

Maartje van den Heuvel

BLANK

With Open Senses is the title of a book by Ton Lemaire, a Dutch cultural anthropologist and cultural philosopher whose work Awoiska van der Molen admires. In 1970 Lemaire published *Philosophy of the Landscape**, which has appeared in many revised editions over the decades since. In that book he writes about the relationship between Westerners and their landscape, about its expression and its development since the Renaissance in landscape art, and how both the relationship itself and its representation reached a crisis in our own time. In *With Open Senses*, a philosophy book published in 2002 that has literary and poetic aspects to it, Lemaire appeals for a new way of approaching landscape in which nature is received with open senses. That is exactly what Awoiska van der Molen does.

Van der Molen visits places on earth that touch her. She does not rely upon specific geographical features or socio-economic circumstances. Rather she 'gauges', by means of the senses, the genius loci or spirit of the place, travelling to places to which she intuitively feels drawn. Then, in that landscape, she seeks silence, allowing the landscape to operate upon her and submitting to it. By so doing she creates encounters between her own character and that of the place.

Her earlier work featured such rencontres de caractère as well, but those were meetings with people. Even before graduating from the Minerva art academy in Groningen, she created portraits of charismatic women she met in the streets of Manhattan, NY. Then her attention shifted to people who were less concerned about keeping up appearances and were approachable in the essence of their being. She found and photographed them from 2000 to 2004. She was not concerned about the identity or specific circumstances of these people, who remained anonymous. What concerned her above all was how, through the way in which they presented themselves, they revealed their inner being.

Then Van der Molen began focusing that same intuitive approach on places in the urban environment. She photographed anonymous buildings at the edge of the city, which she experienced as powerful silent beings. This resulted in photographs of extraordinary suspense. Since 2009 Van der Molen has concentrated on the natural world. She seeks out diverse places, all the way from Japan or Norway to Crete. In this landscape work, the specific identity of the places in her final

photographs is again irrelevant. Van der Molen is interested in the 'being' of the landscape and the experience of it.

Awoiska van der Molen's interest in landscape does not exist in a vacuum. An increasing interest in landscape can be seen in the work of photographers internationally since the 1970s. Many refer back to the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, in 1975, which featured the work of photographers including Bernd and Hilla Becher, Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz and Stephen Shore. It was an exhibition that showed human influence on the American landscape. A sign of the times, it helped to give a new impetus to landscape photography. In the 1980s and 1990s, German photographers of the Düsseldorf School contributed to renewed interest in landscape among photographers. Many people see this revived interest as a reaction to the global ecological crisis. There is even a specific school of thought in the humanities, known as ecocriticism, which focuses on the countless expressions in the literature, poetry and art of recent decades that involve an engagement with the ecological dimension of our surroundings. Often a critical attitude is in evidence.

Van der Molens work is certainly not a critical indictment, however, denouncing specific abuses. The precise location of the landscape photographed remains unspecified and it is never clear whether there is actually any ecological issue. Nor can her photography of remote places be interpreted as a protest against the commotion of life in the city. Her approach stands for an attitude to nature that can best be described as 'sensual'.

Whereas critical forms of photography often portray and give a central place to the way humans gain the upper hand over nature and thereby bring about destruction and pollution, in her work Awoiska van der Molen allows nature to gain the upper hand once more and to be magnificent. She seeks landscapes in which nature is dominant, or – as she puts it – where she can allow herself to be 'absorbed, devoured, but also protected' by the landscape. She will make a photograph at a place where she has reached a state of being in which the boundary between herself and her surroundings seems to blur. She does not separate herself from urban areas as a protest, but the fact that the places she seeks out are isolated helps her to achieve that state. She then makes her photograph, and in the finished work she allows the character of the landscape to speak for itself as far as possible.

Her sensitivity to the 'material' of nature comes through in the material execution of her final prints. While digitalization has come to predominate in photography as a whole, Van der Molen continues

to develop silver gelatine prints by hand. Again this is not a matter of protesting against modern developments. For Van der Molen it has more to do with the exceptionally tactile nature, the feel, of the handmade baryta print, as the silver gelatine print is commonly known. She often produces her prints in large-scale format, sometimes of more than two metres. That such large tableau-style works do something to the viewer standing in front of them, was already clear to the painters of American geometric abstraction. Photographers of the Düsseldorf School who worked on a similar scale, such as Andreas Gursky and Candida Höfer, experimented with that impact. By using large formats and the special material of the baryta print, Van der Molen invites the viewer to experience her photos with a sensitivity similar to that which she feels herself when photographing her landscapes. Since she adds no descriptions or titles, she enables the viewer to experience them 'with open senses', or 'blank'.

* The books by Ton Lemaire appeared in Dutch; some of them have been translated into Chinese (China being that other culture with a strong tradition in landscape art) but strangely enough none of them have been translated into English. They would certainly be worth it.

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