

Landscapes of the Invisible.  
Photographs by Bleda y Rosa  
—Paola Cortés-Rocca

Therefore, the inhabitants still believe they live in an Aglaura which grows only with the name Aglaura and they do not notice the Aglaura that grows on the ground. And even I, who would like to keep the two cities distinct in my memory, can speak only of the one, because the recollection of the other, in the lack of words to fix it, has been lost.

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

“A landscape is never there”. Perceiving and depicting a territory entails turning it into a landscape, finding the words to narrate it or the images able to fix a number of confusing signs in the ordered space of a photographic plate. The history of painting and the inception of “landscape” as a genre of painting in its own right in seventeenth century Europe have taught us to rest our eyes on a space, to pull together its disparate elements—sky, sea, sand—and to perceive a wholeness called, for instance, a “seascape”. They are the two sides of the one phenomenon: painting has taught us to see landscapes; and a profoundly modern way of perceiving space—a way of perceiving the territory by fragmenting it—has given rise to a specific type of visual and narrative representation called “landscape art”.

This means that the history of landscape is nothing but the history of the gaze and its technologies. This is something the photographers María Bleda and José María Rosa are keenly aware of, and for over twenty years now they have pursued images that explore this slippage from territory to landscape. Bleda y Rosa’s practice is inscribed within the tradition ushered in during the late nineteenth century, when the visual representation of landscape was drastically altered with the appearance of the camera. If, up until that moment, landscape served as a metaphor for something else—the aesthetic subject’s feelings, his or her mood—from the birth of photography onwards any landscape is what it is: the world, the real, materiality itself. Following the emergence of the camera, the landscape, inasmuch as an exteriorisation of subjectivity, paradigmatically signalled in the sublime *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [Wanderer above the Sea of Fog] (1818) by the German artist Caspar David Friedrich or in the tumultuous seascapes of his English coeval William Turner, was transformed into a space beyond or over any subject. Now landscape can be captured by a mechanical eye, can be coded in calculus and used to control what exists. Photography, in consequence, initiates what Martin Heidegger termed “the age of the world picture”: a time when the subject gains control over the existent by representing it and inhabits it by turning it into an image. (1) For instance, that of a landscape.

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“Landscape is never there”. We build it when we use a territory in a certain way: when we dump waste on a riverbank and turn the river into a rubbish tip, when we sit on a rocky crag to look at the surroundings and transform it, with our body and our contemplative stillness, into a vantage or viewing point. It is not a question of massive interventions, like those produced by a hydroelectric dam or a skyscraper, and more about barely perceptible albeit steadfast contributions that illustrate ways of living in a place, which is to say, ways of endowing it with a name and a meaning— beach,

viewpoint, football pitch. Someone comes along and paints the place or records it with their camera in order to allow us to relish in contemplating it, or maybe to get us to notice places we normally pass through without paying them much attention. Representation produces landscape. Some artists choose majestic and sublime mountains, while others, like Bleda y Rosa, lurk around insignificant, run-of-the-mill and insubstantial geographies, like football pitches.

Looking at the eighteen black and white images comprising one of the photographers' earliest works, *Campos de fútbol* [Football Pitches] (1992-1995), we can imagine the ethnographer of the future speculating about the prerequisites a plot of land would have to fulfil to qualify as a football pitch. It should have a goal, ideally two, and a bit of grass as well. Having said that, in some images the goal is reduced to its bare expression and consists solely of three metal bars, while in others it is conspicuously absent; the amount of grass varies from one pitch to another; and some are even lacking all these elements. What the pictures show is the space Henri Lefebvre called "perceived space". (2) Unlike spaces resulting from urban and institutional planning, these emerge as a by-product of spontaneous action, habit, usage and daily repetition, not unlike the case of a beaten path, worn by the footprints of passers-by or of animals; and also that of these football pitches. Effectively devoid of any prerequisites and practically lacking any prior planning, these pitches are places construed by a true pragmatics of space: they are defined by their use. What makes a football pitch a football pitch, is the more or less ongoing and non-professional practice of a popular sport.

