

Hugh Martin – Time's Flow – Europa



An essay by John K. Grande

Hugh Martin captures something of the duality of the nature culture paradigm in a variety of ways. There is an overlapping of culture into nature and vice versa in these intriguing visual vignettes that says something about the multi-layered nature of old world civilizations. The traces are there in the architectural details, the motifs, the park spaces so carefully designed, and the random nature of the old walls, ruins, interventions of nature. As Martin says, “I want to punctuate the present through referencing a past that is the sum of many parts, cultural, geographical, art historical, and perhaps most of all, personal,” and there are traces of the aesthetics of photography here, of the traveler/photographer



Farm Building, Rhenen



House Beside Cemetery, Sarlat

visitor looking in and onto these scenes. Martin does not let the nuance decide his aesthetic. It's already there in the places he visits, and he uses colour with great subtlety. Darker tonalities, as well as varying depths bring an extra dimensionality to Martin's photography. Whether it's the weathered, umber coloured walls in *Temple de Garnison (cover image, 2004)*, or the ramshackle farm buildings in an indeterminate field whose ad hoc fencing is made of an eclectic mix of old metal in *Farm Building, Rhenen (2003)*, Martin's photography enters into a scene without transgressing the bounds of the local culture, or aesthetically confining it to a series of stereotypes.

As with his North American photographs, Martin captures European scenes with a natural sense of the landscape, its history and of the specificity of place. *House Beside Cemetery (2008)* does not set up the scene or compose. Instead the scene is much as we would experience it, with an undulating landscape of



Along a Stream, Carcassonne



Within a Park, Paris

stone walls, growth, the sporadic tree or two, erosion all around, and those typical arcane country house dwellings one finds in the most unexpected places all over Europe.

In a strange way, Martin's approach reminds us of the Flemish landscape painters in the past. Painting was the television of its time in the 16th and 17th centuries, and the more details to re-examine the better. The same goes with the visuality of Martin's photographs. He accepts the ambiguity of the scene as it presents itself photographically. The details in each photograph capture our attention: a cemetery gravestone in the lower left, a band of light green grassy field, then trees and shrubbery and stone houses.

Along a Stream, Carcassonne (2008) is a close up view that recedes. It is as if the scale of the trees were artificial. Yet the lighting is vivid, amplified even, almost unreal but very much there. *Within a Park, Paris* (2008) has an array of chairs that follow an orchestrated planned pathway while above, the mature



Two Chairs, Paris



Before a House, Sarlat

growth of trees is captured in such a way that we are not assessing or looking onto a landscape subject but instead we are within the scene, participating in the experience naturally. *Two Chairs, Jardin du Luxembourg, Paris* (2004) captures a human presence without anyone there. These two chairs sit slightly ajar in relation to each other with a flourish of green growth immediately around them. It is this naturalism of Martin's photography that enables us to read a scene less as object captured than as subjective experiential, a partial view that gives us all the clues to the totality of the experience.

Martin's urban views of villages, towns, and cities in Europe often move through and capture a middle depth. This is the urban world close up. In *Before a House, Sarlat* (2008), the street and the cube-like and angular nature of the houses in this village make for an expressionist and somehow mysterious image. While the earth colour tonalities remind us of Cézanne, this village view is a



Above a Street, Paris



Canal, Brugge

microcosm of details. The visuality is defined by the immediacy and accessibility of the scene, a scene where people have existed in relation to place, to nature, to culture for a very long time.

In *Above a Street, Paris* (2008), a scene worthy of Eugène Atget, colour contrasts with the whiteness of layered depths of houses and buildings that seem to go on forever. And there is a deep green framing of all this urbanity to the left embodied by nature and green growth. In *Canal, Brugge* (2005), the mixing of urban and rural, of nature and culture, is immediate. There is no separation between the two. History is close. Texture is close. And there is a density in this photograph that involves colour gradations seen in a canal that recedes, capturing mirror-like reflections of distant buildings. And there is the inevitable sky. The texture is omnipresent, of brick, of growth, of water, of layers of history, layers of nature. Other photographs are intimate and capture a scene that is reduced to a few visual variables as with



Cemetery, Arundel



Passage, Namur

Cemetery, Arundel (2005), *Passage, Namur* (2005) and *Doors, La Rochelle* (2004).

