

Monica Ursina Jäger: On the Threshold

Catalogue text on the occasion of

Monica Ursina Jäger. Shifting Topographies, Museum Franz Gertsch, Burgdorf 2019

By Anna Wesle



'We are all deep in a hell each moment of which is a miracle.'

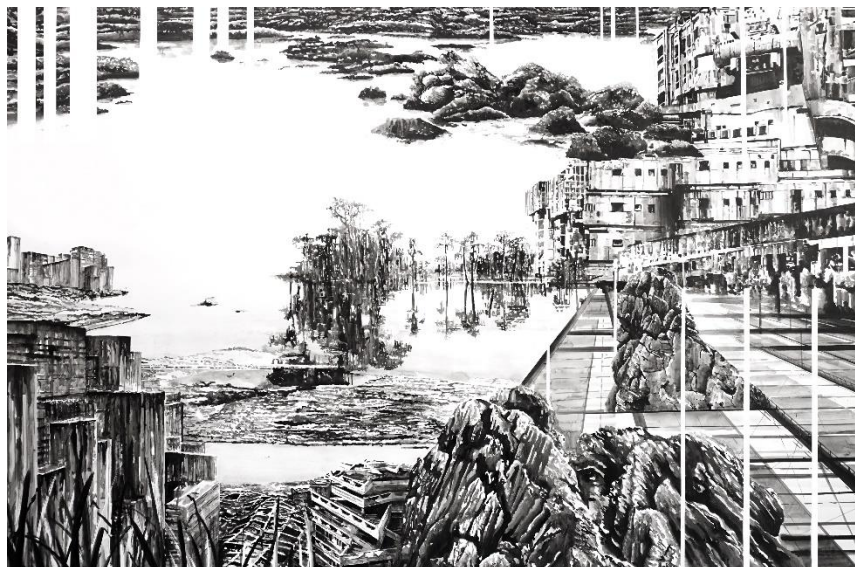
(E.M. Cioran, *The New Gods*, 1969)

The alluring green of rainforest – the regular studding of windows on a social housing block. The deep black sensuousness of ink drawing – empty whiteness. Smooth, grey surfaces – living, black plants. A flood of bright green and fine pencil lines. A black sand beach – nature and destruction, utopian buildings and ruin. Concrete and ice. Black and green and white. Life, creation and death. Hell and the miraculous.

Zurich artist Monica Ursina Jäger's works come alive in their contrasts. Drawing in the viewer with an almost gravitational pull, on closer inspection they reveal inherent subjects and enquiries. How can rainforest and Singapore, a city of many million inhabitants, coincide? Can something be horribly beautiful? What became of the architectural utopias of the 1960s and '70s? When will nature's energy be spent? Questions that occupy

the artist. Questions that relate to us all in times of population growth, depletion of resources, pollution, global warming and its consequences. We, the people of the Anthropocene age – Jäger invokes a term that has, since the beginning of the 21st century, placed responsibility for the dawn of a new geological age on humankind. In keeping with Rumanian philosopher E.M. Cioran: 'In permitting man, Nature has committed much more than a mistake in her calculations: a crime against herself.' (E.M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, 1973)

In this exhibition and publication Monica Ursina Jäger shows large-scale ink drawings of constructed landscapes, collages of hybrid spaces and paintings in chlorophyll on paper, as well as complex spatial installations with natural and industrial elements. The title 'Shifting Topographies' refers to a space which cannot be read in a linear manner. The artist looks for formal and emotional tensions, for oscillation and reflection on the spheres of civilisation and nature. Divorcing herself from classical definitions of landscape art, Jäger reconsiders her own landscape: she applies a loose method of constructing the image and a different understanding of space, developing unexpected perspectives and temporalities. With the graphic composition of her large-format 'future archaeologies' ink drawings (from 2015) the artist reveals various forms of reality: temporal and geographic variations are overridden; past, present and future dissolve; through several vanishing points multiple perspectives coexist and new kinds of space emerge. Jäger's landscape elements are archetypal, with cliff formations, liminal coastal and border lines, geological faults and fractures and the earth's crust in motion. Among the architectural elements we encounter visionary projects of the 1960s and '70s, such as the Cité des Étoiles (Givors near Lyon, 1974) from French architect Jean Renaudie. While these buildings have, in fact, become dilapidated, their partially ruined states are exaggerated further in Monica Ursina Jäger's works. The artist accelerates the natural process of time passing and shows us weather-beaten utopias. Yet in this series white spaces, the empty parts, also catch the eye. They are other spaces which are equally present alongside the landscape and architectural elements and evade a linear reading. Objectively illustrated icons of architecture are combined with washed-out zones, in which the flow of information appears to have been interrupted. A disruption or a pixel glitch occurred and left a trace behind.



