Questioning Landscape: the overwhelming awe of the impoverished: Argentine up to its neck in water.

The thing to be known is the natural landscape. It becomes known through the totality of it forms.

Carl O.Sauer

The Case of Entre Rios.

Not many contemporary artists are painting landscapes but those who do have proved to be exceptional. I shall be making reference to two of them in the course of this essay: David Hockney and Gerhard Richter; and, at the same time, I'll occasionally be moving back in time to Poussin, Constable, and Monet. I should also make it clear from the outset that M&J have found their own way into the genre; they are not dealing with nostalgia or memory, they are not vying with photographic reality or questioning how to represent nature, and they are not part of some larger *ism*: Realism, Symbolism, or Impressionism. They return neither to the daunting presences of the Northern Romantics, nor to the ordered universe of Lorrain or Poussin, nor to the bourgeois opulence of the Impressionists, nor to their own rich Argentinean tradition of 19th century landscape. They are doing what they have always done: react and act. They have always insisted on their freedom not to be tied to language or style, moving into the world through ideas, occasions, and images that have momentarily energized their own experiences - something we need more than we know in the tawdriness of contemporary living and something that lies at the heart of our experience of this series. Their versions overwhelm us with the kind of immediate presence that they themselves as artists and humans must also have felt. . I am talking of a sense of *awe*, the suggestion of fear, mystery, spirituality, and wonder before the world. These landscapes are alive, charged with fragmentary chips of the symbolic and the allegoric; poor but seductive.

Their origin lies in a trip that Lafitte and Mendanha made to the farm-estate of a friend to spend a long weekend; it was situated in Entre Rios, a province seaped in the stagnation of the rural crisis that characterizes a large part of Argentinean economy where over 40% of the population work in highly precarious conditions: a land rich in resources but unexploited and often subject to flooding. The owners prefer the comforts, culture, and commodities of the city, and as a result the land falls fallow and victim to its own sad exuberance

These landscapes want us to experience visual saturation: image overload, closing us in with the natural cycles of birth, decay and rejuvenation where life re-emerges out of putrefaction. The beauty of the images comes through from some kind of primal chaos and swamps us, just as the landscape itself has been swamped and underwater for centuries as a result of seasonal storms and floods. Once again we think of Kant's *sensus communis*, as a place that should not be abandoned. Over the last few years, contemporary criticism has seen aesthetic questions once again coming to the fore of theoretical concerns. Beauty is always manifested as appearance without ever being limited to it. It elicits reactions that are much too complex to be thought of as simply pleasure. These sodden

landscapes soak us in, despite the fact that they serve as the occasional recipients of non-recyclable plastic reminders of man's presence and culture, from an anachronistic dwarf-like human figure to the macabre surreal detail of a human ear that seems to have come from David Lynch's *Blue Velvet!*. Apart from sheer visual pleasure, there is a palpable sense of visionary potential in these works, forcing us to attempt to see through the undergrowth in search of the mysteries of natural light. We are stopped by details, entangled in the trunks, branches, and twigs that are pushing robustly upwards. Yet, in the midst of the *tabula rasa,* we are also made to feel the signs of an indomitable energy that refuses any final act of surrender. Our encounter with these works is intense and immediate; nature is barbed, chaotic, and overwhelming and, at the same time, robust, prolific, and versatile: exposed roots, wind-swept trees at an angle, bits of wood left behind after the flooding or snapped off by the wind, paths trodden between the trees, opened as much by water as by man, sodden leaves, moss-covered trunks declaring where the wind comes from, slanted rainstorms pushing up the level of the rivers and flooding the meadows, nothing human, just leftovers, traces, sad objects like scattered evidence at the scene of a violent crime. Few people wander here for pleasure. It lives in forgotten time, disturbed only by nature herself.

I recall an American poet, Ed Dorn, who said that: "landscape both forms and informs the people who live within it." There may be no humans in this vast twenty-one metre work, set along the River Uruguay, but silence and the absence of the human also talk. The nightmares of Argentinean yellow journalism are there, small details hidden in the undergrowth that trouble the eye when we come across them. I have already mentioned the sinister Van Gogh ear (like a settling of accounts between drug gangs) but we can also see hanging abandoned from the branches of a tree a pair of Topper dance shoes that seem like a limp but modish symbol of barrio life in the urban sprawl of Buenos Aires. At one level, they refer to the fire in the Cromagnon Dance Hall where many people lost their lives in what was one of the major tragedies of recent years; and, at another level, they symbolize the presence of a drug dealer on the block who loves to flaunt his wealth and dazzle any of the young girls packed into the dance hall in search of her Saturday night escape-from-it-all! These image symbols make it clear that there is no escape into the idyllic and that Nature is always supremely indifferent to both how it is used and human fate in general.

