

CHRIS MORIN-EITNER, PARADOX JUNGLE

There are some funny-looking graphic zebras in front of Beaubourg. The forecourt of the Parisian museum looks like a savannah. You might think it was a real art installation, a kind of Saharan *Paris Plage*, constructed to highlight global warming. But this image (*Paris, Pompidou Savane*, 2011) is a digital composition from artist-photographer Chris Morin-Eitner. Here, he plays around with a Parisian building that he loves, The Pompidou Centre, the striped animals gently mocking its abandonment. In the series *Il était une fois demain* (Once Upon A Time Tomorrow) that he is exhibiting at Galerie W, this architect of image manipulation subjects the planet's different megalopolises to the strangest of make overs. Each image sees an iconic building, both historic and contemporary re situated, in an enhanced state of ruin, completely invaded by wild, untouched forest, peaceful wild animals, joyful birds and colourful flowers. Towns thrust into petrified state of greenery like the kingdom of Sleeping Beauty. Think of the ruins of the Angkor Temple, pierced and transfigured by trees, mutant works of living art.

The Arc de Triomphe in Paris bows down before an immense stretch of dense forest. The Eiffel Tower, Tower Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge and New York's sky scrapers overflow with greenery, vines reflected in lakes of water lilies, rivers stirred up by flitting birds. Moscow's Red Square sheds its totalitarian character, the landscape becoming akin to the Taiga, birch trees are replaced with black and white ostriches. Even the extreme capitalism of Dubai, as described by American writer Mike Davis, is transformed into a *Jungle Time Machine*, 2015. The hugely pretentious Burj Khalifa tower is reduced to a tower of Babel reeling before a proud giraffe, feet firmly on the ground, head held high. Bricks and mortar, concrete, generic sky scrapers reaching higher and higher like Norman Foster's Gherkin, which are spreading like wildfire, give way to an exotic, artificial Land Art. The most arrogant urbanism can be seen to crumble.

This series of 'tropical city' images suggests that Chris Morin-Eitner might be pointing us to a humoristic critique of contemporary architecture: these buildings riding high on a wave of greenery in the name of ecology and sustainable cities. They are using trees and plants as false, natural homeopathic extracts like "city ornaments, from urban furnishings"⁽¹⁾ or "a carpet of green"⁽²⁾. It is plausible since he appeared on the front page of the *Beaux Arts Magazine* in April 2016 having illustrated a dossier of Parisian architecture whose projects are rich with towers covered in vegetation and plant cuttings.

It's a lead worth exploring especially when coupled with the fact that Chris Morin-Eitner, born in Paris in 1968, is an architect graduate of the Paris La Seine UP 9 University. Although he has never worked as an architect, he has remained in the field photographing edifices the world over. It remains a profession that he pours into his works but not necessarily to mock urban gardening. It is in deconstructing and reconstructing, as an urban planner without limits, as a landscaper styled after Arcimboldo that he recreates 'his' cities devoured by the future. His large scale images are skilfully drawn up and composed. The foregrounds are home to the narrative and open out onto masterful examples of perspective. The tides are stymied, the roads and squares have disappeared giving way to fields, forests and water. The uniform towers create piercing vertical lines, troops of re-enchanted animals lend horizontal movement to the tableau. The flamingos are not just birds but bands of colour. Flowers are recognisable only by their shape or decorative violet shade. The artist-photographer works like a 'digital painter', playing with superimposition and creating hybrids, encompassing the photographs which he has taken in the course of his many travels. They are his colours, they are his palette, the tools he employs to recreate these stories which revisit the colourful typology of the Garden of Eden. His process is serial, filled with purposeful, obsessive repetitive elements. And yet, the human crowds have disappeared.

What happened to all of these lost metropolises, wrapped in vines, no men, women children or pets? A catastrophe is what happened. But we don't know what it was exactly. We can detect traces in some of the less idyllic images: evidence of humanity that has since vanished in the form of rubbish, old signs, tags, statues, windmills and monuments. In *Paris, La Défense-Lianes*, 2015, the esplanade of the Grande Arche is transformed into an ambiguous terrain on which two horses graze on a strange residue. Abandoned cars are stranded across New York's Times Square, Beijing's Rem Koolhaas' China Central Television building. Paradisiac landscapes are slightly more 'trashy' here. It is not just *The Emerald Forest* that have inspired the adventurous Chris Morin-Eitner, he includes nods to *Blade Runner*. In *Hong Kong, Central-Totems*, 2013, the palm trees, the suspended highway and streams of plants are disassociated whilst a lone statue of Brue Lee can be seen, powerless to fight against the landscape's mutation.

