

Sacred Spaces: Claudia Terstappen

Entering the gallery is like intruding on a sacred space. The viewer is confronted by an extraordinary sight – four shrines, baroque, theatrical and luminous, overwhelming in scale and possibly incomprehensible in this location. As we move further into the gallery we are confronted with photographs of the Northern Territory landscape. What can they possibly have to do with this distinctly European spectacle? The title gives the game away but this is a much more complex story.

Claudia Terstappen is a photographer and installation artist who lives and works between Barcelona and Dusseldorf. *Sacred Places* came about through a meeting in Madrid and the artist's desire to photograph sites in the NT and to show her work inⁱ Australia. Her recent bodies of work have been about belief systems, cultural memory and the manifestation of the sacred in landscape and objects. This long-term project has involved travelling extensively to places where there is strong evidence of belief, whether that be religious, superstitious or scientific where she has observed the processes of faith.

Her study of belief systems sees these as different ways of relating to the world and deriving meaning from it. She sees her work as documenting these very different types of knowledge. During prolonged stays in Brazil, United States and Spain:

“...she observed how men deposit their faith in objects: In Brazil, in *santeria* and *candomble* which cure everything, in the United States where the sky and the mountains are places of revelation for the Indians and in Spain where they parade the saints...in the hope that salvation will be granted...”¹

It is not surprising that Claudia's interest in manifestations of the sacred would bring her to the Northern Territory where landscape/country/environment is an abiding concern and where the indigenous presence in the land is strong. For indigenous peoples in the Territory the landscape is not simply a vista but a multi-layered network of relationships, stories and mythological beings as well as a huge larder. For many people there exists the notion, real or imagined, that the landscape is sacred on level they do not necessarily have access to. Some spend considerable time trying to reconcile their relationship to this place in the light of this understanding. Which is why Claudia Terstappen's approach to sacred landscapes in the light of her considerable oeuvre is of interest here.

In previous bodies of work she has made reference to museum culture and scientific rationalism, which is the prevailing belief system, or way of ordering the world in the West. In works such as “Große Vitrine” she has investigated the way museums display and label artifacts, (both sacred and profane) and the assumptions implicit in that world view. She has set up an equivalence and a visual discourse between indigenous and other traditional belief systems and the western belief in the methods and findings of science.

“Claudia Terstappen’s work is characterised by a particular tension created by the intermingling of various concepts concerning the way human beings go about the world. The relationships of exchange that the artist applies to science, religion and myth completely do away with dualistic structures. Sciences’ exclusive claim on rationality is given up. The irrationality of science and religion are shown up as much as myth’s different kind of rationality.” ²

The juxtaposition of works in this show may seem incongruous and Incomprehensible at first. The *Cruz Dle Romreo* Chapels are colourful shrines created each year as part of a competition in a Spanish village. They act as “celestial theatres of light” ³ and are vehicles for cultural memory. They are also acts of devotion, both monumental and fragile, and are the results of traditional ritual trying to win favour from the gods, or rather God. This is the European experience of being overwhelmed by an interior landscape of power and sacredness.

The landscape photographs are of sites of cultural significance in the Northern Territory. Her works of this type are usually dark and atmospheric, capturing feelings of awe at the power of the natural world. They are...

“neither a documentation of historic sites, nor ethnographic notes, but perceptions and impressions of places and landscapes. They are home to the gods, to the dead and to the imagination... (They)...encourage a culture of remembrance in which the priority is not historic reconstruction, but the space for different stories, a culture of remembrance which does not exclude the other, but is incorporated as a key to other forces.” ⁴

Claudia Terstappen’s images are not of arcane places that special knowledge or connections have allowed. In the context of her whole body of work, we are made to ask the same questions about the Northern Territory landscapes: “what is the same and what is the profound difference between belief systems in different places?” ⁵ This is neither a post modern relativism or a negating equivalence.

She does what Barthes refers to as creating “the invisible in the visible” ⁶. Claudia Terstappen turns the cool, objective eye of the camera on this charged material and creates a scenario where the familiar is made strange and where the strange seems familiar or at least knowable.

Cath Bowdler, 2003

¹ David G Torres, *To Be Radically Sceptical*, From Spirits at the Jucurucu: Claudia Terstappen, 2000 p4

² Petra Maria Meyer, *Seeing the Invisible...*, From Spirits at the Jucurucu: Claudia Terstappen, 2000 p 25

³ Petra Maria Meyer, *ibid*

⁴ Petra Maria Meyer, *Light, phenomena and Nuances*, Claudia Terstappen: sacred places, 2001
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⁵ Petra Maria Meyer, *ibid*

⁶ ⁱⁱ Roland Barthes, *The Photographic Paradox*, 1990