Stéphane Couturier

Biography

Endnotes

Essay by Olivia Lahs-Gonzales, Director, The Sheldon Art Galleries.
Stéphane Couturier investigates the aesthetic and psychological possibilities of the urban environment in cities that include his own, Paris, as well as Moscow, Seoul and San Diego, among others. This exhibition, presented in the Sheldon Art Galleries’ Bernoudy Gallery of Architecture features works from three series: Monuments, an investigation of the mausoleums of high-rise buildings found in Moscow and Seoul; Urban Archaeology, an exploration of what Couturier terms the “ghosts of the city,” and Landscaping, a rendering of expanding and newly-built suburban sprawl on the California border between Mexico and the United States. Each body of work remarks on the layers of daily life that are recorded, which have built or rebuilt using mediocre design and cheap materials, negate histories and engender placelessness, however the photographs of Monuments show in these variations that the individuality of humanity cannot be erased.

Couturier’s use of large-format film which records minute detail, as well as monumental print sizes that invite the viewer into the scene before them, that subtle differences emerge. The uniform cities that are recorded, which cannot be erased. His photographic images that are arranged like maps of the city in flux are also a distillation of temporal and cerebral experiences. Paris, Dresden, Berlin and others were subjects of his investigations in Urban Archaeology. Each of these cities is loaded with its own distinct history involving dramatic change and rebirth: Paris reshaped through Haussmanization in the 19th century; the bombing and rebuilding of Dresden during and after World War II; and post-wall Berlin’s Mitte (previously no-man’s-land and East Berlin), recreated as a dense web of new high-rise construction that glorifies commerce. As a resident of one city (Paris), and a visitor to the others, Couturier gives us layered images that confute experience, expectations and presumptions. His particular vision of Parisian construction sites is that of an inhabitant who brings to the scene the full weight of historical reference, elements of change and art-historical tenets such as modernism’s embrace of the everyday as beautiful, post-modernism’s deconstruction of these same experiences, and the anamorphosis that constitutes today’s experiences and experiences of the urban fabric. In cities, the skeletons of new structures are, clothed and inhabited, and the spaces that they occupy are experienced in new ways by passers-by who each bring to the scene their own personal histories. In archaeological exploration, the past is uncovered to be re-experienced, studied and speculated on in a new context and time. Inviting similar scrutiny (facilitated by Couturier’s use of a large-format camera which records minute detail, as well as monumental print sizes that invite the viewer into the scene), Couturier’s Urban Archaeologies are presented like maps of places in non-hierarchical compositions which allow the viewer entry from many places.

Couturier’s Landscaping series, begun in 2001, shows a previously untouched environment and the San Diego–Tijuana border as it is about to explode into sub-urbanization through monumental feats of “landscaping.” In these renderings of the landscape under development, Couturier also flattens elements, creating an image that is a reminder of Californian artist Richard Misrach’s gymnastic paintings of San Francisco-area hillscapes. His photographs of the shifting California range also lay bare the dichotomy that exists between the public desire for a natural home setting and the sanitized version that is ultimately constructed. In Proctor Valley, for example, two working tracts are sprouted by developers with artificial grass “grazes.” Partitioned for individual housing, the scene provides an ironic pastoral continuance within the scrub by hills of the California desert. Several works from Landscaping are presented as diptychs or polyptychs in which Couturier flattens and varies viewpoint or the order in which the individual images are arranged to underscore the uniformity of the suburban environment.

Each of these projects provides us with a new way to consider the state of land and city spaces and how they function (or could function) in a changing post-industrial world. Couturier, who by trade and out of necessity has also practiced architectural photography (a genre which glorifies and objectifies buildings by presenting a view no deeper than its skin or facade), endorses these commercial ideologies in his personal work and instead provides us with a way to experience the city and other populated spaces as “organic living organisms.” Rich with histories, futures and possibilities for our own stories and associations.

— Kevin Lynch, The Image of the City

In the flattened images of Monuments, Couturier concentrates on the facades of modern high-rise buildings found in Moscow and Seoul, providing on the surface a composition of line, form and color relationships. It is only when the viewer begins to scan these surfaces (made easier by Couturier’s use of large-format film which records detail and monumental print sizes that invite the viewer into the scene before them), that subtle differences emerge. The uniform cities that are recorded, which have been built or rebuilt using mediocre design and cheap materials, negate histories and engender placelessness, however the photographs of Monuments show in these variations that the individuality of humanity cannot be erased.

In a series of photographs begun in 1994, Couturier turns his camera to sites of construction and change, creating large-scale photographs of what he has termed the “Urban Archaeology” of cities. In these often tightly packed photographs like Beuthstrasse, 1994, for example, he uses a small lens aperture to bring together foreground, middle and background of the city in flux, providing on the surface the amalgam that constitutes today’s experiences and experiences of the urban fabric. In cities, the skeletons of new structures are, clothed and inhabited, and the spaces that they occupy are experienced in new ways by passers-by who each bring to the scene their own personal histories. In archaeological exploration, the past is uncovered to be re-experienced, studied and speculated on in a new context and time. Inviting similar scrutiny (facilitated by Couturier’s use of a large-format camera which records minute detail, as well as monumental print sizes that invite the viewer into the scene), Couturier’s Urban Archaeologies are presented like maps of places in non-hierarchical compositions which allow the viewer entry from many places.

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