M&J are drawn to an ethics of poverty but also succumb to the muted modulations of colour and its dancing bouts of brilliance. Technically the two artists have emphasized the impact of what they saw through a process of cropped photographic images and a selective working of the vital immediacy of its forms (not literal transcriptions) and the subtlety of its colours. The panels are cinematic and hyperreal; everything is intensified, indisputably real but, at the same time, realer than real. Plasticine is used as the material for all the panels and used as if it were volumetric paint with touches of relief. Some of the branches appear suspended in the air. Technically many of the sky sections have been finished with melted plasticine, allowing the artists to "*paint*" with a spatula and thus lending an added density to the work.

The works are presented as an interconnected series but they follow no precise

chronology and come from different parts of Entre Rios. They are assembled to function both individually and as a group. They are mental landscapes and this is what links them, say, to Gerhard Richter. For Mendanha, they have an oniric quality of "somebody walking in a dream towards the song of fresh water".[1] Well, maybe, but perhaps it sounds a little all too symbolic and gospel! Once the composition is decided the artists turn to the question of volume, giving the works a musical quality, sumptuous and harsh, vibrant and dense. Things sink in or protrude, chords are discordant and harmonies are constantly being modulated. At the base of these panels we can see the relief-sculpting, exploiting very different materials, ranging from cardboard and wire to Styrofoam and wood. The choice of material seems to set up a kind of musical key and a tonal access to the act of painting.

These saturated landscapes become 'inscapes' for our own thoughts. It is a superb achievement, resituating the genre within any serious discourse on the practices and possibilities of contemporary art. We now need not so much a *relational* art as a potential saviour for our social ills, but an art that risks and explores, that has something to say that needs to be said, not something to say that has finally to be said for it! Conceptual Art left a legacy and all these artists have exploited it in their own ways. These landscapes are groomed, self-conscious simulacra. They do not copy the photo but interpret the photo in terms of form and feeling, shaping it as form and as vision, recovering a genre by questioning it. They begin in darkness and end on a horizon, as we all do!

As I have said one of the first impressions many of us have upon seeing these works is an image of Monet's *Nenuphares* in the Tuileries. M&J remain unconvinced. Monet was talking of hedonism, of the comfort and aspirations of an emerging middle class who found themselves with time for pleasure: picnics, boat trips, restaurants along the riverbank at Argenteuil, a sense of well-being and a progressive upward movement in terms of class. In many ways, Monet seems like a character out of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, even if the bustle of life around him, especially at the weekends, was essentially gratifying. This is very different world from that of M&J – pick up stuff in the Palermo studio, bung the kid into the car, drive over to Entre Rios, and take a mass of digital photos! Monet comforts and cuddles, his themes are light, surface, and colour; whereas M&J's are death, rebirth, entanglement, and abandon, dealing with a semi hostile, water-clogged ground, imbued momentarily with a translucent flurry of light.

T.J.Clark suggests that Monet believed that nature possessed a consistency in a way that nothing else did "It had a presence and a unity which agreed profoundly with the act of painting"[2] Monet felt himself part of a tradition that needed to be rephrased and extended: Courbet, the Barbizon School, Hobbema, Ruysdael, Daubigny, Jongkind, and Corot. The gist of the matter was the interdependence of man and nature. His work deals with this provisional relation – the extent to which man makes the landscape or is made by it. We would do well to remember

[1] Mendanha, M., e-mail correspondence, Nov., 2012.

[2] Clark, T.J., *The Painting of Modern Life*, Princeton U.P., 1984, p182.

Ed Dorn's illuminating words that landscape forms and informs the man who lives within it. Nature, if you like, serves as a register for human progress, gathering the waste as it accumulates, accommodating first the farm, then the thriving village, and then the nestling town, and then later in Monet's work the factory and the smoke. In M&J landscape does not so much accompany human progress as denounce human lethargy, decadence, and indifference. It is an uncomfortable witness since it talks of a potentially fertile land that has not been used. It is both a cry against leaving things as they are and a sense of awe before its repressed potential. For M&J landscape is still something that is being tamed, that has been constantly abused, or that falls into stagnation because it is difficult to exploit. Looking at these *tableaux* we sense the chaotic spontaneity, the rot and the profusion, the dormant humus and the ongoing process, as well as the stubborn resistance that lines the language of the poor. For M&J landscape is sensation and concept, a matter of what can be done with it. It carries, hidden in the bushes and undergrowth, a critique. It is overwhelming and confusing, garrulous and somewhat tormented, a rotting decay that never stopped asserting its own indomitable instinct for survival.

