

What has to be there is missing:
A search for seeing based on what is invisible in the text

By Behnam Seddighi

“Landscape can be defined as vistas which encompass both nature and the changes that humans have effected in the natural.”*

In order to develop this basic definition, if we define the vista that is being looked at as the “landscape,” then it is how we see the landscape that defines the way it is captured. Such development might seem obvious, but it is the very thing that makes the intention of the contemporary photographer significant, vis-à-vis the medium of photography and what is in the landscape. It is a sort of intentionality that, in addition to political, social, and economical settings, is increasingly exploring the cultural mechanism of the medium, for it considers a change in the way one sees as the consequence of cultural aspects of seeing, using it as raw material for inquiry. In other words, a significant part of contemporary photography’s existence is borrowed from confirmation of the metamorphosis of seeing: this alone has affected other art media. Mehrdad Afsari not only has established himself as a landscape photographer, he can also be considered as photographer-artist landscapist. Although a kind of going back and forth between indoor and outdoor can clearly be seen; except “Shahnameh” and “America, Suspended Land,” however, all his series can fit into an internal vista: looking at a landscape from a point, where the viewer is standing alone.

In Afsari’s images, we encounter landscapes into which we have seldom gazed, for when we saw them (especially in the present exhibition and “After Grandmother”), we were not alone. The question of whether or not the artist’s solitude is the overlooked point for us observers in a digital age, is perhaps a point of departure to a journey, on which Afsari himself has set out, avoiding cities and people along the way, leaning towards an abstraction and a stillness that is connected to the movement of our gaze. In his first series, “The Symphony of Light.” Mehrdad Afsari looks from the interior architectural spaces into the windows of light, sometimes capturing the reflection of that very light from the adobe- and brick-walls on two black and white negative frames, in a way that when the darkness of each frame is transferred into the darkness of the next, he makes a panoramic, unattainable image, in order to set in motion the interior/ exterior architectural space with the movement of the viewer’s gaze. It seems that this movement is the photographer’s starting point to move towards a personal approach, this time on the pretext of a place, whose vastness encompasses the photographer so much that what he sees becomes ambiguous and obscure. Thus, what comes forth in his photographs is the unmistakable presence of the natural, whether it is “The Felts” in his next series (which is itself a natural, but displaced material), or in static or displaced stones of “Photography as A Myth.”

Looking back at Afsari’s works, why we see changes that seem to make them essentially different from each other? I believe a significant part of it is due to the fact that the artist does not care about following a certain way of photographing or representation. It is thus that, in some critical writings, he is referred to as an

experimental photographer, which makes it difficult to figure out the exact interrelation between his works. It is true in a sense, but the concepts with which Afsari defines himself are in fact more clearly outlined. Even in "Shahnameh" and "America, Suspended Land," which we set apart from his other series in terms of traditional landscape photography, are encounters with the threats of distancing from the nature of "self" with the help of artificial, digital equipment; a self which, in other series, ends up in a poetic nature, minimizing the representation of objects to his own personal view. However, we should not forget that, in the formal sense, it is this experimental course that has attached the notion of "seeing based on what is invisible in a text" to Afsari's recent works. It is a concept reflected with visual simplicity in "Roadscape" and "I am oblivious of all things," and with intricacy and visual arrangement in "The Sacred Geometry of Chance" and "Insomnia."

In "Persian Garden," Afsari deals with the fading away of passions in their historical contexts. In this series, he replaces the present darkness with the colorful character of the Persian gardens of the past. Here, perhaps it is the historical distance that makes us gradually get used to "not noticing the loss." Such going to and fro between historical and non-historical elements is itself an evidence for the photographer's lived experience in a place, whose history has not been written by its own people, because this land, after a series of library-burnings, have always preferred "being" to "permanence."

Having made a transition from all the previous series, it seems that Afsari has adopted a different approach since his last exhibition "After Grandmother." While this new approach is in line with his earlier works, it has an ordinary, run-of-the-mill quality, void of photographic elements. Although we are familiar with the artist escaping the world of objects, as viewers, we sense that something essential is missing. In this series, which was presented in its entirety nine years after it was finished (the chronological disarrangement of his works is itself an evidence for his struggle to encompass his personal history), we encounter, more than before with meanings hidden outside the frame, for if we see the photos only objectively, not much will come forth, but if we consider concrete layers that exist out of the frames, we will be alone with a new area for discourse with the photos and ourselves, where meanings and associations of doubt and suspension, loss and recollection, come to life. It is here that the viewer of Afsari's photographs has to move before the frames, for in this mechanism, the pictures, more than being answers, are posing questions. For the same reason that the dark veils of our century will become translucent only if they are doubted and questioned.

