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Metropolis futures: collage constructions for a new world

19 JULY 2021 | BY DAVID CAMPANY | ESSAYS

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With the resources of their eras, both Paul Citroen and Anastasia Samoylova's experiments take us into speculative territories

Of all the forms of visual art of the last 100 years, it is collage that has proved the most enduring and renewable. Dada, Surrealism, Cubism, Constructivism, Pop, Situationism, Postmodern appropriation, Internet Art – it is hard to imagine any of these major aesthetic moments and movements without the energies of collage. There are a number of reasons for this. To begin with, the very proliferation of images calls for a response. If, as is often said, images 'bombard' and 'flood' us, it becomes as much a matter of psychic as artistic survival for us to take an active position. We must have our way with images or they will have their way with us. Additionally, modern life has come to be defined by the fragmentation of experience into intensities that often barely seem to connect, let alone cohere. Collage allows fragments to be brought together in ways that suggest affinities and resonances, while highlighting disjunctures. Perhaps more so than drawing, collage can allow even an untrained maker to reach something profound without the barrier of technique (though collage can equally be extremely accomplished technically). Plus, of course, collage is, by its nature, promiscuous and adaptable. There is no defined method and there is no shortage of material.



Paul Citroen's photomontage *Metropolis (City of My Birth)* from 1923, suggests a city that can be held in a hand; the original version was 16 x 23 inches but it was then photographed which became an artwork in itself
Credit:DACS

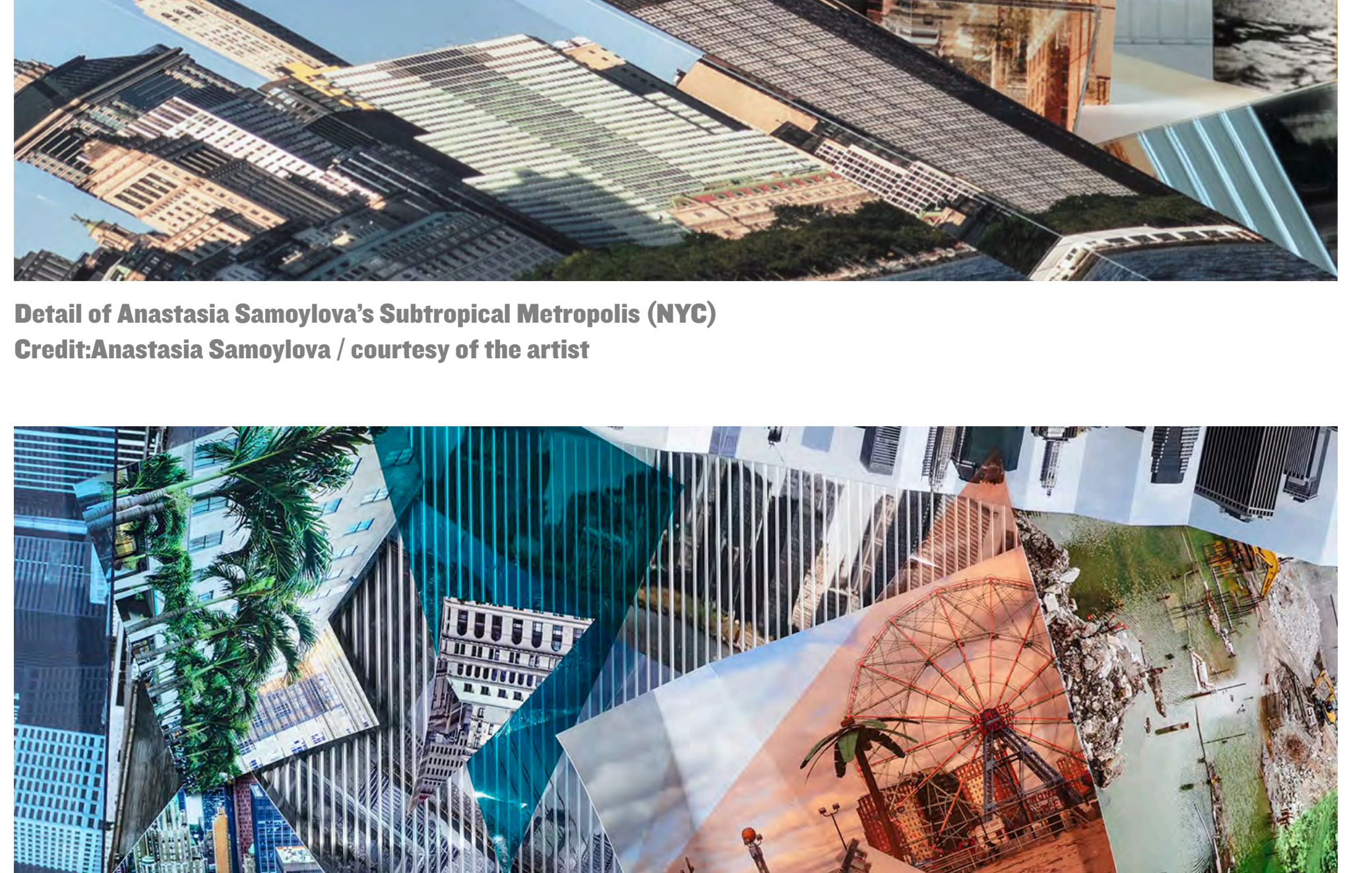
Utopia and dystopia. Dreamworld and catastrophe. Such visions of the modern city survive precisely because they are so ambivalent. What did the modern city really want? What were its fantasies? Was it naive? Guilty? Did it secretly wish for domination, or for its own destruction?