M&J took numerous photos on the trip but, above all, they were overwhelmed by the startling, soaked drama of the scene: the putrid fecundity, the signs of death and rebirth. They were excited and intrigued by the resulting photos and slowly found themselves, like flies, being drawn into the web. They felt the images could serve as a metaphor for a social situation. Argentine was caught in yet another of its immense downward cycles and slides, disoriented *amidst* an increasingly flagrant political corruption and a total absence of political vision. The wealthy have moved their money to Swiss banks, or to fiscal paradises in the Caribbean, or converted it into American dollars; the middle class is losing all it had saved; devaluation and inflation are slowly wiping them out. And, here in Entre Rios, there is a ground-zero situation: a sense of sinking from nothing to less than nothing.

Here is a place where nobody goes and where nobody wants to go! Whatever comes next will include yet another massive struggle, and then another! At first glance, the tangled undergrowth appears as menacing: dead wood, rotting vegetation, and sparse signs of human presence. Everything here is presented as a cyclorama (maybe even a psychodrama). Our first impressions before this *spectacle* - and there is perhaps no better term -may well be to think of Monet's *Waterlilies*, but Monet is representing bourgeois pleasure: the natural beauty of a pond whose surface is scattered with flowers, their reflections, and the play of light. Manuel and Juliana take another route closer to our contemporary reality: no sugar, no Sunday picnic, no fun and games, just token litter scattered haplessly in the undergrowth. Here we find ourselves face to face with a bleak reality - with the wilful oblivion of an area of the country, with an elemental fight for survival, and with a zero level of care but, at the same time, we sense the potential for rebirth.

The landscapes symbolize this sense of utter abandonment and the chaotic natural forces of nature can be seen taking over. Here is a place where nobody goes and where nobody wants to go. Whatever comes next includes yet another massive struggle! At first glance, the tangled undergrowth appears as menacing:

dead wood, rotting vegetation, and sparse signs of human presence. Everything here can sink into oblivion. It is presented as a cyclorama (maybe even a psychodrama). Our first impressions or orientations before this *spectacle* - and there is perhaps no better term -may well be to think of Monet's *Waterlilies* - and I'll be talking about this in more detail later in this essay – but it is an impression that quickly fades since Monet is representing bourgeois pleasure: the wondrous natural beauty of a pond whose surface is scattered with flowers whose subtle reflections include those an emerging middle class's own contentment with itself. In other words, an image that encompasses and enchants. Manuel and Juliana take another route closer to our contemporary reality: no sugar, no Sunday picnic, no fun and games, just token litter scattered haplessly in the undergrowth. Here we find ourselves face to face with a bleak reality - with the wilful oblivion of an area of the country, with an elemental fight for survival, and with a zero level of care but, at the same time, we sense the powers of rebirth and what will become across the seasons, across time, a joyous defiance. None of us would question that, as with Monet's work, the scene visually overwhelms. It pervades all. It haunts our minds and absorbs our eyes: its meanings come to us as we work our way around, as it asks us to register the blast of an overall impression, to step back, to take it all in, and to step forward, to concentrate on detail.

They work seems to me to come at us as a painterly experience, despite the fact that their materials might be interpreted as a negation of this medium. This insistence on the painting experience can be seen as a positioning in a context where art when it looks at nature tends to do so through two-dimensional works. The most interesting projects today show an activist tendency: a care for and curiosity about the planet, involving both an intellectual investigative approach and a social struggle. Let me mention, for example, three impressive examples – and throughout this essay I'd like to try and situate M&J's work within a larger context of contemporary and modern practice - Mel Chin's *Revival Field*, Mark Dion's and Alexis Rickman's project on r-selected species, and Alan Sonfist's *Circles of time*. I cite these works because of their evident social and intellectual commitment and their different procedures but, at the same time, I want also to insist on the fact that Lafitte and Mendanha are plastic artists who render complexity through "painting" and, in our present climate, that stands as an equally radical gesture: their images confront and conquer.

