

Isabelle Hayeur: Mediated Worlds - by Andrea Kunard

As much as the photograph functions as a surface for the depiction of subject matter, it also has depth for its ability to provoke memories and engage individuals to speak and share stories. Especially through this latter quality, photographs create community and a means to consolidate identity and values. Photographs are also multitemporal and multi-spatial; not simply of the moment, photographs move through time and space, gathering stories that inspire new audiences. The act of framing the world through the lens, or constructing it through digital manipulations, represents a desire to see reality as one would hope and imagine. Through the numerous actions that inform photography, image, photographer, subject and viewer are intricately intertwined and in constant process. The past, retained as a continued element, is not simply a statement of absence but an active state in the present with possibilities of future sharing and community.

This extended idea of the photographic medium accords with Isabelle Hayeur's artistic approach that focuses on the land and its uses. Like the photograph, the land is not merely defined by surface but retains memories and cultural values that interweave people and maintain communities. The land, as both surface and depth, is also multitemporal; its past is never completely absent but preserved as an element to be activated in the present. Like the photograph, the land is a result of the human capacity to construct and configure reality as a mixture of fact, fiction, practicality and desire. Moreover, the integration of human and natural elements, commonly termed landscape, is also incorporated into the very activities of photography which harmonizes human and natural elements through the aesthetic devices of framing and composition.

As photographs are subject to numerous interpretations and engagements, so is the land a composite of varied and sometimes conflicted memories, uses, and values. The ideal would be to respect multiplicity and embrace what Édouard Glissant calls "the Whole-World" vision of the universe. To appreciate the world totality in its "physical diversity and in the representations that it inspires," humans must occupy an ambiguous state, one that is simultaneously outside and inside reality "so that we are no longer able to sing, speak or work based on our place alone, without plunging into the imagination of this totality."¹

However, more often world totality dissolves into absolutes as numerous parties insist on exploiting or limiting it through fixed ideas. Extremism positions the photograph and the land diametrically as either a utopian vision of harmony or a dystopic demonstration of utility. In some cases, both states exist simultaneously, creating an irresolvable condition of attraction and repulsion for viewers. To investigate these concerns, Hayeur follows the beliefs of previous artists, especially those of the New Topographics (Lewis Baltz, Nicholas Nixon, Joe Deal, Stephen Shore, Frank Gohlke, and Robert Adams) who understand the landscape as an amalgam of human and natural elements. Humans can never stand outside of nature. Believing in that detached stance results in extremes, where nature is viewed in either a romantic or utilitarian manner.

¹ Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 108.

Unfortunately, these dichotomies have shaped much of Western culture and Hayeur uses photography and video to highlight their impact on the environment and people's sense of culture and identity. Hayeur has had a long-standing interest in the clashes of utopian and functional visions that have resulted in human attempts to reorganize the world. She views the landscape, in both its pictorial and actual manifestation, as representing conflicting desires, expressing, on the one hand, the wish to control the land and environment, and on the other, the longing to become immersed in it.² Hayeur's working method and treatment of imagery echo these ideas. She sees our world as highly mediated; our technical culture transforms, constructs and orchestrates the world in such a manner as to engineer a new space that inextricably confounds fact and fiction. Appreciation of how our vision of the world (both physically and imagistically) is shaped is crucial to the artist. As she notes, "It is impossible to consider the landscape without considering how our actions - and that of industry - have transformed it. The landscape is now inhabited everywhere and everywhere one can find traces (scars) of our having been there."³

