

Joan Fontcuberta

Landscapes of landscapes

“In Fontcuberta’s hands, photography has become a philosophical activity, not a pictorial one. He asks us to think as much as to look. And in this case, we are supposed to be thinking about photography and landscape, perhaps even about the new landscape of photography.”

Geoffrey Batchen, *Landscapes without Memory*

Originally designed for military or topographic use, some computer programs allow us to create non-existent but convincingly real three-dimensional landscapes, or to view actual landscapes on the basis of interpreting cartographic data. In this project Joan Fontcuberta subverts such software functions making the system translate any kind of images (thus cartographically uncoded) into territory depictions. Since those programs are ‘only’ able to produce landscape elements (mountains, valleys, rivers, clouds and so on), absolutely any kind of input will be transformed into a combinatory result within that limited iconic repertory. Thus Fontcuberta proposes to use as source material the graphic reproductions of objects related to identity and security issues (a passport, a credit card, a money bill, etc) but also reproductions of landscapes which are popular masterpieces from the history of Western art. The output? A wild, baroque virtual fantasy world, this is, encrypted landscapes much closer to the kitsch of postcards and tourist brochures than to nature itself. Maybe because nature only exists as a reconstruction that is as artificial and illusory as our cultural and ideological values.

Orogenesis is a geographic term that relates to the process of mountain formation. In this series Fontcuberta has co-opted a piece of computer software – a scene-renderer originally conceived for military and scientific purposes – to build convincing photo-realistic interpretations out of cartographic data. However, the artist tricks the computer and does not feed it with standard maps, but with reproductions of masterpieces from the history of landscape photography of the 19th and 20th century. Thus the software is forced to ‘read’ pictures by classic photographers as actual maps. The results challenge the status of the photographic document as they recreate a wild, baroque virtual world, which alludes to the metaphoric dialogue between illusion, nature, culture, and technology.

While conjuring ideas of kitschy scenes from calendars and ‘postcard’ perfection, Fontcuberta’s landscapes illustrate that the representation of nature no longer depends on the direct experience of reality, but on the interpretation of previous images. As Fontcuberta himself pointed out: Behind those bucolic digital paradises is a simple process of rendering that turns alphanumeric data into mountains, craters, or lakes. These are landscapes without memory, without history: nothing has happened in them, they have witnessed no expedition, no battle. They are mute spaces, mountains with no echoes, lakes without a ripple, silent waterfalls.

<http://www.fontcuberta.com/>