Sonfist's work deals with the primal experience of creation. He tells us: "to enter the main part of the sculpture, you must go through a tunnel in the earth and rediscover our geological past. What I have created is a circle, rippling in waves of rock, each concentric circle representing a layer of time, as with the growth of a hardwood tree. This is a visualization of the upper and lower strata of Tuscan hills. As one walks out of this ring, one enters a ring of laurel representing the Greeks, who introduced the tree to Italy. One then goes through an opening, which is close to the ground, and there you can feel and smell the Etruscan herbs. Then the passage rises, opening to view bronze castings of endangered and extinct trees, which mimic and represent the Greek and Roman heroes of ancient sculpture. In the centre of the circle is the virginal forest of Italy, that which existed before human intervention. Finally, to complete the histories of the land,

I have represented its contemporary use by a ring of olive trees and wheat."[3] Our question here would be if the work actually conveys the symbolic complexity that Sonfist intends? And secondly whether the work creates the same empathy, as the visual image that he managed to conjure up as suggestion in his words? The success, or not, of the work depends on this, given the fact that he emphatically wants us to feel the experience. It's clear that he has complicated the referential field more thickly than is the case with M&J's landscapes, but the latter's work presents the same kind of total experience, the same desire for empathy.

There is a sense of catharsis that may also underlie – however different - Chin's project: a direct intervention testing the borders between agronomy and poetry where she works with specific plants that can remove toxics from the soil. The work carries an intense spiritual charge attempting to expand life into a shape that keeps changing and spinning as it is affected by political and economic structures. This is, indeed, a wondrous work, although our experience of it consists essentially in looking at a field but, having said that, it is also true that the work carries over immediately into the imagination!

Dion, the third artist I mentioned above, is specifically interested in the representation of nature or, more precisely, the way it is officially represented in the context of a museum. What is it in this institutional context that comes to stand for nature, at a particular time and place and, also, for a particular group of individuals? These artists are working in the in-between spaces that may indeed be one of the most interesting spaces for the production of art today where art is seen as an action against the *status quo*, and one that calls for the recovery of a critical edge.

Manuel and Juliana ask us to experience visual saturation: image overload. They close us in with the pattern of the seasons, with the natural cycles of birth, decay and rejuvenation where life re-emerges out of putrefaction. Yet, these images also stand for something beyond themselves, as a cry of faith in the cyclic process, equally applicable to their social circumstances where they suffer the disasters and miseries of the Argentinean economy. The two artists hope – but probably do not believe – that these natural cycles might also apply to the country's economy, to the lives of its long suffering inhabitants, and especially to those living in these depressed agricultural areas.

What truly astounds is the strange but undeniable beauty of these images: the sense of being engulfed. It is a beauty that comes through from some kind of primal chaos and swamps us, just as the landscape itself has been swamped and underwater for centuries as a result of seasonal storms and floods. Surely, looking at these works, we feel once again the application of Kant's *sensus communis*, by which he means not common *sense* but a common *sensibility,* capable of recognizing as universals simple, immediate manifestations of beauty.

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[3] Sonfist, A., *Nature*, Documents of Contemporary Art, Whitechapel and MIT, ed. J.Kastner, 2012, p.154-55.

Kant uses the example of a rose. It still seems a viable statement, even if it is clear that different cultures may well read the rose in different ways! What art does is constantly redefine the concept of beauty as a changing entity recognized by collective consensus (Richter, Doig, Twombly). This is a territory that should not be abandoned and, over the last few years, contemporary criticism has seen aesthetic questions once again coming to the forefront of theoretical concerns. Beauty is always manifested in appearance without ever being limited to it and it elicits reactions that are much too complex to be thought of as simply pleasure. The aesthetics of consumer societies should not be reduced to the lax comforts of the consumer eye. Pretty, professional finish is one thing; the f*risson* – troubling and satisfying – of beauty is something else! These sodden landscapes soak us in, despite the fact that they serve as the occasional recipients of non-recyclable plastic reminders of man's presence and culture, from an anachronistic dwarf-like human figure to the macabre surreal detail of a human ear that seems to have come from David Lynch's *Blue Velve!*. Apart from sheer visual pleasure, there is a palpable sense of visionary potential in these works, forcing us to attempt to see through the undergrowth in search of the mysteries of natural light. We are stopped by details, entangled in the trunks, branches, and twigs that are pushing robustly up towards the light. We feel the humus, smell the decay of the rotting vegetation, and register the twinges of apprehension at being caught in a place where almost nobody seems to have been. Yet, in the midst of the *tabula rasa,* we are also made to feel the signs of an indomitable energy that refuses any final act of surrender.

