

IN FOCUS

Adrien Missika

Melancholy and entropy haunt the French artist's films and photographs

by Tom Morton



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Adrien Missika is a French artist based in Berlin, Germany. In 2011, he was awarded the 13th Prix Fondation d'entreprise Ricard, and his film *Dôme* (2011) is currently on view at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, until 4 September. Missika will have a solo show at La Salle de bains in Lyon, France, in November. That same month he is taking part in the 2nd Benin Biennale. His solo show at Kunsthaus Glarus, Switzerland, will open in February 2013.

In Adrien Missika's recent film *Black Sand Beach* (2011), a dead tree stands upright on a Hawaiian shore, supported by a tangle of roots some two metres tall. The base of the tree's trunk appears to hover just above the blue line of the horizon, as though the Pacific archipelago were retreating towards the Earth's core, leaving the plant's hidden parts exposed. To the lulling melody of Hui Ohana's slack-key guitar classic ‘Sweet Lei Mokihana’ (1973), we see a pair of dogs trotting across the black sands, where they are soon joined by a couple of ageing guys who resemble Lawrence Weiner and Jeff Bridges, were they to wave their respective goodbyes to the art world and Hollywood stardom and spend their remaining days as surf bums. The Jeff Bridges guy pats the caramel Labrador, the Lawrence Weiner guy swings gently from the tree's upper roots, and then they wander out of frame, followed by the dogs. *Black Sand Beach* is, by any measure, a film in which very little happens, but its air of honeyed melancholy is oddly affecting. On the shore, in their board shorts and beards, the two men seem to patiently await the end of the world.

Missika's films and photographs are preoccupied with entropy. For his photographic series ‘Einfühlung’ (2004–10) (a German term the artist has said he understands as a ‘feeling of oneness with the world’), he made a ‘grand tour’ of the peripheral neighbourhoods of several major European cities,

where he took low-resolution shots of Modernist social housing blocks using a first-generation Nokia camera-phone. The resulting inkjet prints have a soft-focus, curiously empathetic quality, as though the device that captured them sees in these crumbling, ideologically unfashionable buildings some reflection of its own obsolescence.

Another series, ‘A Dying Generation’ (2011), revisits the Los Angeles palm trees photographed by Ed Ruscha in his seminal artist's book *A Few Palm Trees* (1971). Missika shoots them in the same deadpan, repetitious fashion, but in the 40 years that have elapsed between the two bodies of work, the palms have grown huge, and will soon dry out beneath the burning California sun. Looking at Missika's series, we get to thinking not only about how representations may outlive the things they represent, but also how, over time, all images rot down into the general mulch of our visual culture.

In a third series, ‘Space Between’ (2007–09), the artist presents photographs of places that exist on the fringes of human experience. While some were taken on his frequent travels, others are mocked up in the studio using polystyrene and paint – like his image of debris floating above the earth's atmosphere in *Asteroid* (*Space Between*) (2007). At once stagey and strangely convincing, these photographs draw heavily on our television- and film-derived expectations of what such remote places might look like, and awake us to the part our own learned visual habits play in the formulation of photographic ‘truth’.

While linking the Romantic landscape, the modern ruin and the eschatological sci-fi sublime is not unique to Missika's practice, his work has a dreamy way with temporality that is all its own. His video *Grand Prix* (2009) comprises a succession of still frames of the late-1920s Spanish racing track, Sitges-Terramar, that goes by so

rapidly we might imagine ourselves at the wheel of a sports car. This once-hallowed ground, however, has been abandoned, and bushes of weeds now grow through the track, like vines snaking up the steps of an Aztec pyramid. As with most of Missika's works, *Grand Prix* presents us with a world absent of humans. Making our virtual passage along Sitges-Terramar's chicanes, we begin to wonder how soon the ecosystem will reclaim the concrete circuit, reducing it to dust. Not long, in the grand scheme of things, but far longer than any human lifespan. Ruins will always be with us, as we speed along our course.

Shown in his recent exhibition ‘The Sun Is Late’ at Galerie Crone in Berlin, the Super-8 film *Dôme* (2011) is perhaps Missika's most ambitious work to date. Here, an anonymous young man explores a vast domed structure built by Oscar Niemeyer on the site of the Tripoli International Fair in Lebanon. Its construction was halted in 1975 at the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War, and it has stood incomplete and inaccessible to the public ever since. As the camera follows the man through the building's shadowy interior, we see him slapping at the steel tendrils that hang from its concrete walls and beams as though they were piano keys or guitar strings. His actions slowly transform Niemeyer's cupola into a gigantic musical instrument, filling it with an echoing composition of rattles, clunks and clangs. In the film's final frames, we see him clamber up the dome's exterior, like an astronaut about to plant a flag on an unblemished Martian peak, or the last inhabitant of a blasted Earth attempting to hail a passing starship. Is this a beginning, or an end? In Missika's work, both possibilities walk hand in hand.





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