

[\[The Photographers' Gallery\]](#)

## Near and elsewhere

The landscape depicts the moment where culture meets nature: it presents a human perspective over space. Near and Elsewhere brings together a generation of young artists drawn from across contemporary Europe - from Sweden and Spain the Baltics and the Balkans - who, in very different ways, engage with the landscape as an idea and a form. What does the landscape mean in European art at the end of a century which has seen pure Nature, the wilderness, all but vanish? At a time when a sense of place is hard to detach from narrow nationalisms and the darkest moments of European history? Or, when physical geography has, for many, been overridden by virtual space? In Near and Elsewhere, there are landscapes of ironic beauty and wilful fantasy, of sad and sometimes violent geographies and landscapes met with degrees of anxiety rather than pastoral salve or political certainty.

From Belgrade, Milan Aleksic makes images of ugly places and broken things glimpsed in present day Serbia. His Low Maintenance landscapes focus on the disintegrating details of a society in decline: they describe, he says, "the way things fall apart." A sense of hopeless waiting pervades Aleksic's pictures - his feeling for the balkanisation of things in a forlorn and frightening present. After Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution in 1990, **Jitka Hanzlova** was able to return from a long period of exile to her tiny home village of Rokytnik, in Northern Bohemia. Her extraordinary suite of colour photographs chronicle a tight community, still living close to the land. Bathed in a brilliant, techni-coloured light, these images capture a life rooted in a particular place and lived at a different pace.

Lithuanian artist Deimantas Narkevicius also entwines autobiography and a specific sense of place, with larger human histories. His film Europe 54054' 25019, 1997 charts a quest for an illusory, yet politically potent place. Narkevicius narrates a journey, starting from his home in one of the high-rise districts of Vilnius, not far from the former Red Army Avenue, taking us past the remains of 50 years of Soviet occupation, to a spot 20 kilo metres north-east of the capital, a place that is proclaimed - since Lithuania's independence in

1990- to be the exact Centre of Europe. Narkevicius's short odyssey reveals how politics turns place into territory, rendering cartography and geography contingent, even absurd.

The sense of a meaningful or essential place is explored still further in the imagination of German artist **Jorg Sasse**. In his epically scaled photographs, with their sweeping horizons there is no original place, only greater and greater degrees of abstraction. Sasse borrows other people's photographs, anonymous, amateur snaps, and subjects them to a sequence of computer manipulations - searching for a perfect composition. In a way reminiscent of the Picturesque landscapists, Sasse forces the real, nature, to conform to an artistic ideal.

**Edwin Zwakman** similarly travels a line between the ideal and the real. Zwakman's photographs refer to his native Dutch landscape, one of the most invented landscapes in the world. And like the landscape, Zwakman's images are a phenomenon of effort, as minutely detailed as a Ruysdael or a Hobbema. Viewed from the air, Zwakman opens up grand vistas:

the sea lapping the land, the land inscribed with monumental roads and neatly configured buildings - and then slowly it dawns that the images are as fabricated as the landscapes they describe, each a meticulous maquette constructed purely in order for the camera to transform illusion into illusory reality.

For young Spanish photographer **Xavier Ribas**, the landscape also results from a collision of nature and artifice. His colour scenes are composed with classical clarity, often observed from a high, distanced viewpoint. Ribas pictures people indulging in the pleasures of nature:

reading, sitting, watching, relaxing, retreating from the vexations of city life. But despite the brilliant rays of the Spanish sun, these are hardly Virgilian idylls in an arcadian campagna. Instead, Ribas documents new, degraded landscapes - residual spaces found around Barcelona, neither urban, suburban nor rural - In which people stubbornly seek old pleasures.

There is a similar sense of beauty degraded in Torbjorn Rodland's photography, but here through artistic excess rather than ecological carelessness. The forested slopes, great still lakes, snow-clad forests and lush meadows of Norway's scenery, provide the backdrop for urban man's confrontation with nature. Rodland grafts a retrogressive romanticism onto the codes of popular photography (fashion, travel), injecting his enigmatic images of people adrift in Nature with a mild eroticism, a surfeit of sentiment and a strangely Nordic

melancholy.

Romanticism, in different ways, frames the work of **Annika von Hauswolff** and **Sophy Rickett**. From Sweden, von Hauswolff's recent series captures women, outside at night, suddenly and violently illuminated in the flare of her flashgun. A girl is deep in contemplation before a cactus, a blind woman walks her dog, a child runs into the night, her trousers round her ankles. These seemingly inconsequential events are transformed into brooding dramas by the troubling combination of the photographer's voyeurism, and her subjects' inexplicable psychological states. **Sophy Rickett's** staged nocturnal dramas exploit the prototypically sublime features of darkness to reinvent the traditional composition of the photographed landscape, making it laterally expansive rather than perspectively deep. A sliver of light pierces the night, its source a mystery, while a solitary figure, or a tree, dwarfed in the beam, provides a moment of heightened detail in a vast and featureless space.

Where Rickett's landscapes disguise the epic in the miniature, **Luke Gottelier** conversely makes small things appear very large. His landscapes are summoned from the most pathetic means - a crumpled sheet of cellophane, a gro-bag, an area of lens flare - everyday phenomena orchestrated with absolute insouciance and then casually caught on film. Despite their antiheroics, Gottelier's radically unformed compositions mutate into big, atmospheric vistas - deserts, boulevards, lakes, and suns - willing the natural out of the sheer act of representation.

**Jaan Toomik's** video work *Father and Son*, 1998, stages the meeting between man and nature in the most extreme environment. On a cold winter day, a tiny speck appears on the horizon of the vast, frozen Baltic sea. Quickly the dot zooms into view. It is the artist. He is skating naked across the icy expanse. He reaches the camera, circles it several times accompanied by a haunting choral song by his ten year old son, then he skates back and disappears as quickly into the white radiance from which he has come.

[\[The Photographers' Gallery\]](#)