We can all recall that early in the nineteenth century the status of landscape painting was once again being reconsidered. Turner changed everything. Landscapes, claiming to be close imitations of nature, suddenly became the most popular form of art. There was a new consensus and a peaceful scene with water in the foreground, reflecting a luminous sky, and set off by dark trees was something everyone agreed was not only real but also beautiful! Landscape remains, in many respects, a social construct; we tend to recognize it through a series of collective vectors. It was Constable who said that his art could be found under every hedge and his natural vision corresponded to a reality recognized by a collective psyche. He painted what they saw! Kenneth Clark in his highly perceptive, even if outmoded, *Landscape into Art* mentions Constable's phrase, "the chiaroscuro of nature", as describing two effects: "first he meant the sparkle of light, 'the dews – breezes - bloom and freshness, not one of which has been perfected on the canvas of any painter in the world (…) and he also meant that the drama of light and shade must underlie all landscape compositions, and give the keynote of feeling in which the scene was painted."[4] In other words, Constable's view corresponds to the belief that there is a *reality* outside to paint and that we are all able to appreciate it. M&J use photos, as if finding reality suspect, just one more human construct. They can, perhaps, be seen as keeping nature at a remove, concerned with freezing instants as parts of a mosaic of the whole. They are more intent on creating a mood than imitating reality: a sense of being caught in this primal swamp of birth and death!

[4] Clark, K., *Landscape into Art*, Penguin, London, 1956, p87-88

Juliana told me that these works had served as a breath of fresh air, as a therapy that allowed her to get away from what had been becoming an excessive immersion in social and personal problems (she was referring to the still-lifes with their hints of Berni). There was, she said, something in the landscapes that she had always wanted to tell but that she felt incapable of saying or putting into words. What exactly was it? A communion with nature? A predisposition towards epiphany? I doubt it! So what was it that she could not put into words? One can only speculate in the hope of throwing some small light on her remark. Was it a sense of awe before the unchecked activity of nature? Was it a recognition of the power of nature to look after itself, as long as we don't interfere with it too much? Was it a feminine intuition of birth and rebirth? Lord knows, but what remains clear is that these works give rise to emotions we all feel, to values of general human significance, and to hope. Can this be seen as similar to what Robert Morris felt when he placed five basalt granite stones on the grounds of *Documenta* at Kassel in 1977? Yes and no! Morris was perhaps trying to provoke his public but he was also impressed by the history and inner life of these forms. M&F have been impacted by the history of this landscape and they gather its confused outpourings, its vital energies: the literal evidence of its "poor" beauty. I recall the words of the poet, George Oppen, who asks us to begin again and again, each time further impoverished, as an integral part of our search for the meanings of life.

Juliana also calls attention to her impression of losing herself within the landscape, paralleling her experience when painting. This may be something we all feel: the contact with first things. Manuel similarly acknowledges the poetic power of this virgin land but he is wary of all interpretative pushes towards the pastoral or the bucolic, insisting that our construction of landscape is primarily social and that we see what we want to see in it! There are no dangers here of any collapse into the facile clichés of Romanticism and equally important should it happen there are no fears; the landscape is flooded, dank, and tangled. They are not always in control!

I recall another American poet, Ed Dorn, who said that: "landscape both forms and informs the people who live within it." There may be no humans in this vast twenty-one (45 metros) metre work, set along the River Uruguay, but silence and the absence of the human also talk. The nightmares of Argentinean yellow journalism are there, small details hidden in the undergrowth that trouble the eye when we come across them. I have already mentioned the sinister Van Gogh ear (like a settling of accounts between drug gangs) but we can also see hanging abandoned from the branches of a tree a pair of Topper dance shoes that seem like a limp but modish symbol of barrio life in the urban sprawl of Buenos Aires. At one level, they refer to the fire in the Cromagnon Dance Hall where many people lost their lives in what wasone of the major tragedies of recent years; and, at another level, they symbolize the presence of a drug dealer on the block who loves to flaunt his wealth and dazzle any of the young girls packed into the dance hall in search of her Saturday night escape-from-it-all! These image symbols make it clear that there is no escape into the idyllic and that Nature is always supremely indifferent to both how it is used and human fate in general; it is obsessively engaged in its own endlessly repeated struggle.

There is no narrative holding these landscapes together; they are what has happened to them. Yet the fact remains, however, that the land across time collects stories: things that have been dropped, left behind, hidden, abandoned, forgotten. History is the story of man in place, it presents an accumulation of archaeological, social, anthropological, and ideological layers. It is indiscriminately receptive: a silent witness, I have mentioned some of these objects that M&J have left in the landscape as if they had come across them by accident. They are out of scale, memory presences, intensely eloquent but incomplete and unrelated. Undoubtedly, the most telling can be found in the last panel, lost amidst the mist and fog along a stretch of beach at the estuary of the Uruguay River: a small military aircraft or helicopter. As we come across it we simultaneously experience a visual shudder of recognition that takes us back to the darkest years of the Dictatorship (1976-1980) when the so called Death Squadrons flew over the estuary and dropped bodies and corpses into the water, murderously adding to the death-toll of the missing. These bodies were often washed back onto the shores of the river and left stranded as heinous criminal evidence.[5] A recent work on this dark period grimly notes:"If you thow bulky things into the waters, they will be returned to you as truths. The river does not lie". The landscape trails off into a sense of litany: a mysterious, slow, loving and final embrace: a horizon line that marks the tremulous division between things.

