

MISSING

I

To see with the naked eye the actual perspective of two landscapes she finds in two photographs, one familiar the other forgotten, is to be suspended at a particular point between two mountains, the valley floor far below. Torn between familiarity and estrangement, fragmented in memory, filtered through time and technology: all obstacles in the search for a view, but also openings through which to reframe a photograph within the frame of a canvas.

II

For those of us who weren't born here, nor remember the first time we came, the point at which Lebanon became familiar is increasingly difficult to grasp. The landscape itself is built up in our minds as much through inherited as actual memory. We rely on our family's intimate knowledge of their place of origin, our own visits there, and the snapshots we take. Seeping into each other, this cocktail of memories makes those of us poised precariously between familiarity and estrangement experience a gentle sort of vertigo. Gentle perhaps because the vista is beautiful—we're not dealing with the trauma associated with 'postmemory'. And beautiful partly because the landscape, or that familiar image of it, has been built over years of childhood stories, afternoon visits, evening strolls and finally, perhaps, assimilated into one's own aesthetic appreciation.

The thinking surrounding 'postmemory' could probably accommodate us.[†] There was a traumatic event, in our case the Lebanese wars. And we were born on their cusp, both geographically and chronologically.

[†]Marianne Hirsch would class us in generation 1.5, whom she calls 'child survivors,' those engaged in lengthy discussions with each other on the presence of that past, and a melancholy search for its traces, rather than an overarching truth about 'what happened'. See Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Post-memory" in *Poetics Today* 29:1 (Spring 2008), p. 119.

But to consider Genadry's mountain views in terms of postmemory is also to imply that they are screen images for an underlying trauma. This isn't the case. Postmemory necessarily fixes on the disjointedness between a traumatic event and memory, while in Genadry's work, geographical and temporal displacement play a greater role.

The repeated return to a view, followed by the anti-theoretical focus on the unfamiliar perspective, relates to a tension between familiarity and estrangement that I find recognisably diasporic. What I mean by diasporic is a certain paradoxical relationship to a place that Genadry reveals in her process: the repeated photographing of a vista builds her intimacy with it, and yet the photograph upon which she chooses to base her painting bears a perspective that renders the place unrecognisable. We remain suspended.

III

Daniele Genadry finds a pile of snapshots, most of which depict a mountain she's been photographing repeatedly for the last decade. Among the familiar view from her grandmother's house in Kartaba is an image she can't place. She recognises the old camera she must have used to take the photographs, so she knows that it had been taken before a particular date.

In order to remember the image she doesn't recognise, she asks her mother to look at the pictures. Together, they decide that the photographs, taken with her old camera and its disconcerting zoom, must have come from a particular trip.

Both mother and zoom play strangely parallel roles: they help her examine a landscape more closely, to become more familiar with it, while also revealing, the closer she looks, the more she is told, its

unfamiliarity; both the technology and her mother mediate her perception of the view. They render, counterintuitively, a particular perspective less graspable, less the result of her own agency.

She returns in an attempt to rediscover the view. The act of searching for a missing perspective, formed at the juncture of time and technology, is an impossible task. Like the blot of recently-built houses on the mountainside, the passing of time builds a barrier, blocking off her ability to find the original perspective, to re-enact the original act of photographing. With the absence of any memory of taking the photograph, with only a vague inkling of certain circumstances and a trace of the perspective shown in the image, she is left with a tangible sense of absence, of the missing view.

IV

Etel Adnan, a painter and poet born and raised in Lebanon, but who joined the ranks of its diaspora, repeatedly paints Mount Tamalpais, a view that rises up near her home in California. She often does so from memory, and in her small canvases, the mountain “summoned and summarised,” to use Simone Fattal’s meticulous phrase, can’t help but also evoke other mountains she left behind.[†] That’s to say, there is something implicitly diasporic about her paintings.

There’s a difference, however, between the diasporic in the work of Adnan and Genadry. Adnan paints from her own memory, and it is because of this that she is able to summarise the mountain, while also summoning up the evocations of other mountainscapes from her past. Genadry, on the other hand, paints from photographs. And her memory of the landscape is fragmented, constantly infiltrated by her experiences of its representation, by images formed at the juncture between the private and public spheres.

[†]Simone Fattal, “On Perception: Etel Adnan’s Visual Art” in *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist* ed. Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh (North Carolina: Macfarland & Co, 2002), p. 90

The act of sketching, then painting the two landscapes, and finally turning them into installations, is an attempt to fix the fleetingness of her glance, while acknowledging its ephemeral nature. There's an underlying sense of doubt to the approach – Genadry does not claim to offer the definitive perspective of the mountain. The view inclines to the peripheral over the frontal, to the modest insistence that while the installations create an absorptive experience, the mountain itself cannot be consumed whole by viewer or artist.

On first hearing the title, *Missing Real*, I was tempted to ask: 'e' or 'a'?[†] And the point of the question, which I think Genadry tempts us to ask, is perhaps to position herself in another generational relationship, this time with a group of artists that are sometimes termed the 'post-civil war generation.' The fact that she would emphatically answer: 'real, as in reality' does little to diminish the impression that there is also a critique (or at least a contrast) implicit in the title.

Some artists from this 'post-civil war generation' propose that the film reel itself, that images themselves, can be potentially redemptive sites for memory. The images are missing, and with their resurrection, memory returns. This reflects a conception of time that leaves us stranded in an extended and insurmountable present, littered with the ruins of the past (and of futures past), ruins they attempt to resurrect through their artistic practice.[‡]

This sort of affirmation is entirely absent from Genadry's work and process. A key reason for this absence is her entirely different conception of temporality. For her, temporality, our experience of passing time, is also out of joint, to use Hamlet's haunting phrase, with history, time's progress in a social setting. But the act of painting attempts to bring together the various layers of this out-of-jointness onto a single plane; in Genadry's paint-

[†]See also 'Interview' by Jennilie Brewster, Genadry's studio, Sunset Park, Brooklyn, 5/12/2015

[‡]See, for example, the *Lasting Images* project by Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas. I am reliant here on David Scott's beautiful study *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (London: Duke University Press, 2014).

ings the presence of the past, the presence of the present, and the presence of the future are layered both in her process and on the surface of the image.[†] The presence of the past is embodied in the source photograph from which she paints – and which her investigation confirms is irrefutably past, impossible to re-enact, re-stage, or resurrect. The presence of the present arises in her sketches, the skeletons of her paintings, that digest place and past in order to translate them for the present. And it's the saturated block of colour often obscuring the surface of her paintings, undermining their photo-realism, that reveals the presence of the future. The bleach of colour: the smear of houses blocking her view, the fleeting blurred glance through the car window – a future present but beyond one's grasp. It is reminiscent of Gerhard Richter, who also probes painting's complex relationship with photography, and who defaces his paintings with a blur to insist on their objectness, on the different reality a painting can propose in a photographic age.

Despite this temporal layering, the title *Missing Real* indicates a humble sort of rejection that her process is comprehensive: it's an insistence that an unavoidable lacuna remains. Just as, in the landscapes she selects, joining familiar and unfamiliar perspectives does not attempt to summarise the mountain range in an installation, so too does the layering of temporalities paradoxically leave us with a 'missing real,' suspended between familiarity and estrangement in an impossible landscape.

[†]David Scott, op cit.

Our concern with history is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.

—WG Sebald, *Austerlitz*