

Cristian Rusu

Fear Itself

January 30–February 20, 2009

Opening: January 30, 18–21 h

At first glance, Cristian Rusu's project for Plan B Cluj seems to equivocate about what might make the contemporary landscape, or engage in an extended understatement about our relation to nature, with Caspar David Friedrich as explicit model and with an impeccably agnostic disposition. Nature is neither located at the fringes of the shrinking city, nor interspersed with failed utopian urbanism, nor is it construed as site of allegorical damnation or as ecological safe haven. The photographs and architectural model on show point insistently to an 'elsewhere' of ethical disengagement: nature is numbing isolation, a cut through the social tissue. But as the scale of the project methodically expands, the works articulate a reflection on the positions, relations and attitudes that compose landscape, anxiety and the phenomenology of our 'elsewhere', the ways in which nature and non-nature contaminate each other. Ideology emerges as a ghostly counterpart to the mountain, the predominant figure of the artist's project, while metaphors of solitary ascension connect to the escalations of Modernism. The project effectively triangulates the sublime, nature and architecture, looking at the viscous antistubstance that pours through and around the blocks of stone erected by modernity and holds them together. Opacity infiltrates these images, otherwise so radiantly transparent they border on the epiphanic, while the flash photographs of the fog visualize a tight grid of blind spots, a screen of obstacles at the core of any formulation of communality.

Between the iconography of a National Geographic documentary that lost its focus and the interwoven questions about our relation to the sublime, the artist's operation is to intensify attributes. To push the pedal of epithets and look at how the extremes begin to communicate, at how the mountain, the temple, the climb and the undercurrent of heroism, the geometric perfection of the sunset against the imposing crest play out against each other and compose an ambiguous puzzle. Everything is heightened, accelerated; the scenes become quasi-mythological, quasi-religious, a supplementary charge that the project brilliantly re-conceptualizes as their political significance. It constructs a background against which political antagonism could be projected, a mode of enunciation where propaganda has not identified the adversary, not just yet. This is a study of the inseparability of landscape and ideology, or of the politicization of the sublime we inherited from the 20th century.

The symmetry that structures the project invites irregularities to develop at its edges: the somatic reflexes of the social body, our need to project totality when its very possibility has been disproved.

There is something persistently invisible to these images, a withdrawn presence they orchestrate in response to a desire for an all-encompassing sense of order in the world, to our aesthetic relationship to authority. While the experiences that test the limits of our imagination, that contradict or crush reason and could instill overwhelming terror abound, we lack Kant's 'safe place', the situation of security from where the spectacle of the thunderstorm, be it natural or political, is surpassed by the sudden intensification of our moral engagement, by a feeling of infinite superiority to that which threatens to destroy us. The artist's notion of the sublime is traversed by paradox, as is our relationship to crumbling icons and projections of totality.

Mihnea Mircan

Galeria Plan B Cluj
Str. Albert Einstein 14 . 400045 Cluj Romania
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www.plan-b.ro