Working these landscapes has taken M&J into their multliple histories. They have gathered their own tokens and left them behind as signs of acquired experience: sometimes as things they have added to the landscape and sometimes as things that they have found lying there. The land accepts as it has always done, although we also can find signs that it is tired of human abuse, of crude and senseless exploitation, and of the loss of what was initially a relationship of respect and balance. Who then lived in La Landa? Who were the originary inhabitants of the delta?Apparently an Indian tribe, called the Chanas, a nomadic population who roamed the area. According to legend when they caught a prisoner, they feted him for a week before eating him so as to acquire his powers. Nothing changes very much!Their artefacts can still be found, carved out of horn. They talk of a way of living and serve as guardians of history. These are, perhaps, digressions since the work avoids any central text, beyond that of the immensity of landscape in the life of man as a fundamental measure of his presence. Nevertheless, these inclusions insist that detail teaches and that throughout our lives we will be rewarded if we make the effort to give care to them.

Mendhana feels the omnipresent lure of seduction and the terrible indifference of these landscapes. He embraces the ethics of poverty they so desperately represent but also succumbs to their muted modulations of colour and dancing bouts of brilliance. Technically the two artists have emphasized the impact of what they saw through a process of cropped photographic images and a selective working of the vital immediacy of its forms and the strength and subtlety of its colours. The panels are cinematic and hyperreal; everything is intensified,

[5] in a book published In 2012 M&J were given a copy of a book called "*El Lugar Perfecto" (The Perfect Place)* where these practices were fully documented-

indisputably real but, at the same time, realer than real. Plasticine is used as the material for all the panels and used as if it were volumetric paint with touches of relief. Some of the branches appear suspended in the air. Technically many of the sky sections have been finished with melted plasticine, allowing the artists to "*paint*" with a spatula and thus lending an added density to the work. The 'landscape' also allowed each member of the group to find his/her place within it. Its inclusivity meant that each could work on what most interested him and that they could move forward together on the same panel: the expanse of sky, the details of a branch, the movement of the trunks etc. One of the results of this procedure is that the works tend to have numerous focal points, like a Pollock. For Mendanha this sense of working as a group, each independent in his own activity but conscious of the others, is an ethical imperative and the fundamental reason for the existence of a team studio.

These are conceptual pieces: rehashed landscapes. M&J work with the literally thousands of photos they took in the countryside, selecting images both for their visual impact and for the meanings they permit and propose. The photos serve as points of departure for the work; the interpretation takes place on their body. In other words, it is not a matter of a literal transposition and this is where they precisely become separated from the tradition, perversely adding something to it. Landscape gives them literally a malleable image that they constantly modify in the early stages of the work, not so much in terms of faithfulness to the image but as to draw from it a visually tensed and emotionally charged impact. The works are presented as an interconnected series but they follow no precise chronology and come from different parts of Entre Rios. They are assembled to function both individually and as a group. They are mental landscapes and this is what links them, say, to Gerhard Richter or Peter Doig. For Mendanha, they have an oniric quality of "somebody walking in a dream towards the song of fresh water".[6] Well, maybe, but it sounds a little all too symbolic and gospel!

This series is conceptually orchestrated, tracing the seasonal dispositions of our lives, as well as our desperate clutching after any sign of hope, felt as ebbing possibilities that come and go as time runs over us like a river. In each of the panels there is emotional current, an awareness of where it wants to go. Once the composition is decided Manuel and Juliana turn to the question of volume that allows them to highlight both natural features and feelings, giving the works a musical quality, sumptuous and harsh, vibrant and dense. Things sink in or protrude, chords are discordant and harmonies are constantly being modulated. At the base of these panels we can see the relief-sculpting, exploiting very different materials, ranging from cardboard and wire to Styrofoam and wood. The choice of material seems to set up a kind of musical key and a tonal access to the act of painting.