A cut-and-paste collage is to some extent unique. It takes mechanically reproduced imagery and subjects it to the hand and the blade. In the process, anonymous material becomes an authored work. To make a collage is always part catharsis and part allegory – a way of dealing with the world on your own terms, whether celebration, criticism or estrangement. But 'world' has a double meaning here, since it refers to both what the imagery depicts and to the ever-growing world of imagery itself. Citroen's piece was a response to the modern city and to the proliferating visual culture through which it saw and projected itself.

'The optimistic modern spirit is receding fast; the technicolour gloss feels like a thin veneer'

Citroen made photographs of his collages, allowing them to overcome their uniqueness and re-enter the circuits of reproduction and distribution. Many of these photographs are now in major institutions as artworks in their own right, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In reproduction, *Metropolis* has appeared in newspapers and as postcards, returning it to the very contexts from which it derived.

Jumping into the present, we find the artist Anastasia Samoylova making city collages in retrospect homage to Citroen. The artist and their form is uncannily similar, but focus on the details and the differences are clear. Contemporary cities are experiencing flood and fire, a century of unchecked 'progress' leading to disaster. The optimistic modern spirit is receding fast; the technicolour gloss feels like a thin veneer, barely capable of suppressing the problems.



Detail of Anastasia Samoylova's *Subtropical Metropolis (NYC)*
Credit:Anastasia Samoylova / courtesy of the artist



Subtropical Metropolis (NYC), 2020, 32 x 40 inches, a sub-series of Samoylova's ongoing series *Landscape Sublime*, which examines the frontiers of climate change and the idea of the Picturesque as well as the sublime. The temporary, fragile construction exists only as a photograph
Credit:Anastasia Samoylova / courtesy of the artist

Samoylova's collages are just as carefully constructed as Citroen's, but they are not made by cutting and pasting. These are 3D assemblies, precarious and made permanent only by the camera that records them. Indeed, her arrangements do not last beyond their documentation. Where Citroen's construction feels relatively solid, even monumental, Samoylova's visions look as if one breath of wind through her studio door would blow them away. They barely seem to have a correct orientation, with no clear up or down, and any foundation they have is no more than mirrors, reflecting and refracting.

