

Sedimentary Histories: On space and place  
in the photographs of Bleda y Rosa  
—Liz Wells

What do we see when we look at the land?

Farmers assess crop potential, chemists analyse soil qualities, geologists explore rock formations, property developers imagine neatly laid-out new estates, and poets express sensorial phenomena. What we consider reflects our particular aspirations, beliefs and interests. How we see, and what we interpret through seeing, that is, making sense of evidence and experience, draws upon cultural discourses. The inter-relation of seeing and knowing relates to politics and aesthetics, and to modes of storytelling. It also reflects the cultural specificity of knowledge and the ideological discourses that frame ways of thinking and of interpreting that which we observe.

For photographers concerned with questions of history, place and meaning, documentation of that which is visible and the poetics of visual imagery come together to articulate histories of place and to invite responses to particular sites. María Bleda and José María Rosa search out traces of human activity in public locations. Their motivation is akin to visual anthropology; they seek to reveal and draw attention to that which might not otherwise be observed. Their work has taken them to cities, to open fields, to considering ways in which histories may be hidden from view yet mark a landscape, and to reflecting on the origins of humanity in terms of anthropology, geology and cartography. Their work might be viewed as “late photography”, that is, images made after an event that both reference and record legacies of something that happened. In his essay “Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problems of ‘Late Photography’”,<sup>(1)</sup> David Company suggests that whilst images made after the fact contribute within the construction of history, they are not traces of occurrences so much as “the *trace* of a trace of an event”. Arguably, such pictures distance us from the emotional implications of events, numbing us through becoming, as Company puts it, “an undertaker, summarizer or accountant” with a different relation to history and memory to that of “decisive moment” photojournalism or of personal snapshots. Late photography can seem mute, animated only through familiarity with stories and contexts. It is photographic enquiry at its most intellectual.

Landscape photography is, implicitly, late photography; what is recorded is that which can be observed at the time of making an image, but the content references that which previously obtained and has morphed into what can be seen now. If, as has been extensively argued in cultural geography, space is turned into place through stories told and those yet to come, then photography makes a key contribution through investigation and documentation of that which can be seen. <sup>(2)</sup> Specific sites may give little away; stories are not necessarily manifest visually. For Bleda y Rosa landscapes relate hidden histories, ones that they seek to unearth through photographic investigation and contextual research. Their approach is archeological both in terms of investigating the hidden layers of history that adhere to particular locations and also in reflecting on the lingering influence of European Enlightenment Era philosophy, which is an underlying interest. As with any hermeneutic concern with theory and method in interpretation, the pleasure of their enquiry resides in part in discovering the limits of visible revelation; lands may resist explanation, with surface characteristics shaped in ways lost from historical documentation.

The couple met as students and have worked (and lived) together ever since. Their work is remarkable for the extent of the endeavour invested in each single picture. Sometimes they make an expedition across continents in order to make just one picture: a historic battlefield, or a pre-historical site. Preparation for each photograph involves attention to maps, engagement with local histories, reflection on broader socio-political histories, familiarizing themselves with issues that contextualized an event, making travel arrangements, acquiring any necessary permissions to access locations, determining photographic formats, film and equipment, and considering the light and weather conditions that they might encounter that would influence shooting decision. Intrepid navigation! Given the research invested in advance their journey is by then somewhat akin to a pilgrimage.

They have realised several series through a “stepping stone” approach of researching histories of a particular place, traveling to make one image, and then moving on to focus on the next one. The approach is orderly, logical, and sometimes heroic in respect of explorations planned and undertaken. Rosa attributes the desire for order to Bleda, but it is almost impossible to determine or distinguish between their individual contributions. Indeed, their collaboration is long-standing and utterly embedded within their work processes, just as their work is integral to their life as they live above their studio and synchronise the pleasures of travel with the pursuit of picture-making. Several projects may be in development in parallel, and new ideas emerge from existing series. For instance, their interest in historical tensions and divergences in the Iberian Peninsula characterises several series as does the engagement with modern European philosophy that threads through their more recent work.

