

The Leyre delta

Since the early eighties, DATAR has commissioned artists to photograph the country's various regions. Sabine Delcour's work shows how she takes possession of a territory, invests it, understands it and, of course, reveals her personal vision of it. What is the impact of man on his environment? How does he build a relationship with his surrounding?

During a 2002 trip to Japan, Sabine Delcour photographed houses under construction, that were viewed as expressions of happiness. She placed her 4 x 5 in. camera at ground level to shoot the empty structures and had local people answer a questionnaire. She thus contrived to build up personal case-histories based on audio and visual landscapes.

While it was easy to walk in the streets of Japan, the muddy undergrowths and the boggy soil of the Leyre delta made each picture taken a tough expedition. In this physical confrontation with a hostile environment, the camera, though cumbersome, becomes the medium for the photographer to apprehend her territory and foresee a possible image.

Given Sabine Delcour's interest in a territory and the way she uses her camera with a preference for frontal approach in addition to the oral participation of local people, one might expect her pictures to be more documents. On the contrary her work rejects precision, accuracy, formalism and the principle of analogy which Walker Evans or Bernd and Hilla Becher so strongly advocate.

Systematically and with the strictest discipline she determines a device which imposes a formal frame to the pictures, the outline of the negative. So doing, she doesn't try, as Henri Cartier-Bresson did, to refuse re-framing; Instead she wishes to make clear the relation her pictures have with reality: they result from a technical construction, from a fixed angle of vision, from a personal view of a particular site at a particular moment.

Thus she insists on the fact that photography is, at best, only an ersatz of reality and, as Berthold Brecht suggested, it can never reproduce the sensations and impressions one has experienced. Sabine Delcour breaks with the concept of analogy that confirms photography as the representation of reality.

At the same time, Sabine Delcour chooses to work at the very center of the picture, insisting on the soft-focus effect which, for a great part, determines its composition. In her series of Japanese houses, blurring was already emphasized as the camera, placed at ground level, drew the eye from the bottom to the top of the picture, from the ground to the house, from abstraction to reality.

In her pictures of the Leyre delta, she stresses the importance of the blurring effect and its possibilities. Thus she refuses the aesthetical uniformity imposed by clarity, and, once more, shows how the artists can, at will, distort the illusion of reality. Such "unsteadiness" reminds us of the "mistakes" or "failures" of 19th century photographs, of Robert Frank's and Bernard Plossu's snapshots. While Frank's blurriness was due to speed, impatience and the bustle of urban life, and Plossu's to a certain nonchalance and travel idealization, it has enabled both to infuse their personal experience into a subjective picture.

In Sabine Delcour's case this experience isn't due to an accident, a movement or the wish to record a scene at any price but from a deliberate technical and formal purpose. Tilting her camera at a precise angle, she can determine the point where the image will be the clearest. As some painters do, she uses it as a living body that can be handled so as to produce the required effect.

The passage from blurring effect to clarity is made possible thanks to the lines of vision formed by lanes, channels and canals, so many minute elements that dot the photos, attest to the diversity of the territory and allow the eye to roam out of range towards somewhere unknown. Sabine Delcour's territory is a geographic space as much as a possible dream of intimate perception and fiction.