The referential field of these works becomes richer and more complex. Mendanha whilst acknowledging the siren calls of Nature, and the dramatic, symphonic staging of contradictory emotions, but he pushes us back towards the

[6] Mendanha, M., e-mail correspondence, Nov, 2012.

social and to where words can rush towards allegorically tinged readings. It is as if something is missing if we simply reduce the images to a potent visual presence. Fifty per cent of the population in Argentine are employed in the countryside, most of them without any social coverage, miserable working conditions, and salaries below the minimum wage. The facts are stark as the trees and men's backs as bent as the branches. Nevertheless, deprived of everything but still not devoid of hope. The vast estates have always been in the hands of a privileged few, less than three per cent of the population, who only have to exploit a small part of it to continue to live, as idle as the land, in immense comfort. The majority of these estates are now in the hands of faceless, foreign, transnational companies: American, Chinese, Russian, and Brazilian. Their relationship to the land is become virtually the same as their relationship to each other: little more than the unscrupulous search for quick profits! Argentine has always been an export economy and it is now benefitting from a momentary boom as a result of the demand for soya in expanding nations such as China and India, but the sad fact remains that little of the profit returns to improve the lives of those who most need it.

In short, we can all lose ourselves in these soaked and saturated landscapes, converting them into 'inscapes' for our own thoughts. It is, I believe, a superb achievement, resituating the genre within any serious discourse on the practices and possibilities of contemporary art. Art has its own cycles where things fall in and out of the public eye. We may now well have had enough in the Western world of large scale cibachrome photography, experimental or performance based video, installation, and neo-conceptual works that either fail to communicate their so called concept or simply fall into an illustration of something that is not far from a social cliché. We now need not so much a *relational* art as a potential saviour for our social ills, but an art that risks and explores to a greater degree, that has something to say that needs to be said, not something to say that has to be said for it!

Landscape has had a long and varied history. When Gainsborough died in 1788 the entrance hall of the house where he lived in Pall Mall was lined with unsold landscapes. In other words, as a genre it was not particularly appreciated. I guess the same could be said today where its appearances seem few and far between. Romanticism seems sick and suspect, out of touch with the dominant irony and cynicism of our times.

M&J'S landscape is suffused with shimmering whiffs of optimism, vulnerable flurries in the midst of rot and stagnation, but rarely with the sublime. Mythology reflects a region's reality. Read its novels, its legends and tales. It is a question of the small nouns crying faith and firing the spirit of resistance as mirrored in nature. If Goethe called for more light and the Americans for more space, here in Entre Ríos, amidst the lethargy and indifference of some and the mere subsistence and endurance of others, they call for new beginnings, calls that continue to flourish in a climate that rarely goes beyond the bare minimum. There is a hope of change as the only thing that does not change, as a condition that defines what it means to be human. We see it around us and it is infectious. I don't want to fall into facile rhetorical claims but such emotion is, I believe, a palpable presence in these works.

At another level what is being played out here is a stance to life that can only imply, in the massive uncertainties that wrack our present climate, a rejection of the ideas that underlie the classical landscapes of artists such as Claude Lorrain and Gaspard Poussin. These gigantic figures served as examples for numerous other artists, including the fine English painter, Richard Wilson. He used them as ostensible model and he was able to build his own world upon them. For example, he also seems to have admired the glowing effects of light obtained by Cuyp, as well as borrowing something of the Dutch style in his treatment of foliage. Yet the principal influence on Wilson was Italy itself, its light and geological structure. Reynolds noted that his landscapes were too near common nature to admit supernatural objects (gods and goddesses, nymphs and fauns) that tend to litter so much classical landscape. I say these things because the continuity of tradition was less challenged than it is today, When broken the breaks were evident and understandable. Today, however, life is more fickle and our stances need no justification. And when I say rejection I don't mean any deliberate positioning but simply that history itself is now understood as a partial reading. It can be exploited but it has no absolute validity. M&J's work acknowledges and appreciates this history but it has become simply one more element in their image-bank, not the same as videogames but not that much different! Their inclusion of miniature elements in the undergrowth and foliage may have a certain debt to Poussin but it is simply visual, like Wilson, they stay clear of any notion of the supernatural, although not perhaps of the surreal! More precisely, they function like social leftovers where the undergrowth receives, hides, and absorbs all extraneous elements What I mean, of course, by rejection is that the philosophical beliefs of Poussin's time can no longer convince; they can be understood but not shared. The established *status quo* is now suspect, if not corrupt, and our daily patterns of existence are no longer geared to a collectively shared set of hierarchies. Rationality seems to have less hold on us than chaos theory! An order imposed from outside no longer appears acceptable; everything seems to have moved into an unstable cyberspace (cyber warfare looms up as one of Obama's principle obsessions in the last years of his presidency!).

These landscapes are groomed, self-conscious simulacra. They have no interest in pretending to be what it is that they pretend to be! They are both that and more; they recover a genre by questioning it.