Each series makes different demands in terms of the rigours of research, travel and image-making. Their first project, *Campos de fútbol* [Football Pitches] (1992-1995) dates from when they were students at the School of Art and Design, Valencia, where they initiated their collaboration through exploring this Mediterranean region. Football is a national obsession, but they were not concerned with well-funded stadiums. Rather, they draw attention to the sport as a vernacular pastime, showing rough pitches and deteriorating goal posts in indeterminate rural situations. Locations are named, but with little indication of who might kick a ball around there. The grey tones of the pictures call attention to shapes, for instance, rectangular fence panels surrounding a pitch that echo the rectangles of the goal posts and netting. But this is not a formalist exercise; the artists were interested in exploring liminal spaces remembered from childhoods spent in villages or suburban areas. The grounds are rough and any signs of human presence are relegated to distant buildings, or, for example, concrete steps and a railing leading to the field. Aside from an occasional few trees, playing football in such places is a barren experience; there is no evidence of well-kept grounds or freshly painted touchlines. Occasionally, the unexpected intrudes: a basketball net or a “camping” sign painted on a wall that suggest other everyday activities. Nonetheless, these are bleak, residual spaces that are both somewhere, in that the location is named, and nowhere as they could be almost anywhere. At almost one-meter width, exhibition prints emphasise the textures of the land, flat daylight averting shadows or dramatic highlights. The banality of the pictures is particularly evident when hung in a block, especially as there is no attempt to incorporate a landscape aesthetic, for instance, through systematic co-ordination of the horizon line across the whole series. Whatever they once were, these pitches are no longer places of exuberance; the spirit is empty. For the photographers, this was the fascination.

A later series, *Memoriales* [Memorials], extended their investigations of everyday spaces. It is one of several series in which they reflect on various ways in which architectural structures reflect, shape and symbolize cultural priorities and hierarchies. (3) An interest in monuments and commemoration led them to explore sites of memory, for instance, in *Berlin* (2005), *Jerusalem* (2010) and *Washington* (2010). They have characterised these projects in terms of tension between memory, which changes, evolves, or may be contested, and ways in which the construction of monuments to honour people or events anchors meaning, influencing and shifting the mood and significance of that which is sedimented historically. Their focus is not only on statues or monuments commissioned for public sites, but also on more banal resonances of history. Titles such as *Bahnhof Berlin- Grunewald* remind us of the use of trains to transport people to camps whilst the closed doors of *Neue Synagoge* invite us to reflect on the ramifications and legacies of twentieth century European history. Scaffolding in front of a bullet-marked wall in *Grosse Hamburger Strasse* suggests that this particular historical reference might soon be plastered over, concealed behind a new façade. The pictures document close-up, showing textures and remnants, with locations situated through the titling rather than through what we see in within the frame. Walls cannot speak, but the conjunction of the several images within the series renders them poignant sites of memory.

This series resonates with their interest in battlefields, sites of events whose significance wanes overtime but which nonetheless represent historical turning points. We might still ask, what if the winner had been the loser, and vice versa? Their original interest was kindled initially by *La batalla de Almansa* [The Battle of Almansa], 1709, which is an epic painting, 161 × 390 cm. It is academic in its intention to instruct through recounting a scenario, and graphic in including very literal detail of men and horses engaged in fighting; we reflect on the energy, heroism and slaughter of war. (4) Unlike history painting, Bleda y Rosa are not interested *Corporations/Telefónica*, 2006 (on the Spanish telephone corporation); *Tipologías* [Typologies] (2006-). in using pictures as a vehicle for visual storytelling provoking questions about the ascendance to power of one group or another. Rather, they are interested in the influence of the so-called Enlightenment thinking in the eighteenth century and ways in which philosophical reflection and empiricism displaced theology as a primary means of interrogating our world of experience. In this respect their ambition relates to Michel Foucault's enquiry into *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) wherein he reflected not on what "knowledge" represents to us, but on the parameters, assumptions and founding principles that constitute, characterise and limit ways of thinking. His intention was to inform historical understanding through analysis of historical thought, or, as we might express it now, the cultural discourses that obtained in a specific place and era. In line with this, Bleda y Rosa note that wars in the Iberian Peninsula emerged from a challenge to the former hierarchical political order, one that reflected new liberal ideals. Their first battlefield series was intended not only as an exploration of histories of place but also as a stand-in for philosophical and socio-political tensions that battles—struggles for power—almost always reflect.

War is endemic to history. It follows that the land is extensively marked by sites of former conflicts imbued with hidden histories and forgotten narratives. This is well-trodden ground. Stories are often invisible, which for photographers represents a challenge in terms of visual rhetoric since they can only record what is manifest visually. It is not merely a question of what is pictured, but also how it is pictured. The inter-relation of content and form is one of "what" and "how", of selection of subject-matter and deployment of photographic and broader aesthetic codes. For

instance, sharp focus and close-up framing emphasise literal detail whereas soft focus and a broader setting may suggest a context and overall scenario. For photographers such decisions, along with technical decisions, articulate the mood of an image as well as conveying or minimizing emphasis on subject-matter. As American photographer Robert Adams has suggested, beauty emerges from form and significance from subject-matter. (5) One might add that the inter-relation of the two is a mark of photographic style, the “signature” of the particular photographer responsible for researching a theme and communicating visually. Meaning is a matter of interpretation, and emerges from shared cultural perceptions. As viewers we may recognise responses on the part of the photographer that we ourselves might have experienced had we been in that place, at that time, reflecting on circumstances encountered.

