

DIALOGUE

Sarah Munro
Amanda Arcuri
Mark Kasumovic

SARAH MUNRO: The genre of landscape photography is as old as the medium itself. How do you think your work within contemporary landscape differs from that?

MARK KASUMOVIC: My body of work has been about critiquing the traditional landscape. Relighting as a way of playing with how landscape has often been captured in this ideal state.

AMANDA ARCURI: In the beginning you have people photographing an untouched landscape. It's the discovery of somewhere man has never been, and it was about documenting that. My work is doing the opposite. I like to invade space even more, spaces that have already been man-altered or man-made in some way, to alter them myself.

SM: Do you think it's an extrapolation on that tradition?

AA: To me this is the next step.

SM: Do you think that landscape photography has changed significantly in recent years in the wake of the green movement and contemporary environmental concerns? Is the way that we interact with nature different now than it was then?

MK: It's undeniable in terms of the kinds of films we've been seeing, the kind of photography. It's becoming this extremely hot topic: representing how a landscape has changed over time. In terms of the new topographers, there's always been this tradition of looking at human interactions in the landscape. But I think it's been pushed a little further, to how the landscape is being destroyed. That's why I find doing the exact opposite, trying to embellish what's remaining, is a funny way to twist that around.

SM: Do you think, bearing in mind that it's become sort of "in vogue" to deal with landscape and with green concerns, that it detracts from the work that you do?

AA: Well yes. I also think that if landscape wasn't the "hot topic" right now, I would still be doing what I'm doing.

MK: (to Amanda) Was there a time when landscape wasn't a hot topic?

AA: I guess I should be enjoying that this is going on right now because it works in my favour, because I happen to be working in that realm. I just don't want to feel like I'm jumping on a band-wagon.

MK: But I don't think either of us are doing that. We're bucking the trend. It's not "environmentally sensitive" photography, it's not aestheticizing ruin. It's something different. Conventional landscape is always kind of cliché. Even if you are Ansel Adams making gorgeous prints, right now they're not going to have an impact because they're not fresh or new. There's always a way to improve or change something.

SM: In terms of big names, Burtynsky obviously has to be talked about; knowing that the reason he started making the kind of photographs that he did was a first year assignment at Ryerson.

AA: I remember a similar assignment with [Phil] Bergerson, to photograph an altered landscape. The first thing that came to mind was, "Alright, I'm going to alter a landscape". And that's what I did.

SM: So it wasn't a pre-existing altered landscape?

AA: Exactly. It was a landscape that I altered. It was that concept that got me started on my later work. Here I am, still using the landscape as a backdrop, still intruding with my man-made things, be they bags or fire or light. I've started to play with the materials I'm using, making more connections between the idea of "natural" versus "unnatural". Those lines, they're blurred. That's why something like fire is wonderful because it's man-made but it's still an element.

SM: Dealing with the same subject matter and coming out of the same school, in what way do you think the [Burtynsky] influenced your work?

MK: It's hard not to find the influence of Burtynsky on so many contemporary photographers. That whole debate over whether you should aestheticize a landscape that's destroyed inspired the project I'm working on. In a way it's about the over-aestheticization of a landscape. How much can people take? Because the Burtynsky landscapes are gorgeous and no one really denies that.

AA: Interesting that's the main thing you take out of Burtynsky's work. For me it's the way that humans alter the landscape, but you're talking more about aesthetics.

SM: (to Amanda) I could make the argument that yours is an aestheticized image. It's beautiful to look at, and it's about pattern and shape and texture and colour.

AA: To me photography is still about the product, so I'm going to take every bit of care in making the best product I can. And those are things that help.

SM: There's also a fair bit of Surrealism and theatricality and playfulness and the performative that factors into your work. Can you talk about that?

AA: I do like to think of it as a performance –the landscape I chose is a stage for my performance– but talking about Surrealism is more interesting because we use juxtaposition so much. As a Surrealist would use juxtaposition to make, say, a lobster phone, I think we are taking the juxtapositions that happen naturally in the world and highlighting them.

MK: (to Amanda) Now that I've seen one of your big prints –you can actually see your feet moving– I think that immediately implies some sort of performance. Whereas to me you were previously invisible, now you're visible.

AA: I'm invisible at first, and then you start to construct in your mind the way that this image was put together.

SM: (to Mark) It's curious you would point that out because of the direction your work is moving in. Not necessarily in this body of work, but in the body of work that has fed off of this, you incorporate elements of yourself.

