

# LANDSCAPES OF THE SOUL

*di Roberto Mutti*

A man with a hat and four women in cloaks and umbrellas (presumably to keep away the water from the waterfalls nearby), unaware of what is happening, are photographed from behind. The American photographer who took the photograph, Platt D. Babbitt, was one of the first people to realise photography had great commercial possibilities. Babbitt used to put his cumbersome camera under a sheet and when tourists came up – which they often did, as he was by the Niagara Falls – he photographed them without their knowledge and later sold the photographs to them. That 1853 daguerreotype taken as a souvenir, now, after many years, gains a very different meaning and deserves a detailed analysis.

The photographer, “forced” not to have his subjects facing him (as they would have been in a traditional group portrait), is looking in the same direction as his subjects and sees what they see. Observers are reminded of the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, painted thirty five years earlier, although this photographic image has none of the romantic unrest and torment of Caspar David Friedrich’s painting. If anything, the awe felt by the man and the four women admiring an unsettlingly beautiful view can be perceived in the photograph.

A particular mental process is required to fully understand this. Imagine looking beyond the subjects in the foreground and concentrate your attention on the background. You will realise the landscape is far less accurate and with fewer details (in other words, far less realistic) than you would have imagined. The long exposure times required to obtain a daguerreotype have made the surface of the water far too fluid and the slight out-of-focus effect caused by the opening of the diaphragm has increased the picture’s poetic atmosphere. The technology limitations of the time have accidentally revealed a hidden aspect of landscape photography of which we became fully aware only many years later.

Realistically spectacular images have a strange characteristic – they are pleasant to look at but they do not cause the pain of perturbing imaginings, which is a distinguishing feature of truly important photographs. You have the feeling that the dominant aspect is the beauty of the landscape, which the photographer has documented simply using his technical skills. This is true for stock images and for the pictures used to create postcards, the front covers of exercise books and tourist brochures, which are beautiful but not seductive, pleasant but not intriguing. They are agreeable to look at but do not lead to the path coded by Henri Cartier-Bresson, which involved the eye, mind and heart in equal measure.

Moving up to the next level, fine art photography, style signs are evident. Whether this can be seen in the strongly prevailing trend of recognisable landscape or in that of its conceptual transfiguration is not important, and the two trends do not necessarily diverge. This is confirmed by artists such as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston or Minor White (just to mention a few of the most famous), who are able to read the landscape through a true naturalistic philosophical vision that was able to capture reality and go beyond it, sometimes extending into abstraction. Observing the landscape as if it were an external objective element is different from considering it a mirror of one's feelings and emotions (and possibly even one's vision of the world). This second path leads to extraordinary works such as "Equivalent", in which Alfred Stieglitz tackles clouds, to the geometrical compositions by Franco Fontana, who loves to say that "what you see does not exist, what you photograph does", to Edward Burtynsky's disturbing landscapes, to the essential cleanliness of the world delicately interpreted by Yamamoto Masao, to the involving and full-bodied vision with which Mario Giacomelli creates an interior dialogue between the folds in the skin of a peasant's hands and the cuts in the farmed land, between the light that crosses the sky and flashes from the sea.

We believe this long introduction was essential (naturally excluding any possible comparisons) to insert the new research work recently carried out by Rossella Pezzino de Geronimo in a wider aesthetic and cultural direction that justifies and ennobles it. If we are before what she herself calls "landscapes of the soul", it is because this is where the interior search that began a long time ago has arrived. The style choices and results are very far from the ones mentioned here.

The immediate language of reporting – which at the time was Rossella's style – was the result of the need to sublimate her pain when comparing it with the pain of other women who suffered in distant lands in which life is far more difficult. Yet that was a first step, although it soon turned out to be incapable of satisfying the deeper and more acute emotions stirring in the artist's soul. A more radical operation was required. This meant moving the prospective vision until the world was not considered as it objectively appeared but as a mirror that could preserve elements of reality and return them loaded with the intensity of the emotions felt. At first, the photographer focused on details that, isolated from their context, ended up taking on a new meaning, partly because they implied a deliberate breaking of matter. Landscape, given substance by descriptive realism until it became a kind of abstraction, was linked to the increasing awareness that this process exists only as much as the will of the subject allows it.

All this is not detached from an amazingly beautiful project that Rossella has been working on for years. "Le stanze in fiore" [rooms in bloom] is a seven-hectare garden in which there is a path made of intertwined areas with alternating tropical and Mediterranean plants, Oriental hints and corners with spontaneous beauty. To walk

through it, stop in it, design it and at the same investigate it have in this way become a real interior search exercise that unavoidably affected the artist's work and style.

The next step – going from fragmented details to complete landscape de-structuring – is recent and was triggered during a journey that had a cathartic effect, pushing the artist in the direction of a new, deeper and more authentic vision. Great deserts, lagoons, regions in which water and earth dialogue with one another fighting over space thus became the dimension in which creativity found its new *raison d'être*. The landscape is not seen as such any more but as a landscape of the soul, a reflection of the feelings it can arouse. The residual suffering found in the titles of certain works (“Strazio” [torment], “Incubi” [nightmares], “Paure” [fears]) changes and gradually grows towards interior liberation, which moves from “Respiro” [breath] and “Leggerezza” [lightness] and finally leads towards the “Energia esplosiva” [explosive energy] that marks the achievement of interior freedom. Observers are overwhelmed in a landscape devoid of human presence, which is the very reason it seems boundless, as there are no parameters for defining limits. They feel slightly bewildered at becoming lost in the gentle ripples on the water and its golden lights, which are the source of pleasant feeling of serenity.

Rossella's holograms followed a parallel evolution. If previously they developed their dynamics in structures that preserved the sense of wonder as if they were in a chest, now they too seem to stretch out, resting on essential shelves and provoking observers into dynamic interaction. Before these three-dimensional works that show imaginative scenarios – spheres, particles, moving masses that evoke the grandiose transformations of the universe – we all feel a deep sense of wonder. It may well be the same feeling that, so many years ago, those tourists and the man photographing them felt as they looked at the Niagara Falls, as they heard from afar the sound of the water in perfect syntony with their excited hearts.