

The EMPTY Near East

By Sacha Craddock

The air in 'The Empty Near East' appears to be cleansed as flowers nod slightly in the breeze. All is static, fixed in its lack of narrative, a position from which to show a state as perpetual in the brain as any conservative expectation from representation. Surely it is the edge of somewhere, a wood, the forest, a mass of repetition divided into distinct layers as if steps of theatrical scenery. The camera shows us a continual loop, it seems, of layered growth extending back into space. A Watteau painting can sport the same relation to nature, an arranged representation in which any figure appear as if it had been tipped in, pushed from the side along runners, along what here looks like a fixed film track.

Mustafa's most recent film is silent but with titles, a running description, or explanation, on the relation between a reason for showing something and as well as an appreciation, second hand, as to why it is there. This is a fixed and familiar, tried and tested, approach to picture, film and photography. The image alone becomes king, in modern parlance; it stands stronger, and upright in the surrounding context. Morphing between the moving and the static this understanding of language becomes that one thing. Landscape has that ability to be both sinister and lovely; one on top of the other, literally, in earth, ruin, soil, and blood, proving that knowledge covers vision and vice versa.

The film unravels to tell a non-tale, there is a double bluff of intention, a limbo of consciousness, a status quo that moves neither forward nor backwards to reflect the historical position of Cyprus as one of the most densely militarized zones in the world. Cyprus is at times looped, or corralled, on historical maps as part of the East, and sometimes not. Relatively recent strife in the 1970's flows from a state of political flux.

The place, a residue of great wars and total peace, of idyllic imagination and truthful fear, shows that one person's beach may have been another person's killing field. The Mediterranean is amazing for this; so much disputed territory, so much history, over and across; the amazing fact of sun, sea, flower, craft and ruin conjured in the mind's eye. By always using on the pull of 'loveliness' in his work Mustafa Hulusi hides the subject matter in the obvious place, under the bed. The obviousness of Mediterranean beauty is there to rediscover, and perhaps more so now as the world has got smaller and more easy to cross, the unknown no longer exists to be falsely pioneered.

John Berger in 'Ways of Seeing', first published in 1972, famously talks of a Van Gogh painting; 'this is a landscape of a cornfield with birds flying out of it'. He suggests, in the publication published by the BBC and Pelican Original Paperbacks, as an accompaniment to the television series, that we look for a moment at the little black and white reproduction of this painting on the bottom right hand page and then turn to the next page to read 'This is the last picture that Van Gogh painted before he killed himself'. The landscape is instantly turned around, to be heavy and layered by history and knowledge.

From the Expander paintings or prints, through to the heightened flower painting, and sometime the combination of them both, Hulusi's work insists on the retinal ease of the high gloss photograph. This in turn becomes like virtual painting with a touch of the outsider's approach to the Oriental. The imagery feeds the eye perhaps in the way an anorexic will attempt to feed the well person but never themselves. The pleasure is there, but questionable, to be appreciated it at a very particular level.

Berger wrote 'Ways of Seeing' just before the Cypriot landscape became touched, troubled, disturbed, uprooted, bloodied, and ultimately separated by the war in 1974. Ethnic cleansing in a sun drenched land where romantic view meets truth that is then taken and over grown. Cyprus was 'liberated' by Turkish troops. Ruins, ruined over much time, from the most famous of .. [ask MUs] through to [ask Mus] . Layers of classical and Eastern, Christian,

pre Christian, Islamic, Moslem, buildings lie in collapse, recent through to ancient. This is apart from the 18th and early 19th century fashion in Europe for building artificial ruins. At what point does something become a ruin, something of beauty, when does it lose its relation to the recent to become as much, if not more, adorable in its decrepitude than it might have been in its full self? Hulusi's work is in constant touch with that question, just as the calm denies, belies, nodding flowers, or poppy head swaying in the breeze. When a place in its perfect sun baked stillness, with herbs that break underfoot to release a gasp of scent, tell us anything?

'The Empty Near East' carries a sense of relief. The hypothetical land has reached a level of peace after history and post understanding. We see, from the outside, a sun soaked perpetuity, a medieval limbo that no human can touch or enter. After so much trauma the earth, and therefore perhaps, the filmmaker, is able to cease to attempt to deal with both the personal and the political. The present here is a perpetual state, where layers of history, travel, belonging, movement, sorrow, change, let alone boredom, are hidden beneath the cyclical logic of nature.

In 1937 Herbert Read wrote that while Otto Dix in Germany depicted 'the dreadful horror of the human side' Paul Nash revealed the outrage on Nature, the unnatural, and therefore already in 1818, the super real'. The suggestion of the 'super real' is fascinating. Hulusi is using very obvious, delightful, accepted, and wanted imagery. To delight in an almost unmediated, apparently direct, depiction of expected beauty, is, perhaps, must be to question the very possibility of the singularity of message and motive. This poses questions about intention, and the super real today. Hulusi photographs, films, has painted the decorated tile, ruin, flower and folk dancers, not so much to comment as to ask something himself. Surely he is questioning how this imagery can or cannot, work? Whether the use of a pictorial and painterly tradition in the flowers portrait, for instance, becomes something like the photographic souvenir on a sliding scale between popularly familiarity and artistic value.

Instead of culture appropriating nature, and vice versa, back to front, instead of the past defining all, everything is so washed out in 'The Empty Near East', that it is relieved of reference and rationale. A post apocalyptic sun-baked landscape with abandoned beehives and tops of pillars against a relentless blue sky. This is a way to continue with the tabla raza, and end, that denies a perhaps now dated slavishness to history, context, and notions of understanding,

There is a history here but it brings itself, limping, along to a photo finish of past and present. While Nash, at the beginning of the last century used nature to show his horror of war, Hulusi, now, in a different world uses it and other stereotypes to ask where he is and where he stands in art; to see, like the seasoned fisherman, the prey, or the subject, beneath the surface.

From 16th century Crusader castles through to the ruined, deserted, tank photographed in [check date] by Hulusi at the border. From you tube 1970's footage of troops with parachutes floating from the sky to land and ask directions towards battle, 'The Empty Near East' is about staving off reality to make the earth stand still. Moving from Church to Mosque, from beehive to tulip to heightened pillar in paint, film and photograph, with a touch verging on the Victorian, there is a strange disavowal of the rough and ready of reality. Such an approach is really one of grasping experience from far away, between missed opportunities, childhood visits and parental migration. It is one of merging the felt with the known, as touching the place with the eye of experience and expectation, and not a matter of understanding in any geopolitical sense..