War and battlefields are well-established as a theme within painting and photography, and there has been a recent resurgence of the genre given the centenary of the First World War in Europe. (6) Sites of conflict are not always obvious, histories are often hidden and memories kept private; wars are experienced personally in terms of death, injury and domestic trauma as much as they are determined publically and politically. It follows that extensive research often underlies pictorial reference and representation. Archive investigations, oral history and site visits help identify places where killings and executions have occurred. Ensuing images often portray silent landscapes, their significance conveyed through captions. A visual scenario, location and date leaves it to us to consider the (non)sense of history. More rhetorical titles may remind us that, regardless of what can be seen, spilt blood and the effects of tramping feet are absorbed into the soil. Legacies of war may be indicated through metaphorical reference rather than through that which is actually visible within the picture. Aesthetic form contributes to influencing our response to sites of battles or genocide. Direct documentation reflects a factual approach to history whereas, for instance, use of soft focus may invoke more emotional reactions—we imagine that which has been lost from view through the veil of time. If only trees could tell what they have seen! Pictorial strategies range from the matter-of-fact to the operatic, reminding us that photographs evoke responses through visual poetics.

In the work of Bleda y Rosa it is often a specific detail that acts to anchor an image. For example, in *Hacia el desfiladero de Valcarlos, Roncesvalles, 778* [Towards the pass at Valcarlos, Roncesvalles, 778] we wonder whether the view marked in the tourism site map was a spectacle that soldiers paused to admire then. They adopt a moderate rhetorical strategy that we might view in terms of academic picture-making, both in the sense of the influence of the university in contemporary photography and the much longer-standing tradition of academic painting. *Campos de batalla, España* [Battlefields, Spain] (1994-1996) followed soon after graduation.

The series was complemented in particular by *Prontuario* [Promptuarium], a series of portfolios, each composed of nine images from specific places that have figured historically as sites of tension. Each offers a range of different visual observations, some quite vernacular, thereby setting up resonances that indicate the complexity of memory, meaning and significance at any particular site. Their archeological approach thus draws on the multi-woven strands of histories, from macro political tensions and debates to everyday phenomena and experiences. Of course, this thinking is not immediately evident from the pictures or series themselves. But the images act as touchstones to invite us to think further about the historical issues at stake at any one time and place, and the socio-political ideas and desires that informed them.

*Europa* [Europe] (2010-2012) and *Ultramar* [Overseas] (2007- 2016) came later. These battlefield series, both the rural places and the overseas American landscapes, are presented as sets of diptychs. Central horizon lines unify two photographs within a single frame, 85 × 150 cm, constituting a panorama that, through the double width and the slight gap within each pair, suggests the openness of the spaces depicted. There are some indications of current use, for example, in *Europa*, the site of a territorial battle in 732 against an Islamic army of invasion now features a road linking Tours to Poitiers, and wire fencing that separates fields at Waterloo, Belgium, layers agricultural use with memories of the famous defeat of Napoleon's army by the British in 1815. Current human presence is suggested, for example, a rough farm track and a windmill in the distance at Valmy, site of a civil conflict in September 1792 subsequent to the French Revolution. However, actual people, for example farm workers, are as absent as those who died on the battlefields. Likewise, in *Ultramar*, tracking the European colonization of the Americas, Bleda y Rosa invite us to reflect on legacies of Empire, particularly on the part of the British and the Spanish, including the subsequent struggles for independence marked in the various site of battle included in this geographically extensive series that includes seascapes and coastal areas among the various sites. *Faldas del Pichincha, 24 de mayo de 1822* [Slopes of the Pichincha, 24th May 1822], photographed from the slopes of the Pichincha volcano outside Quito, Ecuador, over what is now a sprawling urban area, particularly reminds us that places evolve and change, inter-weaving histories from the pre-colonial to the contemporary, that link the local with the global in ways that resist simple exposure. Enigmatic landscapes!

The Spanish and international battlefield explorations were developed alongside a large-scale, ambitious project, *Origen* [Origin] (2003-). The title references Charles Darwin's investigations of *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859), an ambitious undertaking zoologically and also in terms of the risks of expedition by sea; an extensive voyage into the unknown fueled by empiricist curiosity. But their approach is more akin to Michel Foucault's archeological method; they observe, investigate and take pleasure in the speculative. (7) The series is contextualised in terms of paleoanthropology, investigations of the locations of the origin of the human species, as well as in relation to the import of theories of evolution that emerged in the nineteenth century as a challenge to then established theological and philosophical principles. Their project was thus situated within rationalist debates associated with the explanatory power accorded to scientific empiricism. It also represents an exercise in cartography in that the project points to the global wanderings of human groups over many millennia. Whether viewing this work induces reflection on the nature of humankind, and the various claims as to our primeval roots, is another question. Large-scale exhibition prints (124 × 222 cm) suggest the sublime enormity and significance of the exploration. In book form (or on a computer screen) the images seem more contained, acting not so much to inspire awe at the enormity of the history of humankind but as notes towards a catalogue of ordinary places that have extraordinary associations.

