

Martín-Sánchez, Patricia. "Domingo Milella: On Landscape and Time", Truman Factor, June 06, 2011.



Domingo Milella

June 20, 2011

Patricia Martín-Sánchez

On Landscape and Time



Photographs: 1. Castellaneta, Italy (2010) 2. Soğanlı, Turkey (2011) 3. Castelmezzano, Italy (2010) 4. Dalyan, Kaunos, Turkey (2011) 5. Sanctuary-Monastery in Phrygia, Turkey (2011) 6. Pietrapertosa, Italy (2010) 7. Tomb at Xanthos, Turkey (2011)



Domingo Milella

Domingo Milella was born in 1981 in Bari (Italy) where he lived until he was 18 years old. At that age, he moved to New York City to study photography at the School of Visual Arts (BFA 2005). Stephen Shore was one of his teachers and Thomas Struth became an influential mentor. Since 2001, Milella has been developing his project on landscape. Currently, he lives and works between his home town in southern Italy and New York. His photographs have been shown at Brancolini Grimaldi (Rome/London), Tracy Williams, Ltd. (New York City) and at Foam Fotografie Museum (Amsterdam).

Patricia Martín-Sánchez: Your most recent work on Turkey and Southern Italy

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addresses perceptions of time through the landscapes of ancient and present-day societies. You seem to be working in a more quiet approach. For example, the quality of light you harness is more subdued, your palette is more uniform, and your choice of subjects speak to what you describe as "the archaic." Are ancient and archaic synonymous for you? Can the archaic be understood in our present-day accelerated societies?

Domingo Milella: It is "the anxiety of the new" in our contemporary culture that pushes me to look back at an idea of land and architecture that is full of integrity and sense of time. The word "ἀρχή" in Greek is a wide concept that means "origin." The archaic is not just synonymous of ancient or old—it's the language of basic forms and contents. Plato, for instance, imagined a "plain of truths," where all the archetypes would live. I seek the value of grounded and old gestures in culture, as well as in nature.

PM: Your photograph *Tomb at Xanthos*, suggests a tension between the physical space of the historical site and the virtual space of the tourist's digital camera. Why did you include the tourist, and why are you interested in photographing ancient tombs?

DM: I would prefer to avoid making archeological images, that is why I staged the encounter of the contemporary wanderer with the forgotten tomb. It is like a friction between two different languages, between history and post-history. Also, it is like trying to be polite and introduce the contemporary to the archaic—as if waiting to see what they will say to each other, despite the difference of age.

It is very common to come across people taking photographs, especially tourists. I find it fascinating to learn what and how they shoot. Tourists usually photograph to "visit" what they captured on a screen. They prefer to experience the present through an iPhone. Perhaps because screens are more comforting and easier to grasp. Somehow, I see this dynamic as a kind of allegory of our age, where digitalization has accelerated the time of experience, trading it for the unedited ignorance of constant and immediate consumption, and the need of appropriation.

Photography can be everything, but if used with simplicity it acts as one of the last arts of realism. Death is the queen of realism and tombs are architectures of dense cultural acts and archetypes. Tombs are buildings full of symbolic function—in a way, they are human monuments to time. This explains my fascination with tombs and my repetitive choice to photograph buildings that look like them with or without people.

PM: How do you think recent technological advancements redefine the conceptual categories of 'memory' and the 'archive'?

DM: Undoubtedly the digital is the new language of time and memory. The physical memory of real items, as in archives, libraries, museums, storages already has an obsolete yet a more and more important function. When cuneiform writing appeared in Mesopotamia more than 5000 years ago, it became a new way of conveying acts of language. Now, we are witnessing the coming of a new way of communicating language via technology. The transition to cuneiform writing took centuries. The coming of our new digital language is happening in a few decades.

Ancient knowledge would often disappear because of nature and time. Invasions of foreign enemies or the erosion of deserts have devoured forgotten languages and codes, civilizations and libraries. I think technology is speeding up some of this cultural, natural, geological, and linguistic processes. Also, the anxiety of progress is accelerating their deterioration. Is human impermanence rushing to be faster than nature?

PM: What do you think of the state of contemporary art? Is the art world "speeding up" too?

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DM: I just visited the Biennale in Venice. Most artwork in the pavilions was about a carousel of art and architecture meant to fully engage the senses. I felt a bit like entering rooms in an amusement park or in a Disney world of art and design. Everything looked very entertaining and people would stand in line to make sure to see this or that "art-attraction." Little time was left for thinking or observing the few silent and discreet pieces. Technology can be empowering but also comforting. It can be the cozy touch of easiness and slick moves and desires—all while paying little attention to a deeper content.

Today, education is indistinguishable from entertainment—together they offer comfortable knowledge. Audiences are more interested in the results rather than the process. They are becoming visually and intellectually more spoiled and passive. The market of tools and commodities is now more important than any content and narrative.

PM: What would you tell an aspiring artist about the advantages and challenges of focusing on one subject for an extended period of time?

DM: The art process is about attention and patience, humbleness and obsession. Of course, it is not a comfortable territory, but a permanent lesson on the fragmentary nature of things and people. Art making is not a choice, but a vocational attitude, an individual and cultural need to embark upon a long term challenge. I never chose it, I fell naturally into it.

Embarking on a long-term project entails admitting that there is no "original" originality to be discovered. The discovery is in the origins, threads, dialogues, themes, narrations, layers, or little epiphanies.

Perhaps, it is mostly a inward journey, a slow process of introspection, which could allow for a clearer sense of exteriority, the others, and ultimately ourselves.

PM: You will be participating in "Les Recontres d'Arles 2011" at the Discovery Award. What will you show?

DM: The work of the last ten years in a single piece of thirty 20×25 cm contact prints displayed as a horizon on the wall, as a sculpture. It will be in front of two prints, the largest size that can be analogically enlarged on a single roll of photographic paper.

PM: What are you reading now and listening to and how it is informing your practice?

DM: I have in my hands a perfect book, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* by Juhani Pallasmaa. With great simplicity, it discusses the sense of our times through the metaphor of architecture. I like the music of Talking Heads for it is delicate yet strong, fast and slow, great sound and lyrics. And unlike very little music does it nowadays, it tells a story... poetically.