Boats in Canal, Haarlem (2008) engages us in a visual dialogue with nature in microcosm. There is a rhythm in the haphazard leaves that project into space and the dense foliage behind. A moment in time, an immense quietude, and an intensity of present—all this captured with an immediacy. As with Martin's more recent Canadian boreal forest photographs, there is no frame up, no artificial forced compositional effect. Photography, for Martin, becomes a language of recognition. *Entrance, Besançon* (2004) has a man-made wall in a grotto-like falaise of stone behind. Why is this here? Who made it? What is the context and history of the place? All these questions come to mind, particularly because of the ambiguity of the scene, its undulating abstract reality of vegetal growth, stone outcropping, and man-made traces inbuilt throughout. *Young Tree, Parc de St-*



Doors, La Rochelle



Boats in Canal, Haarlem

Cloud (2008) captures an orchestrated forest growth of trees, foliage, and chaotic interweave. We only catch a glimpse of the sky behind, and a small patch of field in front has one small “cultivated” tree surrounded by wire mesh to protect it from forest foragers. Martin’s approach is infused with a simple sensitivity, and a close to Romantic awe at nature’s ongoing and unrecorded, natural beauty.

Reflections, Lille (2005) is one of the strongest works from Martin’s European works, for he takes a chance, leaving the ambiguity of a small pond’s dark reflections of the nature that surrounds to be the centre of the composition. Martin has the confidence to move along a different path photographically. Light aligns the scene as a reflection of something impossible to define. The scene is partially undefined, as we would see it. Martin is less structural, a less conventional composer, and a very intuitive photographer who is aware of the continuity of nature’s



Entrance, Besançon



Young Tree, Parc de St-Cloud

ontological processes. A patch of light on a tree trunk in *Street, Ghent* (2007) becomes the point of focus in the entire photograph. A *No Exit* sign to the left becomes unremarkable, while the classic-styled building behind becomes mere visual embroidery. This photograph is about varying depths, and layers of intense light, and gradations of pale colour as well. It's the way we often see things... The same goes for the more abstract *Light on Wall, Namur* (2005). Here, light patches fall geometrically on an archaic mélange of brick, cement and stone. Light binds it all together with intensity. *Bench and Tree Roots, Namur* (2005) captures a flow of tree roots that has grown amid the human-built and natural landscape of a microcosm of old Europe. A solitary bench stands dead centre like a tape measure—a witness to time's flow.

John K. Grande



Reflections, Lille



Street, Ghent

John K. Grande is a leading writer and curator in the Art & Ecology field worldwide. He is the author of *Balance: Art and Nature* (Black Rose Books, 1994), *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* (State University of New York Press, 2004, www.sunypress.edu), and *Dialogues in Diversity: Art from Marginal to Mainstream* (Pari, Italy, 2007 www.paripublishing.com). John K. Grande co-curated *Eco-Art* with Pia Hovi-Assad and Peter Selz at the Pori Art Museum (2011) in Finland and is curator of *Earth Art 2012* at Van Dusen Gardens, Vancouver, British Columbia. Upcoming books include *Art Space & Ecology* (Shanghai, China, 2012), *Black Peat* (Print Factory, Ireland, 2012) and *Art in Nature* (Borim Press, Seoul, Korea, 2012). Hyperlink: www.grandescritique.com

Hugh Martin was born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1973. He attended Ryerson University in Toronto and graduated with a B.F.A. in Photography Studies. Martin has been honoured with the Gold Medal, Faculty of Communication & Design, Howard H. Kerr Memorial Scholarship, J.L. Beaton Award and Roloff Beny Foundation France Study Abroad Award through Ryerson University, as well as receiving a du Maurier Arts Council Grant. Martin's work has been published in magazines including *PREFIX PHOTO* and *The Walrus*, and is included in various private, public and corporate collections throughout North America including Canada Colors and Chemicals, Deloitte, Four Seasons Hotel, OCAD University, RBC Financial Group (New York), Ryerson University, Scotiabank and Trimark. Martin holds an academic staff position within the Photography Centre at OCAD University and maintains his studio in Hamilton where he lives.



Light on Wall, Namur



Bench and Tree Roots, Namur