The photographic wanderer

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In his photographic series *A Trajectory*, the French artist Constantin Schlachter predominantly focuses on subjects that can be found in the natural world such as rock formations or the night sky dotted with stars. Through a combination of photo manipulation and presenting the work in monochromatic colours, Schlachter makes these subjects look otherworldly – almost as if they were photographed on another planet altogether. Removed from their original context and situated within the darkness of this photographic series, the subjects depicted by Schlachter quickly take on the form of visual allegories. The otherworldliness in this work provokes the viewer to search for a meaning: looking for shapes in the rock formation or appreciating the passing of time in a long exposure of the nocturnal landscape.

The cave is one of the many recurring motifs in this body of work bringing to mind Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* – amongst theorists and historians a frequently referenced philosophical debate about photography's presumed ability to depict the real. In Schlachter’s work however the cave refers to something more primal or what the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard describes in his influential book *The Poetics of Spaces* as the ultimate form of shelter, which can provide intimacy and comfort. In this context the cave references the allegorical retreat to the womb, further emphasizing the fact that spaces are both physical as well as psychological.

The title of the work *A Trajectory* is a subtle reference to the journeys by itinerant monks from the Early Middle Ages who had no fixed address or leadership. The so-called Gyrovagues - a French word derived from the Latin words 'circle' and 'wandering’ – are Schlachter’s inspiration for his own journeys into nature as a form of spiritual exploration of the inner mind. The emphasis in Schlachter’s work is therefore not on religion, but rather it is on spirituality as a trajectory to the imagination. These two aspects of a journey, both in the physical and a metaphysical sense, are signified by focusing on recognizable subjects yet Schlachter makes a conscious attempt to obscure these subjects via photographic manipulation.

Due to the heavy manipulation and obscuring of the subject, in Schlachter’s work the viewer inadvertently participates in a type of visual experiment where some subjects can only be recognized by their shape. This type of Gestalt psychology is particularly apparent in images of animals such a fox, a goat or a horse. The purposefulness with which these animals punctuate the body of work is comparable to a fable, whereas the precise reason for their appearance remains unknown.

In my interview with the artist Schlachter broke his methodology down into a number of steps: first he photographs a subject following his own instincts and intuition, he then manipulates these images either during or after they were taken in order to blur the line between the real and the imagination, and in the last instance Schlachter pays attention to how the images relate to each other
within the context of the photographic series. The last point is rather important because the viewer is not necessarily asked to contemplate a single image, but rather, he is encouraged to consider the image within the body of work as a whole. Even if we only see a small selection of Schlachter’s photographs, the sequencing of images and the notion of seriality relates to a type of storytelling more commonly found in experimental cinema, a subject Schlachter studied before he completed a photography course in Paris.

Schlachter’s attempt to visually obfuscate the natural world can be related back to his upbringing. Raised in a small town called Altkirch in the Alsace Region, not far from the border to Germany and Switzerland, Schlachter grew up near thick forests, rolling hills and lush nature. The subjects we encounter in Trajectory are mostly taken in this region of France, whereas one of the few people in the photographs is the photographer’s father. In that sense the word Trajectory also constitutes a journey into the past, whereas the various manipulations allude to the fact that memories are never static and are prone to change. The work presented herein is of sorts a self-portrait of the artist: a randonneur, or hiker, traversing the landscape for indeterminate periods of time with few belongings. A journey into the past. Or a journey into the imagination. Or both.