

In an essay entitled *Experience* (1844), the American philosopher R.W. Emerson defined experience as the capacity to relate to the objects of the world. But whether the object draws away as we get closer, or whether it plays with us by multiplying its forms, experience flees like an «innavigable sea» that «washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with».

What the lonely sea and the grandiose mountain have in common is, right from the start, their ineffable constancy. They have always been there: since childhood, we have gazed at them, worried about them, marvelled at them, feared them. Each in turn? Almost certainly not. These emotions often appear simultaneously, reflecting how we project on two such primeval forms whose other common feature is that they are bigger than us. The mountain is a colossal affect to which the sea provides its horizontal response, so much so that the photographer has to deal as much with the actual enormity of the landscape as with the possible flood of emotions.

Like Sorger, the character in *Slow Homecoming*, Nadim Asfar, after «months... spent observing this wilderness, learning (approximately) its forms and their genesis... made it his own private domain»¹. «Approximately» is used here not in the sense of “roughly,” but, rather, of greater or lesser proximity. In the video *Territorial Waters*, the artist says he has «come back to film an image». Is this image the gradual softening of the mountain peaks as the boat draws away from the homeland? The eddies of water the boat leaves in its wake? Or the rocky mass whose jagged outline cuts across the horizon more and more sharply as the boat draws closer to the Lebanese coast? Because it belongs to the bottomless safe that is memory, the image is held somewhere in this swaying motion between leaving and returning, with the camera adjusting to the varying distances.

At first, the mountain is a nocturnal glow — witness to an unappeasable war — that the artist, at around the age of 11, saw from the window of his bedroom in his family house in Beirut. The house, built on the hillside, was set slightly behind two detached buildings. The birth of a sense of disquiet is, therefore, inseparable from the awakening of a sense of framing, from which today’s photographs carry the mark. The layout of the images in «multiples» reconstructs the landscape according to curves, continual or broken lines, a flattening of perspective over which our eyes tend to slide horizontally, as though brushing over the back of a sleeping animal. The isolated photographs or «canvases», meanwhile, transmit a more tactile sensation: the viewer feels the full force of the harsh rock face, the aridity of those inaccessible peaks or, alternately, the stifling tangle of vegetation.

¹ Peter Handke, *Slow Homecoming*, translated from the German by Ralph Manheim, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985.

Where I end and you begin, such is the experience of the mountain, what we could call here, literally speaking, its *approach*, that search both meticulous and gentle, full of respect for the landscape, which leads the artist in his quest for that which, of its own choice, may «be crawling through mountainous veins», as Rilke so beautifully put it. Each shot, each composition, denotes a search for limits, inevitably flexible, between the photographer and his subject; inside the images themselves, it is the colours that trace the lines — but also the balance — between what is rock, sky, or vegetation. Sometimes, as in the mountain entitled *Rashaya Sheik*, mist blurs the relief to the point that colour seems to dilute into black and white. But whether night is falling or the day is dawning, the landscape here is never garrulous or restrictive: it is a discreet invitation to the viewer, like a breath or murmur, to make his own voyage of discovery, according to what the pictures awaken in him of memories, dreams and desires.

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