

LANDSCAPE SUBLIME

ANASTASIA SAMOYLOVA



WITH AN ESSAY BY STEPHANIE AMON

IN THE IN-BETWEEN
EDITIONS

- 1 We resort to the speculative in images of nature as stock. This has been the allure of the plot, and we are confined to it by an image culture that prizes the efficient sales pitch of cliché. There is no single strip or patch or print that isn't part of the cycle, that isn't allotted. Resources and living systems become natural capital to be managed for profit. The mirage is our bill of sale. Anastasia Samoylova prints the grid, returns the viewer to a collective ideal which is no longer our home. Her tabletop collages attract by the sheen of curling paper, by the photograph as bald parcel. Their lack of scale, disuniform orientation, and conflicting frames suggest the futility of our acquisitive mood. *Landscape Sublime* presents capture and possession as limited frames through the forging of scale models for the uncontainable whole.
- 2 Fecund imagery is in the same gesture palliative and pronatalist. In *Paradise, 2015* (pg.26), while dolphins are losing pregnancies and the gonads of panthers are shrinking, we have the tropical icon of the fuckable: the halved papaya full of gooey seeds. This promise of plenty drenches us in the austere metropole. To cope, to retaliate, we unfurl a glittering surface of garbage. The sublime is colonial in its central conflict about the appropriation of beauty and the conquering of nature, but also in its orientation toward the mother market. The picturesque lubricates consumerism, disseminated in the modern period on paper media, flat and shiny, and in plastics of mass appeal. The formally elaborate installations in *Landscape Sublime* are a material reminder that photographic saturation means contending with all that the image takes and leaves for dead. Samoylova resuscitates the throwaway beauty of sacrifice zones, of postcards, ads, and commodity packaging. She has said that it is *like immersing a hand into a forest stream [to] collect some samples of plant debris*. The sample makes the sacrifice.

- 3 Samoylova's consumption-forward photographs evince a nearly taxidermic longing. In *Aspens, 2013* (pg.7), a stripe of yellow tape cordons trees reincarnated as prints on pulp. These images are printed to be hung in galleries, to be reproduced in digital layouts of the arts press, and now to be printed in a small-edition monograph. They materialize and sublimate, engage the substrate of consumerist illusion. There is no ironic "away," no real getaway. The corrugated plastic, glossy papers and foils, mirrors, gels, spotlights, and diffusion filters of Samoylova's installations are the tools of commercial photography. Her demonstrative violation consistently leaves behind formally persuasive new images about their waste, about the tacky beauty of a trashed planet. *Nature's joyfulness and spontaneity is retained*, opined a reviewer for the *New Yorker*. But the exuberant panoply of *Flowers, 2014* (pg.12) is a vibrant fix. We are keyed up for the hit by *Black and White Mountains, 2015* (pg.22), by pity for its laughable majesty.

4 The iterative practice of all this printing, cutting, shaping, propping, and lighting partakes of a compulsive guilt, the desire to feel that one is doing...something. As Samoylova explains, *I'm trying to sort of bring them back to life, and print them out and rebuild them and create this environment again.* For early photographers, printing out was an act of creation. An image was born, mortal. Today the drive to materialize a digital image, to "make a print-out," to make a "fresh" copy, is effluvia. It is a fleshy ask, conflicted by the desire to do well, make something real and really remember. But this is the bait and switch of the trope: our palates accept the disposable, our mouths water at the futile. We can still get off to a beautiful image of a waterfall because whatever is vivid, whatever is on sale, we love. We want *something you can hold in your hands.*

5 Generic lust pervades the digital, seeking overstimulation in the homogeneity of exact matches. In *Lightnings, 2014* (pg.10) and *Cascades, 2014* (pg.16), complex natural forces are categorized, stripped of their cyclic contexts, and subdued into sideshow. In *Trees in Fog, 2014* (pg.2) and *Tropics, 2014* (pg.18), ecosystems are color schemes. *Landscape Sublime* employs images typical of digital design and visual marketing under capitalism, and the largely mimetic, ignorant, and sentimental visual response of the consumer public. Consider that Samoylova could not have worked within the same method to collage clear-cutting, strip mining, oil spills. Her source is the creative commons, its collective denial and nutrient poverty. Millennials decry the willful ignorance of our forebears, lashing out as if we do not propagate an aesthetics of extractivist hedonism on social media. By the same token, it is disingenuous to castigate the digital native for reveling in only their own browsing hours; it is we who maintain the framework of the native and the age.

- 6 Samoylova's appropriations are breezily unstable in their denotation of decay. We may prefer to read them as documentation of places not yet destroyed, as if the souvenir cannot be weaponized. Yet these bountiful images also have a solastalgic attraction: their sheer quantity rinses the "homesickness [we] have when [we] are still at home." The sublime requires threat and overwhelm—it is not merely the idyllic, the cheesy. Sometimes the ecological reclamation of your homeland is not recommended, so toxic has some nearby extractive project become. *Landscape Sublime* is a bitter salve when we are inside of a world that has been thrown away, and there is no "away," and we understand that the earth is dying before our eyes, that it can happen to us. When we too—our lifeways, the plants and animals and seasons of our lives—are slated for death, no thematic calendar will save us. Samoylova raises the issue of the free and easy share of the photographic sample by addressing us as consumers. These landscapes are devoured to the extent that we believe their "wildness" may be tamed, that the market will entertain.

7 Humor is not intrinsically subversive; the viewer's bemusement is not grounds for acquittal. *Landscape Sublime* troubles the line between recognition and espousal, offering a tongue-in-cheek morbidity. To take Samoylova's images straight would be to risk their ridicule. In *Glaciers, 2015* (pg.14), accordion-folded prints zigzag across the composition. They are stacked into a conglomerate berg, depicting our planet's pristine arctic and enduring snow-caps as houses of cards. Our hollow fear is not preservationist (we have come to categorize life itself as overburden). The biome-centrism of expedition, in which whatever was not temperate was seen as barren and resistant, assists the dread of this image. Today we also fear coastal inundation at the loss of these ice forms. How deeply we have tampered, we know not. Samoylova's work counters to our colonial topophobia with a lurking sense that *independently of [our] playful attitude, the game has the potential to get serious.*

Works Consulted

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- Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. 2014.
- Winona LaDuke, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*. 1999.
- "Millions of Mountains, Billions of Flowers," *The New Yorker*. 2015.
- Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*. 1993.
- Anastasia Samoylova, talk given at the Society for Photographic Education, Las Vegas. 2016.
- Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. 1977.
- Slavoj Zizek, *Living in the End Times*. 2011.