Photography is an inherently visual medium; photographers centrally explore and respond to the visible. The challenge for photographers interested in investigating and drawing attention to invisible histories is how best to indicate that which cannot be seen; how to pierce the silence of the land. In the case of battlefields there is also the issue of how much can be conveyed of complex socio-economic events and the failures of political negotiation that result in leaders resorting to military engagement. Commenting that, "It's not the photograph that generates evidence about

something but rather the text and the words. It's the argument, the scientific authority that bears witness to it", (8) Alberto Martín suggests that, paradoxically, in their work there is a displacing of the photograph as evidence. At one level this stems from their method; images are used as evidence of historical events or current situations. But this also relates to the "numbness" of certain types of photography and fields of practice. If land in itself resists revealing histories, then the possibility of fuller historical reference relies on the effects and expressivity of aesthetic style as well as on titles, captions and artist statements as framing methods, and on photographers' confidence in the curiosity of audiences willing to engage with an image as a touchstone for fuller reflections.

Hilde van Gelder and Jan Baetens argue that critical realism is founded in systematic research practices that focus on exploring social reality through accumulation of materials, including visual documentation. They cite work by Allan Sekula commenting that he documented "inscriptions and traces", in his case, of contemporary socio-political circumstances, bringing together materials thereby setting up dialectical tensions that invite viewers to question the implications of what has been observed, collected and assembled. (9) Bleda y Rosa are primarily engaged with questions of history and memory and ways in which reflections on sites of historical significance sets up resonances in the present, but their work method is likewise systematic and intended to provoke reflection. In terms of aesthetics and landscape they set up resonances between spaces that have been named and (hi)storied as places not only through titles that reference the past but also through the tensions within the frame between the conceptually spacious locations and the specificity of place that has motivated their enquiry. In the case of the battlefields, it is difficult to view their work without reflecting on the expansive scale of warfare historically and now, and future legacies of current conflicts. Yet, arguably there is a parallel between the distance of historical events of which there is little trace and the geographical distance from current war zones that we, in Western Europe, experience, perhaps with a sense of relief at not being there and involved. One aspect of the human condition is an ability to disregard that which does not touch us directly, even though it ought to matter and is clearly catastrophic for others. The silence of the battlefield landscapes should speak not only of the past.

The complexities of discourses and shared understandings and the slippages of interpretation that occur in visual communications are in themselves endlessly fascinating, part of the pleasure of looking at images. For Bleda y Rosa the quest to explore enigmas of land and place and to draw our attention to historical sedimentation is an obsession, as is evident in their extensive tracking of places of interest and in the reflective aesthetics of their imagery. Each journey represents a monumental investigative endeavour. We wonder what might attract their focus next.

Liz Wells

1. Company, David: "Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problems of 'Late Photography'", in Green, David: *Where is the Photograph?* Photoworks/Photoforum, Brighton, 2003, p. 9.
2. See, for example, Tuan, Yi-Fu: *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 2001; Massey, Doreen: *For Space*, SAGE Publications Ltd, London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi, 2005. Neither specifically discuss the contribution of photography, but the conceptual notion of places being *storied* offers a useful starting point for reflecting on the contribution of visual media.
3. For further series investigating architectural space see *Estancias* [Rooms], 2001-2006, on interior rooms in decaying classical buildings;

4. *La batalla de Almansa*, 1709. Oil on canvas, 161 × 390 cm, painted by Buonaventura Ligli with the cartoonist Filippo Pallotta. Prado Museum Collection, Madrid.
5. Adams, Robert: *Beauty in Photography*, Aperture, New York, 1996.
6. See, for example, Gersht, Ori: *The Clearing*, Film and Video Umbrella, London, 2005; Dewe Mathews, Chloe: *Shot at Dawn*, Ivorypress, Madrid, 2014; Michiels, Bart: *The Course of History*, Damia, Bologna, 2013.
7. Foucault, Michel: *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Pantheon, New York, 1972.
8. Martín, Alberto: *Bleda and Rosa speak with Alberto Martín*, Fundación Telefónica and La Fábrica, Madrid, 2007, p. 71.
9. Baetens, Jan & van Gelder, Hilde: *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula's Photography*, Leuven University Press, Leuven, 2007, p. 9.