

The abandoned stage.

Sibylle Omlin: the series *Time and Again* by Flavio Micheli

In the mid-19th century when Charles Dickens went on his 'Grand Tour' to Italy, he left a volume of travel notes which appeared under the title 'Pictures from Italy', in 1844. In this, he describes the colourful street scenes and customs of the people in the Italian cities, in the surroundings of the crumbling ruins and the slow rhythm of life in the south, among other things. What Charles Dickens noticed most of all was the so-called picturesqueness. This phenomenon that travel literature has determined since the 19th century builds its aesthetic appeal through inharmoniousness, especially inharmoniousness between what seems familiar and what lies on the edge of it.

The art historian Philip Ursprung has, in turn, identified architectural ensembles as picturesque, when existing and rapidly constructed buildings are found under development and threatened by demolition like two sides of a coin next to each other, and because the look of the picturesqueness seeks the combination of the sublime and the ugly. 1

It is mainly those combinations which, time and again, are of interest to the artist Flavio Micheli for his series. This latter shows landscape shots from the Mediterranean region, with pictures of situations in Italian cities and everyday moments closely knitted together, especially through the eyes of the traveller, the wanderer and the holidaymaker who is ready to see things from a new focus. Flavio Micheli wrote in an email to me:

«The series *Time and Again* shows the places I have registered emotionally. The photos were taken over a large period of time and deal with subjects of travel, from holidays and everyday life. Their selection was not planned, but rather determined by random factors. The places shown in the photos have an almost magical charge on me because they wield a barely conscious charisma.»²

The magic arises in turn when viewing these images, as the locations photographed seem familiar but also strangely alien, because hardly a human being can be seen in these pictures. A table shows 14:38; on the deserted stage water collects after the summer rains. The daily photograph displays, in the picture, furniture with creases from being sat on or dented sofa cushions.

In one instance, there is a foot that juts in the picture out on a cliff, so disconnected from the body, as if the leg has been severed. In another instance, there is a dog in the bushes, pointing to his absent owner. Then, a group of people appear under umbrellas in a sparse forest with their backs to the viewer. The urban landscapes carry the full mark of human intervention; most notable is the architecture or urban setting of the place that has been created by man. In one image, it is a pedestal, which speaks of ancient antiquities, while another picture in turn heralds a carved inscription on a marble wall on the victories and struggles of recent past, a conflictual time. A quarry or an olive tree propped up with cement bricks tell of the unexcited interaction between man and nature elsewhere.

The distance that the photographer puts between the subject and the viewer is thus characterized by a certain time reverie, which also expresses itself in the colouring of the photographs. Hand-colourized photos thus point out the aesthetics of 19th century photography in the early days of the medium, as particularly used for documentation of ruins and antiquities, and beautiful postcard images. The picturesqueness that the medium of that time also brought to indwell in compositional questions, was shifted to the beginning of the 21st century by Flavio Micheli. Thus Micheli's images always cling to a certain nostalgia in the Proustian sense of a search for a past moment that can only be evoked through the art of remembering again.

Colouration probably creates the opportunity for such a mnemonic technique. Watercolours are directly applied to the small-sized black and white prints. In this scope, the artist can apply the colouration in the necessary specific manner on the medium. The inherent properties of watercolours also allow technology-inherent randomness. What's more, they mingle with the medial characteristics of photography: the flow of the water affects the ratio of pigment to the grain of the photo, stains or spots may emerge, etc.. Some images require a precise redrawing or readjustment of the subject, while others entice the artist into an almost expressive engagement. Subsequently the edited image is rescanned in high resolution to adjust the size of the format of the subject accordingly.

Flavio Micheli also practises the principle of medial overlay using digital means. In older photo series like Solfatara and the Botanikus, the artist has worked with digital colourations; individual images were even supplemented with digital offset parts. The series is dedicated to Solfatara, the bubbling, hissing, foul-smelling volcanic craters. These craters have fascinated the artist because they are places where the Earth's prehistory and the present coexist. In the Botanikus-series, botanical testing facilities in greenhouses are the focal point where plants with heat lamps and special climate impersonators are cross-bred and cloned. The botanical experiment as a kind of Mabusescher witch's kitchen. Both series offer places in which the artist has condensed scenarios with digital installations and colour manipulation.

The so-generated medial hyper-artificiality is perhaps equated with what was initially described as the picturesque. The photographic overlay between a photorealistic subject and hand colouration generates that strangeness which we unanimously perceive as timeless and an artificial import. The exhibition of this simultaneity in the series Time and Again makes up the core of Flavio Micheli's artistic search in itself, after the time.

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