From this spatial pragmatics, Bleda y Rosa propel themselves (and us) into the future as archaeologists of contemporaneity, imagined as a fictional past. We scrutinise the territory in search of marks of what our experience tells us has happened there: the stumbles and falls, passes and goals, dives and triumphal headers of children and teenagers sweating, shouting and laughing as they run after a ball. The space summons up the personal or cultural archive of artists and spectators; when seeing these photos, scenes from our childhood flash before us, whether or not they be real or imagined, fragments of our children's childhood or even images that are not ours but borrowed from advertising and cinema. Space is not only convened and looked at through the filter of the archives in our eyes; space is, literally and simultaneously, a registry, an archive and a map of presences and games from another time which, by virtue of repetition, turned this place into a football pitch. The series *Campos de fútbol* is an archive of archives, a chemical recording of the photographic space, of imperceptible marks we observe through eyes steeped in the past. With this suite of works, María Bleda and José María Rosa embarked on a journey through an extremely personal geography that they will continue to travel for almost twenty-five years, exploring fields that bring affectivity, memory and action into tension.

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"The landscape is there, in some imprecise place, in between history and myth", Bleda y Rosa tell us. Every landscape is in its own way a kind of monument, archive, deposit or drainpipe of history. It is made legible through the traces that history etches on its surface: childhood stories, interwoven with vague memories and assorted affections, and also the History of so-called public events, of national and global occurrences. Now more than ever we know that no story or indeed History is an unfiltered aggregate of events; rather it is a narrative starting point for the production of lines and rhizomes, spiralling and linear stories, fantasies in the making and repetitions of tragedy and farce. In these stories, the beginning is a moment that glows with particular narrative and fictional brilliance. As Edward Said argued in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, it is a point that starts the

story and, at once, never remains there, in the beginnings. Instead it persists, building, demolishing and rebuilding itself again out of each new present. (3) One of Bleda y Rosa's projects maps this constant to-and-froing and visits those places where various successive theories have pinpointed the origins of the species. *Origen* [Origin] (2003-) features images of the Neander Valley, the Atapuerca Mountains, Lake Turkana, Arago Cave, the Yurab Desert, and the Rift Valley. Neither primeval nor original, origin is always a *myth of origin*, the starting point for a historical narrative it does not hold sacred, instead updating itself in each new present. It is also a principle of legitimisation of the present and a (teleological) helm of the future. A way of narrating the beginning of, let's say, the world—one presided over by gods or by explosions of atoms, by *ex nihilo* creations or by extremely long evolutionary patience—is never exclusively an origin: it is, above all else, a way of understanding the present and a premise for the direction it oughts to take.

“In the beginning was the landscape”, the series seems to say. It comes first in Genesis, the first book of the bible, where God made landscape—separating the light from darkness, and bringing forth animal and plant life—and then created man. Even in the scientific cosmogony of positivism, landscape also comes first. This is true to the extent that the human animal is an effect of landscape: in order to survive, the species adapts to changes in the environment. That is the core thesis of *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection* (1859), later continued in *The Descent of Man* (1871). The principle of natural selection, which Charles Darwin reached after his voyage on the Beagle, named a dynamic system tracing the transformation of life in contiguity with its habitat. In a less positivist and empirical sense, space also logically comes first: it is a condition of possibility for the subjectivities that dwell in it. Indomitable nature models the investor and the settler; just as big cities allow the dandy to flourish and criminals to lose themselves among the crowds; and as highways were instrumental for the beatniks and other adventure-seeking youths.

