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THINKING THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

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## Invisible Structures by Xavier Ribas

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*"One is always crossing the horizon, yet it always remains distant"*

*Robert Smithson*

The tumulus or mound provides a focal point to speculate on the perception and representation of the invisibility of a historical site. That which remains beyond representation, or which hides behind its visible surfaces; that which is only suggested or unspoken, which cannot be known completely, or that remains at the edges of the narration, or of thought; that which is neither one thing nor the other... these in-definitions are fundamental in contemporary visual arts, as in literature, science and philosophy.

The images in this body of work represent tangled fragments of jungle, with no horizon. They are discontinuous, indifferent and interchangeable. (It is difficult to retrace one's steps in the rainforest). These images, 'bursting with jungle', represent the edges of archaeological excavations. They look outwards, trying to capture an unconstructed space. At first glance, they look like a wild space; natural, undefined, as if without motif. However, this disorganised and entropic space is, in fact, the historical site of a buried city beneath the rainforest floor.

The sprawl of the city, made up of squares, roads and common residential structures, is of secondary archaeological interest compared to its ceremonial centres and elite residential areas, and it tends to remain unexcavated, deep in the rainforest, estranged from the work of archaeological documentation and historical interpretation. This 'periphery' of the city, and in a sense of archaeology, or of history, is the subject of this work.

Paradoxically, the presence of this historical memory of the pre-Columbian Maya civilisation can be perceived more intensely in its overgrown invisibility than in the reconstructed spaces of the archaeological parks, which are somehow disappointing in their inevitable similarity to the character and aesthetics of theme parks. The archaeological parks tend to be spaces designed with an urban mentality and for tourism (entrance fees, souvenirs, toilets, etc). In the rainforest, however, the perception of something that is hidden offers us a more apt framework to appreciate the historical presence. The mounds which denote buried ceremonial or residential structures, and which could be perceived at first glance as 'small jungle-covered hills'; the distances between them concertinaed by impenetrable vegetation; the traces left by the archaeological excavations, now filled in, the earth less densely packed, mediate more effectively than the reconstructed landscapes and monuments of the archaeological parks.

The images propose that we approach this historical site not from the point of view of the visible and the ordered, but via the spatial and temporal 'suspension' of its historical materiality. The memory that is represented in these images is not the monument, but a projection, a threshold, a memory 'which is not yet', or that is as yet 'unthought', as in a state of 'inversion'. Or, a memory which, simply, does not let itself be thought, as if the rainforest was not only the direct consequence of the desolation and the crumbling of a civilisation, but also the necessary strategy for the preservation of its fragments: we could say that it hides itself, that it buries itself and that it eludes us.



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