MK: It's all a big test. As soon as you introduce a figure, you change something. I like imagining that there's someone there –that objects are belongings of some sort– rather than actually having someone there. There's a lot of work done right now with people trying to tell an entire story in one frame and I don't think it's overly successful. I think you need more than that.

SM: (to Amanda) In some of your work you're very present in those performances. I'm thinking about the body of work in which you're nude in your surroundings.

AA: I made that work prior to this series. It was about considering the process behind the piece, that's why I included myself there. I included myself nude because I wanted to make reference to Renaissance paintings. That and there's

always the joke that every photographer does one nude project (laughs). Here I was very welcome to having a bit of my hands and feet present in the image because it did exactly what I wanted it to do in a more sophisticated way. We grow.

SM: If you had a choice, would you be there?

AA: (laughs) I enjoy fragments of my body being there. Don't get me wrong, I fully enjoyed doing the nude project. I learned a lot from those past two series and I really combined them in this series.

SM: (to Amanda) You expressly refer to yourself as a visual artist as opposed to a photographer. In what way is it important that they're photographs?

AA: If this was a performance piece, you'd be watching a video or you would be coming out into the woods and watching me. I do believe art is about presenting it in the form that is best. These performances are made for the photograph: the audience is the camera. They don't exist as installations because the materials I work with are temporal. And it's not a performance because, as I said, it's about seeing it all at once in the image. These pieces are made to exist as photographs.

SM: (to Mark) If Amanda's work is about the images that result from performance, in what way are your photographs performative?

MK: They are not necessarily performative, but I like how there's a slice of time that they exist in. My images also exist in this realm that's only visible photographically. For a split second this scene occurs, then you record it and it's gone. In a way you can never actually see it before you see it on the film. Both of our projects have this subtext of speaking about the medium. I think there's a

performance in terms of lugging gear into the woods (laughs), but I don't think there's an implication of a performance going on. There is that setting of a stage, though.

SM: Using artificial lighting mimics product photography, fashion photography, something that's entirely outside the realm of the natural. It's about taking this thing that's already beautiful and making it more beautiful, whereas original landscapes were all about nature's splendor revealing itself to you.

MK: It's a re-interpreting of something. In a way, it's a comment on my own feelings towards the landscape. This is the way I think a dramatic landscape should look. It's also a comment on our expectations, on being disappointed when you see a landscape for the first time—

SM: The rainforest.

MK: The rainforest. Going to the rainforest and being disappointed is ridiculous. It's a comment, also, on patience: "I'm not going to wait for the right light, I'm going to make the right light, and I'm going to keep shooting it until it's perfect." Which is not really a natural concept.

SM: As with artists whose work is digital. You're both making false, idealized versions of something. It's about saying, "I'm going to pick and choose as to what I like and what I don't like, and what's aesthetically-pleasing to me." Put all of those things together and it's not real at all.

AA: For me it's important that I actually went into the scene and did it. Shooting film is another way to help people realize that happened. In my work there's also

a lot of trial and error: being unsure as to what's going to be on that piece of film. I like to shoot film because it allows me to welcome happy accidents.

SM: What's your relationship with nature now, given the kind of images you make and the amount of time you spend in solitude?

AA: The more time you spend with a space, a person, you're going to get to know them better. There was a big learning curve working in the dark, because my pieces are all shot at night. A landscape that you are familiar with during the day is a very different space at night. Being in a vulnerable state in a landscape really allows you to get connected with it, because you have to trust it.

MM: Carrying a large amount of equipment into the woods is a strange enough experience as it is, so for me it's about avoiding people, and when you do that it's just you and the landscape. Talking about the light, for me dusk is when I leave because it becomes this kind of unwelcoming place where I don't really seem to fit in any more. I take off because it's like going into your cellar at night: there's nobody there and you know it, but—

AA: That's a big thing: there's no one there and you know it. But is there someone there? There might be someone there.

SM: Given that you're both emerging artists, what do you think this is a jumping-off point for? What comes out of this?

MK: Every show is a learning experience. You want to have an interaction, a dialogue, to see what people are taking from what you're doing.

SM: How do you keep that fresh for yourself, and within the greater context? Landscape is not new. Altered landscapes are not new.

AA: I'm not going to use the word "landscape". I'm going to use the word "space". I see myself working with space for the rest of my career. What I get out of a landscape is the way I feel in that landscape.

MK: It may be over-done, but I don't think it's going anywhere. There's always going to be more to say. It's like people: portraits never get old.

AA: People change. The environment changes.

MK: I see myself continuing in landscape, expanding ideas.

SM: (to Mark) No portraits for you, then?

MK: Trees. Portraits of trees.