The deep black of the Chinese ink used in these works is highly expressive and produces a rather forbidding mood. The post-apocalyptic America described in Cormack McCarthy's dystopian novel 'The Road' (2006), in which a father and son walk towards the coast in hope of a better world, has accompanied the artist since 2014. The terms utopia and dystopia remain current today: What drives people? What image do we have of the future? In what way does this conflict with reality? With this comes the question of the possibility of action: What can we do and what defines our behaviour? In her works Monica Ursina Jäger adopts utopias and dystopias and tries to achieve an open state: Should it be understood as fictional or documentary, as visionary or nostalgic?

The collages made since 2018 entitled 'shifting topographies', which deal with the contrast of modern metropolis and tropical rainforest in Singapore, were made during a research residency at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore. Numerous windows of social housing blocks were cut into photographs of the forest and several photographs then collaged over one another. Here Singapore, a city with which the artist is closely linked through family and education, seems to be a perfect exemplar of accelerated urbanisation. With about 6 million inhabitants it is both an extremely dense city state and a 'garden city'. A city which has exploited the area's natural resources, resting on an island of which a quarter is reclaimed land. In the centre of the city lies a large green lung where the freshwater reserves are also maintained. One experiences both a still-functioning ecosystem and the pressure that city and forest exert over each other. In the artist's view, the intrinsic value of nature seems to have been forgotten in the current day; we have forgotten that nature is a system that operates independently of us humans. Monica Ursina Jäger posits the question whether we might learn from existing ecosystems – from this perspective forests could serve as a model in order to reinvent cities.



Monica Ursina Jäger's smaller works from this series consist of inkjet prints of photographs from the Singaporean rainforest onto which she collages additional elements. Leaves and tree shoots are employed, as are architectonic elements on tracing paper and cuttings from her own painting with chlorophyll. In Jäger's paintings with chlorophyll the question of nature's intrinsic value and its forms of representation arises once more. The black ink from pine soot that she uses for 'future archaeologies' is also, in essence, a natural product – yet through burning pine wood, a cultural product was made. When the artist was exploring the question of how chlorophyll could be used as a medium, she came across a pigment powder derived from it.

This is a non-toxic, living material – like mown grass it is sensitive to light and it changes in colour when exposed. The artist processes this pigment with gum arabic (from the sap of acacia trees) and water and then paints it on paper, so that several elements of a tree are used in this artwork in altered forms. The tree has thus undergone a process of transformation.



The exhibition space in the Museum Franz Gertsch is also marked by a complex spatial installation of natural and industrial elements, 'before, beneath, beyond' (2019). At its centre, a constellation of islands spreads out like an archipelago. Low geometric containers formed in solid, grey material are filled with coal slag, a black waste product from the coal industry, and gleaming anthracite. Projecting out of these blocks are spruce poles painted matt black. The vertical battens are an abstracted form of a plant-like, organic growth principle. This installation can be related to the ink drawings: similarly formed structures appear in the works on paper, or one could view the installation as the manifestation of the empty spaces of 'future archaeologies'. We are dealing with contemporaneity in another spatial arrangement – the space-image fabric intensifies.

Artist Monica Ursina Jäger works in black and white and she reveals contrasts to us, but she operates not only with a binary system, moving instead on the threshold between the two. Green. A dance on a volcano. The allure of paradise and of the abyss. Tension in a liminal field. The people who will be prompted to interact with Monica Ursina Jäger's works are people of today.

Translation: Aoife Rosenmayer