

Distance and Inner World

On a spring day in 1336, Italian poet Francesco Petrarca embarked upon what at that time was still considered an extremely risky undertaking – voluntarily climbing a mountain just in order to enjoy the view. His destination was the treeless peak of Mont Ventoux, not far from Avignon. Having reached the summit, exhausted by his climb and overwhelmed by the panoramic view, he omitted to write down his impressions for posterity. The only thing that has come down to us about this breathtaking moment is that in the book he carried with him containing the writings of St Augustine he came across the following lines as if by chance: “And the people go and admire tall mountains and wide seas and powerfully roaring rivers and the ocean and the movement of the heavenly bodies and depend on them.”¹ He then shut the book and revealed nothing more.

Jacob Burckhardt uses the description of this episode in his famous book *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (‘The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy’) to prove the discovery of scenic beauty in fourteenth-century Italy.¹¹ The scientific interpretation of the world that had flourished since the beginning of the modern age had evidently opened up new emotional freedom for educated people in their contemplation of nature going beyond the previous certainties that every river, every tree and every mountain was inhabited by a demon or deity. It is no accident that the painting of that era, such as works by Giotto, contains initial attempts to insert the landscape as such into the frame – not as some celestial metaphor but simply as a background to divine and human action.

These days, the landscape has regained wide attention in art, albeit under completely different circumstances. The justified anxiety regarding dwindling natural resources goes hand in hand with a growing desire to enjoy the aesthetic pleasure it brings. It’s no coincidence that the landscape plays a major role in not only art but also science and society. The idea of the landscape is a cultural construct which enables us to conceptually determine and aesthetically experience a certain part of the complex, all-embracing phenomenon of nature. In contrast with nature, however, the landscape is not merely generally comprehensible; it can also be created and correspondingly used. And although it has largely become detached from nature, it still remains connected to it on an ideational level.

Against the background of the present day, Paolo Chiasera the artist has evidently reflected on the roots of Italian tradition and, devoting himself to a classical motif of art history, designed two landscapes for Marta Herford. *Unter freiem Himmel* is the title of the work which, unlike its name suggests, takes possession of the museum’s interior with two large installations: a wall painting of a forest and an architectural sculpture in the form of a mountain.

In its current perception, *Unter freiem Himmel* does indeed open up the possibility of becoming embroiled in various mental links with the past, art history and the artistic creation of myths. An approach like this is not uncharacteristic of Chiasera. For years he has addressed the complex relationship which frequently connects young people to their role models and traditions. In his works, the ambivalent figure of the hero plays a role which is just as important as that of the process of destruction and new beginning. This also harbors as a metaphor the ubiquitous conflict of many artists between the burden of art history and the need to strike out in search of something new. Chiasera uses this drama for his pictures and installations not only with intellectual reflection and conceptual distance, but repeatedly full of relish and with plenty of emotion, without shying away from the pathos of grand gestures. An important point of reference for Chiasera is his own inner world, the artistic imagination, because that is where all the threads come together. The artist’s imagination is a legendary place in modern society – a myth, in fact – and people gaze with particular attention at the place where it enters the visible

world. The museum is of course particularly suitable for the artistic presentation of such imaginary and historical interconnections because the physical and mental timelines intersect more conspicuously there than elsewhere.

Let's take a closer look at the exhibition *Unter freiem Himmel*. Through three rooms, Paolo Chiasera has built a mountain – or more accurately incorporated a mountain into the museum. Yet the building's architecture is neither a neutral shell nor a projection surface – for Chiasera has discovered and responded to a very specific place there. Those familiar with the soaring rooms of Marta Herford are likely to quickly conclude that the mountain – something which is associated with enormity, immensity and eternity – forms a counterweight to the light, flowing architecture and brings it down to earth. But of course, it's not as simple as that.

