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**Presence in absence**

translated from polish by Jerzy Chyb

"Actually, it's quite paradoxical," says Leonie Young about her residency. "I go to a different country, sometimes a different continent, and then I show photographs which practically don't reveal where I am. Theoretically, I might be just a few steps away from home". When I first talk to the French photographer, I have a similar impression. We sit in a Wrocław café, I browse through her book with pictures from her projects, exhibitions and residencies. I look at a pile of stones, sun-scorched grass and a wall with nondescript doors. It might be the States, France or Italy, it could also be Poland. Anywhere. Nowhere. At the same time, each of the projects follows a characteristic, very deliberate narration that is recognizable for the whole series.

*Searching for the Magic Stone* from 2012 is a mystic Irish story in which we look at hewn stones of various shapes, abandoned and waiting for a new (perhaps magic) function. Stones are also the main characters of the Italian series entitled *Made of Dust* from 2013, which Leonie Young prepared together with Mathilde Lavenne. Antique remnants blend with the contemporary need to arrange and restore what vanishes, as well as the need to create a structure, cosmic order which would lend the stones a timeless narration. One of her older projects, *Le terrain de jeu du quotidien* from 2008, enters a more human, day-to-day sphere, in which she looks at walls of buildings and pebble-piled roads. Just like in the previous photographs, what strikes right from the start is a total absence of people. "When you want to talk about space as a certain mystery, uncertainty," Leonie explains her approach, "and when you

want to raise a question about the landscape, you avoid the people, because their presence in the frame is a distraction. The whole composition and reception of the photograph would be built around the figure."

This takes us even further back into the past, when Leonie graduated from L'École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Her final project included a series of portraits entitled *Le point de flottement*. In fact, it is the first time I see people in the artist's photographs, people who are the primal element rather than just a backdrop for a smoke-shrouded car or a stony seat. It takes me but a short while to realize they are not classic portraits, though, supposed to express the person's character, emotions or tell us a fragment of his or her life story. They are faces and figures of people lost in thought, absent, as if "beyond themselves". Present, yet somehow not there.

I look at the artist's latest works resulting from her residency in Wrocław. Their entirety constitutes the project *Pack Your Bags* presented in the residency space of Studio BWA Wrocław and at the same time in an exhibition in the photography gallery *Miejsce przy Miejscu*. It is Leonie's first project that I can see from the point of view of the inhabitant of a given space, a person who is totally immersed in the presented landscape. I do not feel the kind of distance I had when watching the photos of Rome, Calais or Quebec, which does not mean I feel any sentimental whiff or a mood of warm familiarity when I look at her photographs of Wrocław. Quite the opposite, I feel a gaping precipice which forces me to look at



it all from a different perspective: on the one hand, it agitates and teases, on the other – it engrosses and chokes, but also makes me laugh.

*"Leonie Young is a stranger, she looks at the city with alien eyes,"* Łukasz Rusznica, the curator of the exhibition, describes the project. *"She sees various traces in it – small fragments of architecture, pieces of public space, everything that is available from the outside – because she is an outsider and nobody lets her in."* The photographer takes full advantage of this strangeness, making her observations go beyond the picture-postcard narrations or familiar associations. She is naturally distanced, which makes her capable of noticing in abandoned objects and (over)built landscapes both the narration which is imposed and the one which appears tentatively after a while and is more difficult to tame. However, in comparison with her earlier series, *Pack Your Bags* is more emotional, less graphic or constructivist. Perhaps it is also a matter of colours. Leonie Young discovered definitely more pictorial sceneries and colours in Wrocław than in the Roman or Irish narration. The photograph promoting the exhibition shows an underwater landscape with beautiful, deep saturation. I find equally lush greens in the picture presenting a fragment of a model railway, whereas another photo (taken in the city zoo?) shows slightly kitschy, pastel colours covering a painted wall by the water. Juxtaposed with the photographs showing a fragment of a silver tent or cool concrete, they still evoke a warm atmosphere (although "warm" should not be literally associated with "nice" or "pleasant" here). I immerse in these works completely, especially the ones showing a large aquarium or Wrocław's most visited tourist attraction – the Racławice Panorama. *"The way I frame when I take a photograph is quite narrow as it doesn't reveal the context",* Leonie tells me. *"The image seems to continue indefinitely"*. It is this trick that makes me ask myself how the image of my city is formed, how the landscape I watch in a gallery as an artistic project forcing me to look in a new, fresh way was created. And it is the absence of people that makes me lose the sense of familiarity. *"Without people, spaces are more mysterious, mystical, ambiguous,"* adds Leonie. *"At the same time, the scale of objects and space is lost, thus questioning reality."*

