found that there is not a better approach than emulating the models that inspire you and to look for yourself, to search for your own way, elaborate and reformulate... From this I naturally came to make a small series about small ideas, black and white *vistas* of the suburbs of Bari, my home and a subject I felt drawn to portray. Soon after, I naturally departed from that order. Somehow I do still work in a series format, it's just that I do not show everything in a serial way. Every project and every trip has a serial approach. Many images may resemble each other, yet the dialectics between the differences and similarities draws a narrative. I would say that I primarily make images of *vedutas* from a vantage point, but sometimes I am also shooting at the ground level, including people as well. I think it's impossible to not work in series. Some people work within disordered repetition and others 'order their own order'.



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*Naucalpan Poniente, 2007*

FS: *You often said your focus is on the border areas where suburban and rural world meet, those grey areas where none of the two develop fully and architecture often does not exist to be admired, but simply as a series of almost casual volumes meant to be inhabited. Informal landscape, it comes to my mind. I also remember you once described the landscape as a symptom. Which are the symptoms that a landscape can express and how can photography depict them?*

DM: I grew up in an area filled with big apartment buildings, at the edge of the port of Bari. My playgrounds were fields of olive trees next to piles of industrial garbage overlooking the Adriatic Sea. Near my house there were also bunkers from World War II, and some nomads camped every now and then near an abandoned country house. I think my language began developing there. A landscape and its own architecture often represent a vocabulary of human facts, dreams and illusions. I am mostly interested in the clear edge between the manufactured landscape and natural space. Consider the engravings of Saint Peter Basilica in Rome after its completion, for example. You can see a monumental piece of human history built right above the uncared soil, dirt, bushes and forgotten rocks. I am utterly fascinated by this contrast between cultural and natural, when architecture grows out of the earth. There is a sentence from the Italian philosopher [Giorgio Agamben](#) that I would like to quote in this regard: "Only for an instant, like dolphins, human language puts its head out of the semiotic sea of nature. Yet, the human is properly nothing else but this passage from pure language to discourse; this transition, this instant is history." I am interested in architecture that comes from the landscape, that comes out of necessity and mirrors its makers and inhabitants. Necessity is a very important factor for me in choosing the landscapes I photograph. To me, the 'human struggle' seems to be a very archaic yet contemporary subject matter. I am very concerned with the idea of community as an ancient order perhaps fading with modernity. Its social nature is becoming virtual and in the end this archaic network is mutating under the pressures of capitalism and technology. The vernacular and the anonymous are like a fortification protecting the values and needs of a community and its collective struggle. This idea of a common social base seems to be fragile in front of the praised individualism of consumerism. The fear of poverty has blinded our cultural roots leaving the economic project to design new rules for



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newer desires.



*Uchisar, 2007*

*FS: The layers of natural and urban landscape have been explored by many photographers and are still the core of many photographic works: how do you challenge yourself to keep finding your own path through this subject matter?*

DM: In the beginning of photography, the object photographed and the way it was photographed collided, metaphor and subject were on the same level. The purity of the grade of representation was very high. This is a fundamental aspect in using the medium. An aspect so rare in most of the photography made today. Yet, the legacy of artists who have worked within this path is what I want to respect, inform, and challenge. I hope that what I photograph and the way I choose to do it will be helpful for this tradition, and also for a new approach at the same time. Technology and digitalization allow many languages to proliferate and over-express themselves. I think that this abundance encourages a tendency for superficial formality. The priority of objects changes as well as the perception of values. There is growing attention on 'how' to do things instead of 'what' to do. What to express, and what to change has become secondary...But what are we talking about then?

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*FS: You tend to avoid any kind of frontality or symmetry in your images, often used by other photographers as tools to dominate the landscape in front of the lens. Instead, you seem to prefer viewpoints that reveal the unbalanced, unresolved or otherwise articulated nature of the landscape, rather than summing it in absolute views. Is it something you aim at consciously?*

DM: Not really. I always see my images as so tight and formal. My vision comes from a desire to pay attention to things, places, times that would be otherwise lost or left unseen. The abstract art of Cy Twombly or Blinky Palermo, as well as Italian postcards from the 70's have been substantial elements in my visual passions. Yet, most of my primary visual guidelines come from German photography, historical and present. I was sure to be working in that direction, until I met Thomas Struth. I was struck by the fact that all of his remarks about my early works were about a lack of precision, as if my compositions were full of obstacles, and my message was not as clear as it could have been. It was hard to accept his opinion at first, but my composition of space was not as clear and as frontal as I believed. In a way his sharp annotations helped me to understand that my peculiar idea of formality, based on complex and often contradictory surfaces, needed to work in accordance with my subject matter and content. Classicism is, in a way, nothing other than the perfect balance of shape and content. A German as well as an Italian can agree on that.



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*Cheope Chefren, 2009*

*FS: Do you feel yourself as part of some kind of tradition? In a way, both biographically and photographically, you are somehow between different world: the US from one side and Europe and Southern Italy from the other, Stephen Shore and the American landscape in color, the Dusseldorf legacy but at the same time the Italian landscape photography, from Gabriele Basilico and Massimo Vitali to Francesco Jodice and Marco Zanta, to name a few. Is there any dialogue inside your work among these different traditions and roots?*

DM: Photography is not the most interesting ghetto if taken only in itself. Before photography, my strongest influences came from poetry, literature and movies. I started to make photographs because I liked neorealist movies. I just wanted to be able to connect with something I could see in those black and white images of a graceful Italy; a kind, humble, and elegant country during that time. Pasolini came onto the scene with his persona, ideology and beliefs. His work virtually took me hand-in-hand to thinking about my language and researching my own ideas. I watched this brief documentary a few years ago and it remains a seminal milestone for me.