To convey the complexity of human engagement with the world, Hayeur crafts images that blend dichotomies into a fruitful, ambiguous relation. The resulting images are not simply artistic or documentary photographs but both; colour, texture and light are expertly employed to hold photography's celebrated capacity to present highly detailed depictions of its subject matter. As well, in several series Hayeur exploits photography's privileged relation to the real by digitally constructing her landscapes. For example, in her *Destinations* series (2003), the artist blended views of various tourist sites, such as Cape Cod, the Mohave Desert and the Everglades to present landscapes replete with strange familiarity. The resulting images play with the tropes of tourism; the fabricated landscapes appear real and entice viewers with the promise of travel. Another series that digitally blended various sources to present an unbelievably believable subject was *Model Homes* (2004-2007). Combining different elements through Photoshop, Hayeur created odd but credible looking houses that revealed their own constructed nature. She then placed the home in a desolate, barren landscape reminiscent of new developments. Hayeur sees suburban houses as having little or no historical connection to the places where they are built. "[T]hey are amalgams of cultural, imaginary and borrowed identities.... Some people even think that these artificial landscapes are real, leading to confusion between what is really part of our cultural heritage and what is only the market value of substitution. This generates false perceptions of who we are."⁴

For Hayeur, the state of the natural world is particularly vulnerable given our present condition of dislocation and alienation. For her *Underworlds* series, ongoing since 2008, she has been photographing rivers and waterways with an underwater camera to capture images of what lies beneath the surface. The waters, altered by pollution, are mostly aquatic deserts, devoid of life. Along New Jersey's Chemical Coast and the marine cemetery of Rossville (Staten Island), as well

² Eleanor Milner, "Isabelle Hayeur. Desert Shores," [Urbanautica](#)

³ Eleanor Milner, "Isabelle Hayeur. Desert Shores," *Urbanica*.

⁴ Isabelle Hayeur, "Model homes (2004-2007)," Isabelle Hayeur : Model Homes / Maisons modèles artist's statement

as the Mississippi, Hayeur's images reveal unhealthy ecosystems suffering from the lack of dissolved oxygen. However, although dying, the sites have picturesque appeal, as she notes, "These desolate expanses are suffused in a wavering light endowing them with a strange, disturbing beauty."⁵ The images indicate the need to penetrate the seeming picturesque surfaces waterways and water masses provide for viewing enjoyment, to see, understand and attempt to rectify the reality existing beneath.

Ideally, human relations with the land should be caring and based on a respectful understanding of natural processes and our dependency on them. However, studies have shown that given the increased stress the planet is under due to global warming, climate change creates optimal conditions for extreme events to occur despite human efforts to manage the environment.⁶ Wildfires are one example of such phenomena; increased periods of drought, combined with higher temperatures, produce ideal conditions for wildfires which have been occurring with greater frequency over the last few decades. Hayeur addresses these concerns through long established pictorial techniques that present a sublime but disturbing landscape. The *Wild Times* series takes the 2021 fire in British Columbia as its subject. The intense and massive fire devastated Lytton, destroyed homes in surrounding areas, and created dense smoke and airborne particulate matter that covered central and southern British Columbia, spreading as far as central Canada and the northern and midwestern American states. Wildlife and habitat suffered dearly as well. Given such conditions, the sky darkens, and day becomes night with the rising sun appearing as a blood moon. As well, a feature of intense fires is the development of pyrocumulonimbus clouds, as seen in Hayeur's work *Pyrocumulonimbus*. The image depicts a massive plume of smoke rising into the upper atmosphere. The clouds form because of the intense heat on the surface, and often develop into their own meteorological event, producing lightning storms that spark even more fires.

Feminist scholar Donna Haraway notes that "If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism, then we know that becoming is always becoming with—in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake."⁷ Hayeur's projects provide a means to consider the consequences of binary thinking, and the damage that occurs with people's alienation to the world and others. Her aesthetic approach blurs oppositional boundaries to provide viewers with the opportunity reflect on our fundamental place in the world, our relation to it and one another. She thinks forward to future challenges informed by shared communal and individual responsibility that maintain openness to the world and others and all their possibilities.

⁵ Isabelle Hayeur, "Troubled waters and subaquatic landscapes," https://isabelle-hayeur.com/underworlds_eng/

⁶ Alison Auld, "Research reveals global increase in wildfires due to climate change despite human interventions," *Dal News*, 23 October 2024, <https://www.dal.ca/news/2024/10/23/wildfires-climate-change-human-impact.html>

⁷ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 244.