Samoylova turned to photography while studying architecture and environmental design in Moscow. Documenting her many 3D maquettes she noticed how the camera flattens space while inventing its own illusions. A photograph is always both a document and a transformation, a record and an artwork. A stint as a designer of shop window displays heightened her attention to the possibilities of a theatrically constructed world seen from a restricted vantage point, glassed off and seductive.



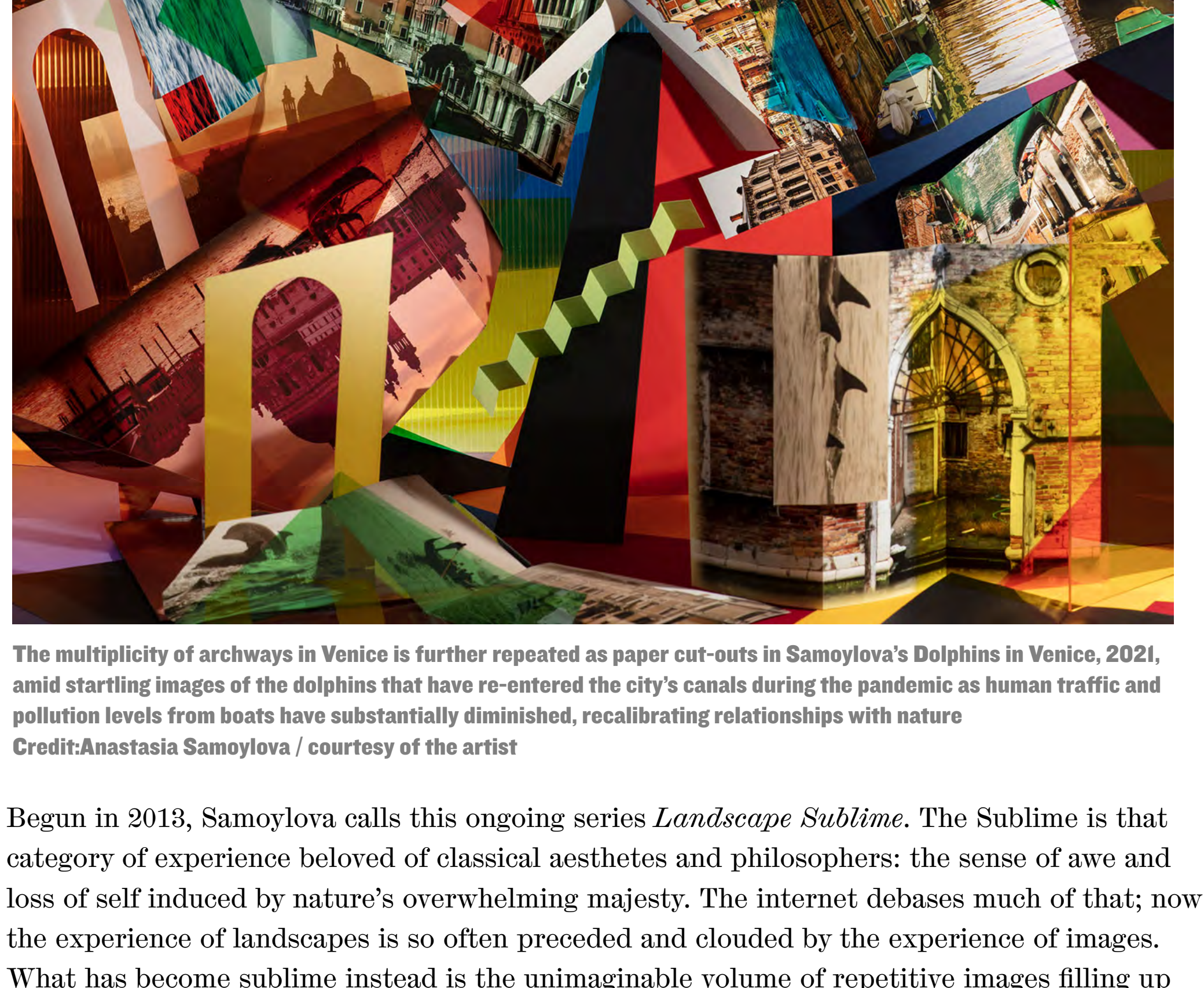
Detail of Anastasia Samoylova's *LA (On Fire)*
Credit:Anastasia Samoylova / courtesy of the artist