So what does Morin-Eitner want to tell us? That Man, so vain, the sorcerer's apprentice, suicidal even; has destroyed the planet with his diabolical, uncontrollable, polluted metropolises, with his destructive technology? That Nature, the stronger of the two, will dance on our graves? And yet, if the artist is worried, he does not seek to exacerbate this fear, he can see a happy ending. He takes the road less travelled, avoiding Science Fiction style

carnage such as in *Mad Max*, or the post-apocalyptic world found in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, no dark images like those of Chinese artist's Du Zhenjun's series *Tower of Babel*. He takes the opposite view. Echoing the quote by Alphonse Allais, "*We should build our cities in the countryside – the air is purer there!*" or Robert Bresson who said, "*Since the world is backwards, we're going to have to turn it right round to put it right*". Confronted with the violence of the Information Age, terrorism, political masquerades in a dystopia which perhaps wouldn't be so dark in a digital Douanier Rousseau painting, he is doubting, calling out the paradox and launching his counter attack with creeping vines. He is simulating an artificial biotope, free in its chaos where signs of globalisation and different civilisations are mixed together. Perhaps, Morin-Eitner is a kind of ecological Candide, advising us to cultivate our secret garden and people it with good, old fashioned savages?

This artist-photographer is not renouncing the human world. He inhabits it. But he is warning his fellow man, that they might reconcile themselves with nature. It was during the recent COP21 held in Paris that he took part in the *Artificial Climates* exhibition as a 'poetic activist' at the EDF Foundation⁽³⁾ alongside other artists who put forward their metaphorical visions of climate-related issues. He exhibited two pieces: *Paris Jungle Tour Eiffel*, 2010 and *Paris Opéra Garnier Ballet*, 2012, both works reflecting contemporary 'eco-fictions'. In the exhibition's catalogue, Dennis Mellier, professor in comparative literature and cinema at the University of Poitiers details, "*Eco-fictions are not so much story of the causes which led to a catastrophe, rather an exploration of the redefinition of a relationship; as in tales of travels or exploration when a completely new environment is the subject of a new discovery and leads to the adoption of a new point of view forcing the opening up to foreign knowledge... Eco-fictions on the subject of catastrophe turn the dissolute climate into a catalyst for the planet's revolt, humiliated and exploited but awoken at last to the chaotic power at her origin.*"

We must enter into this waking chaos, discover it like we would a new building, a new city, to go above and beyond their icy, luminous décor. Chris Morin-Eitner presents us with an alarming vision of the world. But at the same time, he lets us look right into the baggage of an explorer. The Franco-German artist magnifies the art and history of the Outer Rhine which have also shaped him. In *Cologne, Wunder Köln Hauptbahnhof*, 2016, he offers up a hymn to the Gothic cathedral of Cologne, a style of which he is particularly fond. He knows how to hark back to the past too, like a remodelled 'Hubert Robert of ruins', glorifying modern debris though not because of hopelessness, more as a possible rebirth. He exalts Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* series and scatters the famous Giverny flowers throughout his works like an impressionist gimmick. He plunges into Max Ernst's *The Petrified City*, he meanders through road movies from the likes of Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmusch and is not indifferent to the installations-collections of Ai WeiWei.

If we are able play along with the futuristic extrapolations of Chris Morin-Eitner, it precisely because he doesn't politicise. His images of waste, are also enigmas, open to interpretation and in which humour is nestled in the details. He takes pleasure in his borderline repetitive kitsch, his decorative sentimentalism. Look for the trails of stones that he places in his jungle scenes – you won't be able to find all of them. Just like the, peacock feather palm trees he fetishizes, omnipresent across the rooftops of London and New York. Or the little windmills, resistant and mocking, he's the 21st century's Don Quixote of tiny windmills. There are near invisible snakes whose venom would certainly no longer pose a threat. In the stories and fables the artist leads us into we are transformed into pink gazelles, no longer subject to the natural order of the food chain. There are fairy tales into which he has slipped his personal fragments of unrealised childhood, his personal 'Forest of paradoxes' where he would like to walk himself at the same time confronted by great fear, and little pleasures. Amongst all of the clues that he leaves for us, which one is his true 'Rosebud'? It is like Le Douanier Rousseau said, "I possess the landscapes that I paint".

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- (1) Tribune de l'architecte Matthieu Poitevin, March 2016, from the review *AA*, larchitectureaujourd'hui.fr
 - (2) Rudy Ricciotti, in *HQE, Les renards du Temple*, 2006, Al Dante/Clash editions.
 - (3) Exhibition *Climats Artificiels*, curated by Camille Morineau, 4th Octobre 2015 - 28th February 2016 at the EDF Foundation, Paris. Catalogue, Paris Musées/Fondation EDF editions.