In *Origen*, the territory is the starting point of history: the origin of the species, the origin of life and of the various narratives that suggest ways of inhabiting and of surviving. The suite consists of large-format photographs that confront the beholder with an extremely sparse space: the trees of Neander, a path vanishing in the misty horizon of Taung, metal structures and descending steps in Sterkfontein, near Johannesburg, in South Africa. The place names summon a discursive swarm that bestows meaning on these locations for the spectator who lingers on these landscapes of the possible origins of man. The encyclopaedia spills over those images: in 1856, in the Neander Valley, a few kilometres from Düsseldorf, a fossil remain was found that gave rise to nineteenth century palaeontology (and to a competition among European nations to see which one was the origin of man or the discoverer or authorised announcer of that moment of genesis of the species). Another instance can be seen in the view of the steps descending into the stone, interfering with the landscape, which is the entrance to the Sterkfontein archaeological site, a series of caves called “the Cradle of Humankind”. At present, the fossil from Neander is believed to be a mere forty thousand years old, and the remains of the hominid found in 1997 in Sterkfontein, over three million years.

“Landscape is the origin”, Bleda y Rosa tell us. Indeed, it is the touchstone of a body of work of more than twenty years devoted to questioning the ways in which it is built, endowed with meaning, perceived, overlooked. In *Origen*, they confront us with a silent landscape which accrues meaning when scientific discourses inform us that this is where the species began, only to have another discovery place that origin somewhere else, in some other time, in the next photograph. We look at the images with the excitement of an inquisitive child and with affected nostalgia, like when

we look at a photo of events, people or objects from our own childhood that we ourselves are unable to recall.

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“Landscape is anti-natural”. The word *landscape* is not synonymous with “nature”. The mere accumulation of things placed next to each other in a given territory and seen with a simple glance does not construe a landscape. A landscape would be a “piece of nature”, but the problem is that nature is not made up of pieces, it is always a whole. Accordingly, the emergence of landscape would be the result of an exercise of violence perpetrated by a consciousness capable of parcelling up an unfragmentable whole. That would explain why Georg Simmel called it the modern tragedy par excellence:

that the part of a whole becomes an independent whole, growing out of and claiming its own right versus the former—this is perhaps the most fundamental tragedy of the general spirit that has achieved complete effectivity in the modern era and seized leadership of the cultural process. (4)

“Landscape is a modern concept” par excellence; it is a fragment and a new totality which does not resolve the tension that gives rise to it: it is a fragment of what cannot be fragmented, and a totality unable to fix itself as such. Thus, as a grand modern piece, landscape is structurally bound to violence and melancholia. The violence implied in tearing off a piece and fragment of the world, and the melancholia of looking at it always as a ruin from another time: two questions also defining the photographic act and which, precisely because of that, turn photography into the modern form of visualisation of landscape par excellence. Landscape, violence, melancholia and technical visibility: that is what *Prontuario* [Promptuarium] and *Campos de batalla* [Battlefields] are about. The former is a still ongoing body of work started in 2011, focusing on the Peninsular Wars, on that moment of rupture with the *ancien régime* and the fervour of enlightenment, of the proclamation of the values of liberty, equality and fraternity consubstantial to the republican ideologies of the French and North American revolutions. The latter series, started in 1994, is a record of wars of all kinds fought in Spain, in Europe or overseas.

If landscape, inasmuch as a modern fragment, involves a certain violence of perception and representation, here it also becomes a fragment of national and continental histories fundamentally marked by violence. In *Prontuario*, the images take us from Trafalgar to Boulogne-Sur-Mer, from Puerta del Sol to the fields of La Moncloa, while talking to us about a Spanish Robespierre or about the Real Academia de San Fernando. Landscapes and urban views, texts and objects that weave the skin of the nation: a tissue of ideals and libertarian hopes intertwined with relations of exploitation and power, of large and small triumphs and learnings, displayed in their total polyvalence as a “document of civilization” that is at once a “document of barbarism”. (5) Using those images, Bleda y Rosa suggest reading the history of their homeland through the scars and scratches on the body of the nation, that is to say, on its territory. And that it must always simultaneously adopt the form of biography and compendium.