In relation to recent fires in California, Samoylova's *LA (On Fire)*, a 32 x 40 inch collage from 2020 takes on a more apocalyptic tone, representing various cities that are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Her reimaginings of Citroen's photomontage nearly a century later, show how attitudes and feelings about the city and environment have lost the early-20th-century excitement; instead anxieties about the future come to the fore
Credit:Anastasia Samoylova / courtesy of the artist

Citroen belonged to the world of the interwar newsstand, and the physical browsing of printed matter. Samoylova came of age in the early days of the internet, a world of glowing, immaterial screen imagery that circulated very differently, and she became interested in the image-sharing platform Flickr. The general excitement about the internet assumed a world of choice and creative possibility, but what she noticed was quite the opposite: an overwhelming desire to conform. Pictorial conventions and mass ideals dominated the internet from the start, especially in the genre of landscape. Photographers seemed to compete with each other to produce the most perfect clichés: not just sunsets and rolling landscapes but glaciers, valleys, deserts, crashing waves and jungles too.

The deeper Samoylova looked, the more specific the image types became. Mountains photographed in dramatic black and white. Trees seen through fog. Provençal lavender fields in afternoon sun. Many photographers were uploading their images copyright-free, simply hoping for wide dissemination and popularity. Samoylova would search by keyword, downloading the images into folders on her desktop. She looked closely, scrutinising the drive towards homogenised standards of beauty. None of these pictures were ever expected to be printed out, so that is what she did with them. To explore further, she began to improvise still-life constructions with the images, checking how they looked through her camera viewfinder, moving her lights to sculpt the forms into a final image.



The multiplicity of archways in Venice is further repeated as paper cut-outs in Samoylova's *Dolphins in Venice*, 2021, amid startling images of the dolphins that have re-entered the city's canals during the pandemic as human traffic and pollution levels from boats have substantially diminished, recalibrating relationships with nature
Credit:Anastasia Samoylova / courtesy of the artist

Begun in 2013, Samoylova calls this ongoing series *Landscape Sublime*. The Sublime is that category of experience beloved of classical aesthetes and philosophers: the sense of awe and loss of self induced by nature's overwhelming majesty. The internet debases much of that; now the experience of landscapes is so often preceded and clouded by the experience of images. What has become sublimed instead is the unimaginable volume of repetitive images filling up the world's hard drives.

Samoylova's work has always had an ecological dimension but this has become more explicit of late. She has made works about the recent sightings of dolphins in the canals of Venice and seashores in the Hudson River – symptoms of nature bouncing back temporarily during the Covid-19 pandemic. Her tableaux of flooding in New York and fires in California appear at first to be less optimistic. Climate change has led to the reclassification of New York as officially subtropical, and its foundations are evermore prone to inundation. The skies over San Francisco have a burnt orange dread. Flames lick the hillsides surrounding Los Angeles. The source imagery is documentary in nature and points to the facts; and yet, collage always has something speculative about it, something possible, something otherwise. Collage is an experiment in thought, not a report. It can open up the mental distance required to think, and in doing so, suggest that things could be different.

Lead image: with their angular cuts and vertical folds, Anastasia Samoylova's *Black and White Mountains*, 2015, resemble a contemporary cityscape, peaks reaching high into the sky. Credit: Anastasia Samoylova / courtesy of the artist

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