

SOMZE, CATHERINE. "A MEETING WITH DOMINGO MILELLA,"  
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TRACY WILLIAMS

# Domingo Milella

/  
*Paesaggi*

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## A meeting with Domingo Milella

Text:

**Catherine Somzé** (Brussels, 1977) is a freelance art historian and media critic based in Amsterdam. She contributes on a regular basis to a.o. *Next Level*, *Tubelight* and *ZOO Magazine*. She is the author of *Who's Afraid of Leni Riefenstahl?* (Veenman Publishers, 2008).

Images:

*Domingo Milella, courtesy Brancolini Grimaldi Arte Contemporanea, Rome*

cover: Naucalpan, Mexico City, 2004



Cuautepec, Disscarica, Mexico City, 2004

→ Domingo Milella (Bari, Italy, 1981) was just eighteen years of age when, in the footsteps of his grandfather and other members of the family, he left his native city in Southern Italy to go to New York. There he had planned to study film-making, but enrolled instead in the Photography program of the School of Visual Arts, from which he graduated in 2005. Photography had always come naturally to him and yet, strangely enough, it soon became clear that New York was failing to inspire him as subject matter. It was an excellent environment for learning the basics of photography, under some of the most distinguished authorities in the field and with Stephen Shore as his mentor, but the American megapolis simply did not trigger his curiosity. Whenever he could, Milella would return across the Atlantic and photograph his homeland, as well as places on 'the border of things' as he still likes to name them. His favorite travel destinations became Albania, Turkey and Tunisia as well as Mexico and ultimately the South of Italy; locations where both historical and identity struggles revealed themselves to him with the unmistakable clarity of a panorama. Milella, who had experienced his own story of migration, felt at home in these remote areas. They reminded him of a familiar view he thought he had forgotten, the one he used to contemplate from his window in Bari as a child. Despite the bold coldness of a concrete building in the foreground, it is this same view, Bari (2004), that he appears to capture over and over during his trips to the outskirts of the First World. He had learned to speak the silent language of things through his detailed large-format photographs, a language that tells of the repressed history of places of conflict, and one that is resonant with his own sense of belonging.

**Catherine Somzé:** *Why did you choose to title your exhibition 'Paesaggi' instead of, for example, 'Landscapes'?*

Domingo Milella: For me, there is a crucial difference between the visions that these two words evoke; a way of looking at things that summarizes almost my entire photographic enterprise. In English, the word 'landscape' means the opening of the land. It is connected, in our imagination, to the American idea of vastness. The European conception of landscape is, on the other hand, very different and translates much better into the vocabulary of Latin languages. The root of the word 'paesaggio', from the French 'paysan' or peasant and the Italian 'paese' or settlement-town, describes both the inhabitant of the land and the settlement itself. The word 'paesaggio' has not as much to do with nature as it has with the traces of human presence on nature. 'Paesaggio' which I have deliberately put into the plural form as 'paesaggi' embodies the idea, as the definition reads, of 'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors; the particular physiognomy of the territory as determined by its physical, anthropological, biological and ethnic characteristics.' With this definition it becomes clear that 'paesaggio' is a construct of the observer's gaze and actions. It conveys the sense that things have to be discerned through the way we look at them and interact with them.

**C. S.:** *But how do your photographs reveal these concrete and symbolic projections? How does a landscape reveal its own history?*

D. M.: For me, landscapes are like symptoms that are easier to recognize from a certain distance.

**C. S.:** *...a distance that you create by taking your photographs from a high standpoint. How do you capture such exceptional views?*

D. M.: I stand on hillsides, bridges, balconies...I don't create any special structure. I use found places, often from a high perspective, where things reveal more of their hidden order. However, I also sometimes like to focus on specific elements of these views. To come back to the idea of landscape as symptom, take, for instance, a commodity that has come to overwhelm the world: the car. Sales talk always praises their unique qualities. The message is that you need to choose very carefully because the car has to match your so-called identity. But you only need to step a few hundred meters away to realize that they all look the same; their uniformity becomes blatant. In order to look at those urban landscapes, settlements and places on the edge of the city



Cerro Elefante, Ixtapaluca, 2004



Tlalnepantla, Mexico City, 2007

that I like so much, I take just enough distance to be able to consider the view as a whole. It's almost a need for clarity and a need to see the relationship between the constitutive elements that can then be singled out by the sharpness of images shot with an 8 x 10 inches view camera. Most of the time, the green or organic elements intertwine with built elements, the man-made component. A city that is viewed from above at night looks quite different, more like organic matter; a series of cells or the fibers of a plant.