“History is a territorial record of time” seems to be one of the major discoveries of Bleda y Rosa’s aesthetic project. And that is what they are bound towards, pointing their camera at that thickening of time on the ground of the nation, the continent, the planet. This history, Walter

Benjamin warns us, is not exactly a recording of man's great achievements, nor a line of monuments crowning progress, but a number of ruins heralding "one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage". *Campos de batalla* locates that catastrophe in a number of places where civil wars and battles severed a huge number of lives in Spain, Europe and beyond. The passage is reticular, presented as a diptych: we are shown a path in Ollantaytambo, Peru, triggering an evocation of January 1537, or the Valcarlos gorge, explaining in the caption: Roncesvalles, 778.

While one could perceive a slippage from one's own childhood to the infancy of man between the two previous suites, here the photographers move from the violence of the homeland at a certain moment of history towards the universal history of violence, legible in the indelible traces left on the whole territory. The camera embodies the *Angel of History* painted by Klee, who casts a look backwards and registers the fields of death. If it could talk, it would perhaps recite a line by T. S. Eliot, *I will show you fear in a handful of dust*. (6) The images of *Campos de batalla* dwell on these territories of war and on the dust covering those who died there, to reconstruct a geographic history of violence. They superimpose on the territory the violence of the landscape as a modern ruin and the violence of the species systematising its own extermination.

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In *Invisible Cities*, the Italian author Italo Calvino narrates the act of narrating. Marco Polo recounts his journeys, explorations and diplomatic missions; Kublai Khan listens to him. Even though they belong to him, the cities are invisible for the Emperor of the Tartars: he was never there, he never saw them. For him, they are made exclusively of words, descriptions and micro-fictions coming out of the Venetian voyager's mouth. Other ambassadors, he says, talk to him about mining riches and about possible textile enterprises; they convey to him the utilitarian dimension of his domains; Marco Polo, on the other hand, stops at their invisible edges: the links with memory, desire, signs, the dead, names, and the sky.

For nearly a quarter of a century, Bleda y Rosa have mapped landscapes that are relatively close to us, but to deliver them to the empire of our gaze, as if they were remote and alien geographies. The work of these photographers consists of views containing something of description and micro-fiction in them: they coagulate a temporal flow which momentarily stops at each image and then pumps it up to the next one. The visible is offered to us in them: places and spaces, landscapes of this world captured with consummate mastery, printed and arranged in large-sized views, or placed on high quality display devices. However, the semiotic power is played out in the order of the invisible: each one of the images is a blank field that is recharged with meaning when the name of the series crosses them, or when the place name in the caption freezes them in a specific space and time coordinate. Then, what we have just seen stops being *just* what is seen—a patch of thin grass, the edge of a stone construction, a clump of vegetation—to become *also* something we had not seen until now: that barren land over which the ball of childhood games rolled, the place where our species lit the first fire, the body of the nation, the tombs of the species. For an instant, the beholder feels that he recognises, remembers, inhabits or has inhabited those territories of the visible, not realising that, in one way or another, we have always been treading a landscape that only becomes visible out of synch—after the event, after the shot, after developing. These settings of delayed visibility emerge later, when memory, affect, melancholia or fear have intervened. Perceptual automatism and the mere passing of time erode and disperse meanings and events, like a shovelful of ashes tossed to the wind. The photographs of María Bleda and José María

Rosa also work against that dispersion and underpin those landscapes of the invisible, grounded in the most primeval of the real. The images are true archaeological sites saturated with sediments of landscape: geographies of the real and realms of the sense still to come, territories of immediate perception and delayed narration, repositories of past times and of the eternal present of the image, layers of history and of timeless myths, warning us that the landscape they offer us is always cradle and at once tomb, origin and shroud, monument and mausoleum of the species and of its relationship with the planet.

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