True, for a 'genuine' sculptor (whose character – including as a myth – represents an existentialist corporeality), the exertion of creating or moving an entire mountain would be the ultimate challenge (or in mountaineering terms the peak), and simultaneously probably the most monumental form of artistic expression conceivable. Yet with his art, Chiasera is not in search of powerful primary experience. Instead, he loves intellectual games and the imaginary. His mountain, which appears to stretch through the walls from one room to the next, is not a sculpture in the correct meaning of the word but instead a fragile backdrop: nothing more than a light wooden frame and painted canvas.

It is above all the use of paint that constitutes a key difference from the memorable mountain by Hans Schabus displayed during the 2005 Venice Biennale. Whereas Schabus left the monochrome, grey coloring of the surface – and hence the object's character – in its original state, Chiasera's work features painted shading. It's actually a paradox: a huge, three-dimensional painting (perhaps even the convex negative form of a panorama) – yet the experience of visitors who find the mountain quite literally in their way is physical.

Over the centuries there have been (and still are) many artificial mountains, such as in grand parks, where they were made not just to create the image of an idealized landscape but to provide viewpoints here and there. However, Chiasera's mountain fulfils neither of these conditions: nowhere can you stand back from it far enough in order to insert its shape into a painting's horizon; nor is there any possibility of a 360-degree view from the summit.

In the middle room, where the mountain is the tallest and covers the biggest area, visitors can just about move through the narrow space between it and the wall, while in order to pass from one room to the next they have to actually pass through the mountain, enabling them to look inside its open structure. This 'peak' behind the scenes is the point at which the landscape theater becomes epic theater, breaking any remaining illusions.

The words 'painting' and 'scenery' take the mind back to Giotto and his abstract rocky landscapes. Rather than a portrait of actual mountains, they each symbolize a distant place, regardless of where we imagine it to be. By contrast, the figures in Giotto's visual narratives are locked up behind the picture as if inside a stage area merely by virtue of their being borne by the rocks. The crucial question could then be: Where is the place to which we could be abducted from the museum in our imagination?

Despite its visible relationship to a specifically Upper Italian art tradition, geographically speaking Chiasera's mountain is actually a 'non-site' as defined by Robert Smithson: "The *non-site* is a three-dimensional logical image which is abstract and yet represents an actual place."^{III} But whereas Smithson had in mind a way of relating the representative place of the museum to a certain real place outside by means of the work, the 'far-off' point of reference in Chiasera's work is once again the dialogue with one's own inner world. To be more exact, it is the imagination of a critical dialogue with Giotto and the perspective perception of space in Western art and

architecture mythically associated with it which has long been obsolete in our time and yet which remains the measure of all things. What architecture could illustrate this observation more persuasively than that of Marta Herford, a museum whose rooms constantly turn away from their own vanishing points?

If one ultimately wished to describe the mountain as architecture within architecture (which his structure would certainly permit), it should not be simply understood as a comment on Frank Gehry's concept of space accomplished in the town of Herford. Instead, we would have to use Robert Venturi's term 'duck'.^{IV} Inspired by a duck-shaped roadside shop, Venturi used it to define a building turned into a sculpture, in which the symbolic meaning expressed in its shape utterly eclipsed the design structure or any other form of architectural style. Chiasera's mountain is a 'duck' par excellence and as a whole a symbol of the 'drama' of the modern artist – against the background of the theme of touching landscape and architecture.

The room following the mountain reveals a totally different picture. All four walls are covered by a row of painted trees while the room's interior is empty and visitors can move about freely inside it. The situation is therefore similar to that of viewing a panorama picture: whichever way you look, you can't escape it. In the nineteenth century, when fine art began to lose its monopoly on the production of images, popular panoramas were alongside theatres the harbingers of modern commercial illusions – and hence also of today's audiovisual entertainment industry. They convincingly carried off the audience into history and other worlds. The emergence of the modern myth of the artist is partly closely associated with an analysis of art in connection with the triumphal march of the professional illusions provided by popular culture.

