

## DOMOBAAL

**When is a landscape not a landscape?  
when its photographed by Daniel Gustav Cramer**

In 1714, the Irish philosopher George Berkeley crossed Mount Cenis on horseback, and found the view distinctly unedifying - he was, he later wrote, 'put out of humour by the most horrible precipices'. (Perhaps he consoled himself, in proper Idealist fashion, by concluding that the hideous crags existed only at the instant that he perceived them.) As Robert Macfarlane points out in his history of the modern obsession with uplands, *Mountains of the Mind* (2003), such a reaction was not unusual in an era for which mountains had not yet acquired sublime or picturesque significance. Wealthy travellers, it is said, even had themselves blindfolded before being led over the Alps, so as not to have to look at the monstrous peaks. Mountains were in a sense invisible to the pre-Romantic imagination: they were deserts of rock, vacant horrors before which the mind shrank.

But blanks have a habit of being filled in, and although later aesthetic enthusiasts of altitude and ice may have affected to value exactly this emptiness itself, they also wrestled with the paradox of having to describe structures so novel and alien that they could hardly be grasped. Consequently, in their accounts of them, mountains always looked like something else; to the Romantic eye, they were oddly incapable of being themselves and so became bare screens on which to project a prodigious array of metaphors. In part, the problem was their sheer strangeness: Jean-Jacques Rousseau spoke of 'the pleasure of seeing only totally new things', but these unprecedented wonders seem almost invariably to have been translated into the language of the known. Mountains looked like waves, glaciers like frozen oceans, clouds like floating boulders. It is as if, above a certain height, the landscape only became visible at the moment one mistook it for something else.

It would be naïve at best to insinuate that the photographs of Daniel Gustav Cramer exist in some direct - or, actually, even ironized - relation to the Romantic art that first tried to frame the edgeless atmosphere of this upper world. The briefest mental flicker-book tally of the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich is enough to dispel the comparison: Cramer quite disposes of the icy expansive vista, the dark punctum of the heroic subject set against the scene, all the familiar stage machinery of the muscular German sublime. And yet: he shares something, a certain interest in the limits of the visible as such, with the most rigorous formulations of that aesthetic. And like the first writers to record their impressions of the higher reaches of air, rock and water, his photographs can often confuse one space or substance with another, substitute one stratum of the representable world for its apparent double. Forests appear drowned or pelagic, the actual ocean bed looks like an aerial view of rainforest at night or resembles mountains scurled by snowdrifts that are actually seaweed.

Cramer's three ongoing series of medium-format photographs - *Woodland*, *Mountain* and *Underwater* - are linked by their precise absence of aspect. The 'view' vanishes in a kind of uncanny middle distance: not far enough away from the mountain peaks to compose a bracing vista, not close enough to the undergrowth to seem forensic or hyper-real. Nor is there much sense of narrative or scenography. It is only in the earliest of the *Woodland* images, for example, that Cramer allows a certain melodrama to intrude: a foreground of rain-jewelled vegetation is sharply in focus, while the blurred background looks like a badly painted stage flat. The whole scene might be awaiting a rehearsal of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, such is its air of stalled magic. Though the depth and darkness are still there in later additions to the series, everything also exists on a single plane: no foreground, no horizon, just a square expanse of foliage without any route in or out.

Cramer's 'landscapes', in other words, are really no such thing, which is not the same as saying that they have nothing to say about landscape. They are more like photographic non-sites, subtle displacements of the territories in which they

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were made: places (though we could name them: a forest in Scotland, the Dolomites, the coast of Cyprus) whose specificities are perhaps irrelevant to the project as a whole. *Mountain* is the most conceptually vertiginous of the three series in this respect, and one image in particular embodies the various paradoxes involved. It depicts Mont Blanc: a 'mountain of the mind' that seems not to match in reality the chilled abstraction of its idea -- William Wordsworth, on first seeing it, 'grieved to have a soulless image on the eye which had usurped a living thought'. Cramer's Mont Blanc, brittle and beclouded, has lost all sense of scale, so that it might as easily be a model sculpted in the studio or a CGI approximation of the 'black drizzling crags'.

In the 1850s, a craze for views of and visits to Mont Blanc broke out in Britain. For those disinclined to Alpine travel, stereoscopic views and panoramic entertainments supplied the necessary vaporous whiff of the sublime, just as Victorian aquaria preserved under glass and water a glimpse of the deep time of fossil life alongside living creatures.

If Cramer's photographs show us something like a post-Romantic, post-environmental view of nature, they do it by acknowledging that nature now is a kind of science fiction. In that sense, the closest analogues to these photographs - and they seem, like the peaks scaled by the first mountaineers, to continually gull us into seeing them for what they are not - are cinematic, not photographic. The clouds that shroud Cramer's mountains recall the veil of fog around the dreaming planet in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*; his woodlands are like the eerily overgrown portions of the Zone in *Stalker*, where one might happen upon the ruins of the future. One has the sense - and here the filmic exemplar would have to be *Predator* - that something at once visible and invisible is moving among the leaves, 2007.

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