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ON EARTH

THE NATURE OF IMAGES

BY GREGORY EDDI JONES

Ocean of Images, the title of the most recent incarnation of MoMA's annual New Photography exhibition, is an effective term to describe the overloaded image culture that we have found ourselves swimming, and perhaps sometimes drowning in. The term sheds light on multiple lines of curiosity and raises questions that have defined recent areas of photographic production: What do we make of the existence of such an endless supply of photographs? How does such a degree of image saturation affect our ideas of originality? And what meaning can be found in the banal repetitions of subject and aesthetics that span the integrated networks of online media? If we continue with the metaphor of *The Ocean*, Anastasia Samoylova's work, *Landscape Sublime*, casts attention to one river that feeds it: a pervasive subset of photography known as the *picturesque* landscape. Samoylova's genre-breaking work is comprised of these types of pictures, mined and printed from the web, folded and shaped, arranged into tabletop sculptural arrangements, then photographed as still life. Ana's highly stylized constructions are comprised of elegant geometrical systems of color and space, and employ a degree of formal purpose that we often encounter in commercial imagery.

Pictorial formalism offers it's viewers a promise of something better than the actual; a product, lifestyle or notion depicted as such that, if we buy into it, we can for a moment suspend our disbelief of a life where everything is ordered, perfect, and beautiful. A simple Google search of 'beautiful landscape' yields thousands of photo-

graphs of coastlines, sunny vistas, and enchanting mountains. The same types of images are often encountered in calendars, motivational posters, desktop backgrounds, and office spaces among countless other common picture spaces. These imagetypes adhere to the principles of idealism, and offer their viewers scenes that attempt to translate the sublimity of natural phenomena into visual form. Such a mediated experience of seeing, however, does not express to the critical eye a sense of 'Thereness' so much as it offers a replacement for it, one that is codified not so dissimilarly from a car commercial, a bikini-clad woman posing on a beach, or a magazine ad for yogurt. There's a strong measure of salesmanship involved when the formal is invoked, and scrolling through image search results for landscape photographs may be more akin to strolling through a shopping mall than sightseeing in a national park.

Landscape Sublime offers a new syntax for this style of imagery, as Samoylova utilizes the pictorial elements and physical prints of her source pictures to fabricate her own compositions. While referencing the surrounding issues of commercial beautification, and in a studio setting which mirrors product photography, Samoylova also interrogates pictures in a line of questing directed towards their basic components: light, color, and form. When all is said and done, one summarization of her work is a lively and clever metacommentary that uses images of nature to describe the nature of images.

Somewhere in Texas right now there is a drill burrowing into the earth in search of an oil well. In the depths of the Amazon rainforest there's a chainsaw biting into a tree. In a Chinese mine, there's a pickaxe cracking rock in order to expose precious metals. It is the refinement of these earthen resources that form the products that are central to our economic and cultural lives. This process of cultivation is also the most basic principle of artistic production. If landscape photographers venture to use naturalistic spectacles as source material for their pictures, Anastasia adopts those pictures as her raw materials, extracting them from the ecosystem of visual culture, and refining them into a more rare and elegant form.

This methodology of repurposing and reauthoring existing image products is a strategy that the photographic field has increasingly encountered throughout the digital era. It coincides with the hybridized and highly conflicted world that we've been witnessing, via the cultural democracy that has been enabled by rise of social media. *Landscape Sublime* draws together multiple lines of insight into our ideals of the natural world and the realities of our digitally mediated society, both as humanistic and photographic propositions. Samoylova's hybridized forms of image and genre, and the deep spatial confrontations her work exudes, mirror a hyperplurism of social and cultural values that have been revealed in the Internet Era.

It's by no accident that Samoylova's work reflects the current age so astutely, because this role of societal reflection is found consistently within the landscape tradition. Throughout the history of art, there may be no genre that has more effectively charted the history and development of civilization more effectively than landscape. It is a form of picture that haws most visibly served as a vessel that holds the values of the society from which it is developed. In the Eastern tradition, the landscape long served as a reflection of a spiritual and philosophical culture, one which revolved around Taoist ideals of simplicity, sensitivity,

and harmony. The Western tradition of landscape has been much more turbulent. Since the fifteenth century, landscape depiction has undergone transitions, in both subject and style, from propagating biblical literature to proposing romantic and humanistic views on the world, then from modernist reflections of contemporary life in the nineteenth century, into the vast pluralisms that developed during the twentieth century. *Landscape Sublime* follows in this tradition with a metamodernistic recognition of how these types of images function, and allusions to an endlessly fragmenting cultural space. While her subject matter holds tight focus on one brand of picture, the overtures of Samoylova's work convincingly carry over to all manner of images common to the cultural lexicon. It's not difficult to imagine her constructions based on other prevalent imagetypes: journalistic war photographs, vernacular family pictures, or even the highly stylized Facebook profile pictures we casually view on a daily basis. By taking a macro view of image culture, it's not difficult to discern patterns of personal, social, and cultural politics that pervade the pictorial aesthetics of any given media network. Yet seldom is the case that artists such as Samoylova draw back the curtain to expose the inner workings of these realms. *Landscape Sublime* may signal a method of finding headwind in the proverbial Ocean, and a path of navigation for the next generation of artist photographers to explore.