

# Terror Unscene: Meditations on Tomoko Yoneda's Photography

Text: Guy Moreton

**'What was looked for in the hills and in the recesses of the forest is found at last in the sea; the transformation of qualities into quantity.'**

**'On looking at the sea, it is not the sea but the looking that is redemptive'**

**Thomas A. Clark (2000)**

In his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) Edmund Burke drew particular attention to those ideas which are in a position to move strongly and hence create fear in the mind. He listed the characteristics which produce the effect of the sublime: enormity, eternity, suddenness, light and dark. Even though Burke defined the sublime as terror inducing, he saw this terror to be mixed with pleasure, especially in situations when; 'fear of the pain, which terrible things can inflict upon us, does not threaten us too closely'.

Tomoko Yoneda's photograph *Forest (Location of the Battle of the Somme, Delville Wood, France)*, 2002, depicts a wilderness scene of inquiet calm. The impenetrable forest surrounds and suffocates our vision of nature. Immense and forbidding tree trunks lead us and mislead us through shafts of light into nothingness. From our vantage point under the green canopy of broadleaf and branches, and like Simon Schama's description in *Landscape and Memory* (1995) of *Waldsterben* (forestdeath) in Anselm Kiefer's painting *Varus* (1976), one senses the terror attached to this sublime scene. The trees here are firmly rooted in the tellurian solidarity of the present, and beyond the forest the other, incomprehensible and indefinable depth of history and memory that Yoneda invokes. It is this tension then, that also holds and beholds before us.

Landscapes and seascapes feature prominently in Yoneda's consciousness, it seems. Such dominant motifs that artists, poets and writers lament. The visible traumatic event of the present impassively resides in that place between the historical account and the invisibility of melancholy. In his wandering memoirs of East Anglian walks, the late W. G. Sebald whilst staying in Southwold recounts a visit to Brussels in 1964 and the memorial site of the Battle of Waterloo:

Across this horrific three-dimensional scene, on which the cold dust of time has settled, one's gaze is drawn to the horizon, to the enormous mural, one hundred and ten yards by twelve, painted in 1912 by the french artist Louis Dumontin on the inner wall of the circuslike structure. This then, I thought, as I looked around me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. The desolate field extends all around where once fifty thousand soldiers and ten thousand horses met their end within a few hours. The night after the battle, the air must have been filled with death rattles and groans. Now there is nothing but the silent brown soil. (Sebald 1998)

Sebald's writing consistently leads the reader through ordinarily familiar and intriguing landscapes, and yet it is the familiarity that is the stage for the events and wanderings that he so eloquently integrates. His profound ability to evoke such images is not in some small way due to the unquestionable beauty of his prose, but rather the haunting darkness of history with which we are confronted. And this brings us back to Yoneda's photographs of scenes that convey a beauty of emptiness that transports them into the sublime condition of the *unscene*.

Her photograph *Hill (Hill made of rubble after allied bombing, Berlin, Germany)*, 2000, describes a place of quiet ennui. An imagined place that before this hill was constructed Christopher Isherwood looking out from his window at the balconied facades in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939)

presents the essence of the photographic, 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking ... Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed'.

The hazy distant horizon is where one's eye is drawn to. Like the *landschap* paintings of seventeenth century Holland by artists such as Jan Van Goyen, it is the vastness of sky, and the almost featureless flat landscape that is measured within the rectangular frame of the photograph. This form of aesthetic made using a large-format camera allows us to survey the minutiae of detail, each blade of grass, the occasional item of litter, and the pale ochre patches of barren dried soil. The suburbs of the distant city defined by tower blocks and factory chimneys belch white smoke into the brooding overcast and oppressive, yet strangely luminous grey sky. An almost Barthesian sense of aura hangs over the picture like Tacita Dean's description of 'place' from her Berlin studio in 'Postscript', published in her and Jeremy Millar's *Place* (2005), 'I have realised in my search for a description of place, it is so often best imagined through the senses and through the memory of senses. If I were to go East now, soon the air would smell of the cheap brown coal that for me is the place that was the GDR' (Dean 2005).

Suburbs literally mean 'city below', and in a sense this is precisely what we are looking at, but which we cannot see. A formless entity that through forced destruction and conflict has shifted from its utopian past to an atopian place of temporal detachment.

It is Robert Smithson in 'Strata—A Geophotographic Fiction' (orig. 1970-71) who reminds us of the complex and often hideous layers of history that lie beneath the serenity of surface (in Smithson 1996). Yoneda's scenes/unscenes are photographs of meta-narratives articulated through the site and context of memory and place. Her more recent photographs explore the post-conflict landscapes of Beirut and Sarajevo. The wintery mountains in *Sniper View (View from Serbian sniper position overlooking the city of Sarajevo)*, 2004, that surround the city of Sarajevo afford us an epic view of the city itself. This overview is intentional and here again we are reminded of Burke's emotional claims of the sublime. Perhaps we might also consider the relationship between the view and power especially in the context of the title of this photograph. It is essentially a picture about surveillance and terror, where previously a walk from one place to another was seen as an act of provocation or aggression. Yoneda's 'objective' sense of detachment belies her optimistic vision. In the absence of the sea, and to return to Thomas Clark, it is the looking that liberates us, and the looking that carries hope.

pp.206-211, *Art in the Age of Terrorism*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Clarke, Thomas A (2000) *Distance and Proximity* Edinburgh: Pocketbooks.

Dean, Tacita and Jeremy Millar (2005) *Place* London and New York: Thames and Hudson 2005)

Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy (1999) *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* New York: Allworth Press.

Isherwood, Christopher (1945) *Goodbye to Berlin* London: Penguin books.

Riese, Uta Landscape (1998) *The Trace of the Sublime* Kunsthalle zu Kiel.

Schama, Simon (1995) *Landscape and Memory* London: Harper Collins.

Sebald, W. G. (1998) *The Rings of Saturn*. London: Harville Press.

Smithson, Robert (1996) *The Collected Writings* ed. Jack Flam. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.