But why question reality? Why ask about the landscape as a space eluding clear divisions into what is natural and what is human? For French photographer, these issues are virtually a mania around which all its projects seem to revolve. Leonie asks about the space and landscape, she wonders how humans



shape them. She questions obvious urban divisions which attempt to separate residential spaces from entertainment areas. In her photographs a fragment of the Olympic Stadium becomes an almost political symbol – the silver tent is a place hiding something, it is impossible to see what is inside, we are excluded, expelled from learning the truth. A similar mood permeates the picture showing a fragment of a concrete wall in three parts separating us from strange sand mounds (excavations?). A clear distinction is made again, I look at a boundary beyond which something is happening, except I cannot understand what. However, the photographer does not answer the question what emerges from the secrecy and what can be "discovered" in this image. Raising the question is more important than expressing an unambiguous opinion, especially that it refers – not only through its title – to the complicated past of Wrocław, a city which used to change hands and nations so often that it was stigmatized with frequent, forced "packing". Leonie gives no simple clues, so the text accompanying her exhibition, or words said during its opening, should be seen as the curator's outlook: *"Even though the imperative 'Pack your bags' was shouted in the middle of the night and what was left were traces of the war, night deportations and resettlements – we are safe. The worst thing is a stranger reading the signs of what is to come, hearing a foreign accent in a corner shop, sensing our tension and saying something we are afraid to say today because we don't want to jinx or portend anything."*

Looking for sources of her themes and style, I ask Leonie which artists move and inspire her. She gives various names and contexts. Back at school, she was fascinated with Nan Gol-

din's photography, which is immersed in ongoing situations at the most intimate level. Leonie appreciated in her the ability to create great tension and strong emotions, even though she was reluctant to choose a similar style herself. Florence Paradeis, a French photographer and her teacher in Paris, remains an important person for her. She arranges narrative situations, portraying people at surprising, highly surreal moments. "*I like the infinite tension,*" explains Leonie, "*and possibility to treat photography as a field for creating fiction*". It is possible that it was precisely where the artist has found a way to create tension in her own work, except that instead of people she uses inanimate objects and nature, repeatedly processed by man. She also values artists connected with land art (Richard Long) and sculpture oscillating around absurd and glittery contexts (Franz Erhard Walther, Peter Fischli and David Weiss), who use simple techniques to create works with endless meanings. There is also Thomas Demand, a German sculptor and photographer. Leonie appreciates him for the way he treats architecture, how perfectly he shows abandoned offices. "*Sophie Ristelhueber is also on my list,*" she says in one of her emails. The French photographer looks into how the war has changed the landscape of the Balkans and Middle East. ("*I want to create a narrative about how little we see,*" says Ristelhueber about *Fait*, one of her series.)

This is what Leonie Young does too – although on an entirely different scale and in a different context. She shows us how little we see, how much everything eludes us. Living in familiar surroundings and passing the same buildings every day, we see objects with an imposed narration and miss a lot of diffe-



rent meanings. Leonie shows how much we take the landscape for granted and leave no space for various interpretations and emotional imbalances. That is why she gets immersed so deeply in the past and existing narrations of a city or local space long before she even begins to take her photographs. She looks for cracks, unconscious denials, absurd and surreal constructions, she uses (not always consciously) situationist methods when creating psychogeographical maps. Sometimes she delves back in antique remnants or pagan beliefs, sometimes she studies the convoluted past of the inhabitants where the entertainment space blends with the political cuticle. And then she photographs in a way which "removes" people from the picture in order for us to feel uneasy and see what is hidden. Interestingly then, to show how much power we have in changing and applying narrations to our surrounding space, she must ignore us all. *"People are too strong,"* laughs Leonie.