***C. S.: The industrial landscape seems to have come to replace nature by its capacity to provide sublime experiences...***

D. M.: I don't believe in any form of mysticism. I am very pragmatic. Yet, this idea of New Sublime makes me think about one of the Mayan visions of future times. Somewhere they wrote that between 1992 and 2012 Man would have faced the Age of Mirrors; that man would have seen his own manifestation for the first time and would have suffered from the experience.

***C. S.: That may be true, but your photographs do look attractive. It seems as if your camera has the ability to transform chaos into beautiful abstract compositions. Even the most repellent subjects, such as the garbage in your work Cuautepec, Discarica, Mexico City (2004) exude a certain aura of greatness...***

D. M.: All my pictures stem from a particular fascination. Even though I don't really know whether it is a question of content or form, there is a synergy. There is a message about humanity and need that comes to me from all those visual elements. Cuautepac is a picture of the edge of the built-up area of Mexico City, where the city is in chaos and where there are hundreds of thousands of people trying to survive. Nowadays, not even poverty and need are humble anymore. They have become urbanized, gigantic. In a way, the periphery of Mexico was a discovery for me. The passage from rural to urban life that captivated my imagination in the South of Italy, is even more physical in Mexico. Besides, it is compounded by a history of ethnic segregation. Most of the population of these marginalized areas is of ethnic origin. And it is there that their historical struggle continues to manifest itself in many different ways. The grace which they exhibit with their choice of colors and life-style has something to do with the legacy of a history of permanent segregation. In Mexico City, you have to leave the centre to get closer to nature and, perhaps most importantly, to the roots. The Cuautepac picture establishes a mirror effect between the garbage and the growth of the periphery. Both elements have the same modularity and color. The vegetation growing through the pieces of

garbage echoes the contrasting play between houses and mountains. But this should not be understood in purely formalistic terms. It is as if the human roots of this place were still literally struggling and engaging in dialogue by means of these visible plays of colors and shapes.

***C. S.: So, ultimately, your photographs speak about the relationship between places and the collective memory of a traumatic history...***

D. M.: Yes and I think this is very important for young people at this moment because it has become very difficult to grasp what it means to belong to a place. The individual has become so important that it seems to have become problematic to gain any notion of real collective identity. But in the end, most of my pictures are questions. They are not meant to give answers. They are tools of research and for enrichment. And, in order to produce them, I search for those places where I can identify the human struggle more clearly; where identity and its contradictions are physically manifested.

***C. S.: This becomes more tangible in border areas, where different states and cultures cannot avoid a mutual dialogue, of one form or another...***

D. M.: An extreme example of this is Tlatelolco, the Square of the Three Cultures in Mexico City. Here, three cultural borders meet in one place. The Aztec/native, Spanish/colonial and State/modern cultures are represented here almost as if they were staged so as to reveal a history of violence. The Aztec pyramids have been mutilated and buried, and are now dominated by gigantic skyscrapers. For me, cultural behavior, identity and struggles reveal their paradigmatic expression in objects, public places and architecture. The collective experience of many people becomes assimilated into the physical presence of things and it survives within the unconscious of places like this.

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Ankara, 2007

**Domingo Milella** (b. 1981, Italy) lives and works in Bari, Italy and New York. In 2005 he graduated at New York School of Visual Arts under Stephan Shore. He has shown work at Tracy Williams Ltd (New York), Brancolini Grimaldi Gallery (Rome) and has exhibited at Paris Photo and Art (212) in New York. He has taken part in group shows at Museo dell'Ara (Rome) and Castello Svevo and Pinacoteca Provinciali (Bari). Domingo Milella is represented by Brancolini Grimaldi Arte Contemporanea in Rome.

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