This type of illusion discussed here is not intended to create confusion between reality and reproduction. There is a difference between an audience fleeing a cinema in panic because it believes the train speeding towards it to be genuine and being able to enjoy the credible simulation of reality. What we are dealing with is therefore a conscious, highly reflected process. This applies to both the production of the illusion and its perception. It is the expression of an apparently contradictory double strategy: it assumes on the one hand knowledge of its technology and an understanding of the stories told by it, while on the other hand it could not succeed if the audience was not willing to at least temporarily suspend disbelief and trust the illusion blindly. Such an illusion often serves escapism. The two phenomena share a seemingly paradoxical principle: you must want to become lost in the illusion. (Petrarca evidently met such a desire with a degree of distrust and therefore held up a philosophical book to it in the face of the excellent view on the summit.) From the panoramas in the nineteenth century to digital cinema and modern deep sea aquariums, the aim has always been to offer the audience a spectacular experience based on a calculated distance. The boundary between auditorium and depiction cannot be genuinely (and certainly not permanently) pierced.

For a long time, artists were illusionists at best in the sense of magicians, for example when painting trompe-l'œil. But here and now, Paolo Chiasera is not directly following on from that tradition of optical seduction by simply repeating it. Instead, he uses the idea of the panorama as a metaphor in order to lend his own artistic method of working an abstract equivalent and at the same time a framework creating distance. The forest (which could of course also be a park) forgoes any attempt to present a convincing optical illusion.

The black silhouettes of various leafless and leafy trees can be seen on the walls strictly alongside each other and with no spatial graduation. Naturalism is seen here solely in the presumably accurate reproduction of the forms of growth of each species. Because they are kept consistently monochrome and shown completely two-dimensionally, the trees can in fact be regarded as pictograms.

Moreover, the two-dimensional mural undergoes an unusual extension which, rather like the technique of directly addressing the audience in epic theatre, counteracts and suspends the familiar principle of visual illusion. In front of every tree trunk there hangs on the wall a framed picture. The series of small gouaches is part of the 2006 project *The Trilogy*, in which Chiasera performed complex masques with the personalities of three famous Dutch painters: Pieter Brueghel, Vincent van Gogh and Cornelius Escher.

These three historical icons of art appear in the pictures sometimes as people (either alone or together) and sometimes merely as masks. They are brought together to create a fictitious group existing beyond the restrictions of time, admittedly only in Chiasera's imagination. Their experiences shown here relate no ongoing plot but instead form individual usually surrealist capriccios. The theme here is the myth of the artist – yet not simply as a depiction, but above all in the structure of the entire piece.

Myths form a bridge between collective understanding and individual experience. They produce narratives and images maintaining not only the relationship between reality and imagination but also between present and past. No doubt realizing that the artist plays a key role in this connection, Chiasera tackles the question using the above-mentioned double strategy between critical reflection and deliberate overpowering, as Andrea Viliani notes in her essay about *The Trilogy*: “On one hand he gives us a critical account of the functioning and transmission of contemporary myths, and on the other hand he lets himself be overwhelmed by them entirely uncritically in order to participate – despite its inadequacies – in the ebb and flow of the creation of myth as the only way of a both individual and collective storytelling.”^v

With the shadowy, abstract appearance of the forest, which at the same time completely surrounds the onlooker, Chiasera has succeeded in giving the seemingly unbridled painted imagination of his inner world an adequate backdrop by way of support. At the same time, the ideational concept of landscape – which otherwise nowadays only serves as a promotional consolation above all in the artificiality of urban landscape gardening, theme parks and recreational areas – is thrown into a state of turmoil.

Unter freiem Himmel has the modern myth of the artist take shape in a route leading through abstract mountain scenery into a ‘pre-modern’ mythical forest. Accordingly, especially in view of the present-day figure of the artist, Paolo Chiasera might well with a wink accept his own role as illusionist in the romantic character of the magician or traveling entertainer.

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ⁱ Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance [1860]* (Stuttgart 1981), pp. 327.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 324.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Smithson, “A Provisional Theory of Non Sites” [1968], quoted after: Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1996), p. 364.

^{iv} Cf. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steve Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Mass. 1972).

^v Andrea Viliani, “Vincent, Cornelius, Pieter, inside Paolo's Brain,” in: Paolo Chiasera, *The Trilogy: Cornelius*, exhibition catalogue published by Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, Bologna 2006, p. 11.