This is the approach followed in this exhibition, consisting of two photography series and one video. The most expressive feature of Mehrdad Afsari's video titled "His brightness is the veil of his brightness," is the slithering movement of the reflection of sunlight on a blue surface that seems to be passing from under a bridge. If we gaze for a while, we will realize that the camera is fixed, but every now and then, we feel like it is moving. Even though we know this is an optical illusion, it is as if we are witnessing the movement of the eye of a person behind the video camera. Thus, the stationary camera is reminiscent of the moment that the image was captured, and the movement of light's reflection alludes to the motion in the viewer's mind: in order to overtake what is happening in the screen. Now, with the help of such image, has Afsari been

successful in highlighting the responsiveness of the mind when it encounters the moving/static image? Is it not captured with aid of light and its reflection in a dark room? A dark room, in which the images of the columns of the bridge is reversed, so the upside-down image can be a reference to the mechanism and act of photography. Shortly, we will see how this mental motion in front of photographic image hints at how we can interpret Mehrdad's works.

In "The Hidden Law of Causality" series, which is similar to "Years Long Gone" in its visual objectivity and its down-to-earth quality, we see traces of man's presence, which is, similar to the "trace-like quality of the photo," comes to the fore plainly in a dusty road (in one of the photos), and remains hidden in others. Shooting in the light of cloudy weather allows us to take a look at all the photos, seeing nothing but a drudging desolation. These images, like the works of new topographers, warn us, but, in another sense, it is as if they are taking us to a crime scene after months or years. The idea of desolation cannot be located inside the frames, for everything seems to be normal, like a remote wasteland. Are these photos like a terrifying passage that have wounded someone before and after they were taken? Can these photos, which are less spectacular and scenic, be considered as the calculated reaction of the photographer to industrialization? Whatever the answer, dim traces of a dirge for the Earth can be detected. These signs might be better perceived when we think about the excessive consumption on our planet, or even global warming. With that in mind, these images may cast a shadow of visual pain, which is the result of distancing from the incident, from behind the clouds, that take the shadows away from the perspective.

In "Years Long Gone," which were single-frames (unlike the traditional way of making a series) taken during the course of four years in different location in Iran, we encounter open and half-open vistas that seem scenic at first. The difference is that, by tweaking the photo, increasing the exposure time (in two mountain photos), and also computer editing, the photographer has made perspectives that, more than showing a subject in the foreground, are actually cold backgrounds. This coldness keeps the viewer in suspense in a scenic, spectacular image. It seems that they need something more than their size to chime in with the painterly tradition of a scenic vista: things that the photographer keeps hidden from us. It is thus that the photos and us are caught up between "what must be" and "fading away." At first, the blurring inside the photos (which takes a unique shape inside each frame), is a veil, increasing the tendency for abstraction. But a little farther (because of the diversity of the photos, such as mountainous vistas, sea, trees, and desert) something crawls in from the space between the images; something that tastes like "loosing" and "not reaching." Maybe that is why there are no frames, so that the viewer can easily wander from inside the image to the outside.

The title of this series, along the sleeping beauty of the images, attracts our attention to loss and longing, while reminding us of the desire to see the absolute beauty. This desire and reminder, however, makes an abrasion between the romantic quality and the photos. But the feature itself, as a transformed tool in the hands of the photographer, is deployed to raise questions: Is it not beauty that, in the transforming digital processes of our age, has turned to a virtual Arcadia? Is the absence of such beauty not enough for making such romantic landscapes? With these images, Afsari distances from visual reality all the more, examining references to painting, not like contemporary

landscapists such as Jeff Wall or Andreas Gursky, but through attaching importance to isolated minimalism in the negative space of oriental painting. In this sense, what we see is a holistic approach to silent spaces in the oriental painting, with no reference to a specific work in a specific time and space, for the confluence of these images is with the “self” in our times, not the fervent “other” in spaces.

That the images are seen as backgrounds, remind us of countless images of nature that are to caress our eyes in front of the screens every single day. The difference is that Mehrdad Afsari’s images create fields of inquiry, so that we cannot easily click and “choose as desktop background.” The photos of “Years Long Gone” series do not give us a clue of the place in which they were captured, because the photographer’s vantage point is the “coordinates of seeing” in “time.” With more emphasis than “The Hidden Law of Causality,” they avoid being topographical by making visual-objective choices, leaving us in a daze, in a fantastic, wistful time. Our contemporary age forces our eyes to study and to see the ambitions and desires of our dominated “self” once again.

*) Wells, Liz (editor), Photography: A Critical Introduction, Routledge, 2015.