The Case of Monet:

As I have said one of the first impressions many of us have upon seeing these works is an image of Monet's *Nenuphares* in the Tuileries, but that first impression quickly gives way before a Pessoan disquietude. It can come as no surprise that M&J remain unconvinced with the comparison. After all, Monet was talking of hedonism, of the comfort and aspirations of an emerging middle class who found themselves with time for pleasure: picnics, boat trips, restaurants along the riverbank at Argenteuil, a sense of well-being and a progressive upward movement in terms of class. The natural beauty of the water-lilies is enhanced by the social satisfaction of having the time available to look at them. At Giverny, Monet fully indulged his bourgeois pleasures and he may well have complained about the fact that the railway line cut him off from direct access to

the pond and about the four trains a day that intruded into his comfortable silence. In many ways, he seems like a character out of Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, even if the bustle of life around him, especially at the weekends, was essentially gratifying. This is very different world from that of M&J – pick up stuff in the Palermo studio, bung the kid into the car, and drive over to Entre Rios and take a mass of digital photos! Their landscapes are uncomfortable, impossible to penetrate, and the branches reach out, scratch, and tear. They assert the bare minims of existence; they are of the poor even if they belong to the rich. Monet comforts and cuddles, his themes are light, surface, and colour; whereas M&J's are death, rebirth, entanglement, and abandon, dealing with a semi hostile, water-clogged ground that, despite all contrary circumstances, is imbued occasionally with a translucent flurry of light, as if we finally reach what we have been looking for. Monet presents nature and tries to capture light (in other words, it is a technical challenge that also moves him closer to the truth); M&J deal in overwhelming immediacy, metaphor, and raw feeling. Their work is motivated by the knowledge that the resilience and resistance of the people who inhabit this virgin, unyielding land will finally be enough to let them get out of the undergrowth and start to untangle their lives!

M&J's work comes straight at us, sheer frontality with cut-in depths and difficulties. It carries no whiff of romanticism. It is full of snares, not seductions. There is an immediate recognition of nature's raucous and indomitable energies, its inherent knowledge of how to survive serves as a functioning metaphor for the Argentinean economic situation, mirroring the trammels and repercussions of life in a depressed zone: the constant grinding down, the back-breaking problems, the difficulty of getting anything going. M&J went there, but they don't live there, nor do they have any desire to do so! Monet, on the other hand, moved to Argenteuil, just before Christmas of 1871, and lived in the town for the next six years. Friends came out from the city to see him, such as Renoir and Sisley. They stayed with him and painted. Caillebotte lived across the river. Throughout this period Monet produced over one hundred and fifty works depicting the town and river. His concerns were multiple: what paint can and cannot do, how to revive a genre, and above all how to define the relationship between man and nature that is so deeply rooted in the European consciousness. T.J.Clark suggests that Monet believed that nature possessed a consistency in a way that nothing else did "It had a presence and a unity which agreed profoundly with the act of painting"[7] Monet felt himself part of a tradition that needed to be rephrased and extended: Courbet, the Barbizon School, Hobbema, Ruysdael, Daubigny, Jongkind, and Corot. The gist of the matter was the interdependence of man and nature, and not nature by itself. His work deals with this provisional relation – the extent to which man makes the landscape or is made by it. We would do well to remember Ed Dorn's illuminating words that landscape forms and informs the man who lives within it. Nature, if you like, serves as a register for human progress, gathering the waste as it accumulates, accommodating first the farm, then the thriving village, and then the nestling town, and then later in Monet's work the factory and the smoke. He himself took off to Giverny because it seemed less spoilt, despite his efforts in Argenteuil to balance factory chimneys

[7] Clark, T.J., *The Painting of Modern Life*, Princeton U.P., 1984, p182.

and tree trunks, or sails and commercial steamers, by masking and setting industrial presence at a distance. In M&J landscape does not so much accompany human progress as denounce human lethargy, decadence, and indifference. It is an uncomfortable witness since it talks of a potentially fertile land that has not been used. It is both a cry against leaving things as they are and a sense of awe before its repressed potential, *seeing* that all will survive since the energies - of land and of people - will be focused on the effort. In Entre Rios, where this land belongs to the vast *fincas* of absentee landlords who prefer life in the city spending what's left of the money their forbears so diligently earnt, things have not so much returned to the wilderness as never emerged from it! For Monet, landscape could hardly be construed without human intervention; for M&J landscape is still something that is being tamed, that has been constantly abused, or that falls into stagnation because it is difficult to exploit. Looking at these *tableaux* we sense the chaotic spontaneity, the rot and the profusion, the dormant humus and the ongoing process, as well as the stubborn resistance that lines the language of the poor. One hundred and fifty years later M&J are working out of a different tradition – one that well have reduced it to an information barrage, to nothing more than image - with different coordinates and, above all, with a different understanding of the role and place of nature but, like Monet, they are testing ways to extend landscape painting's range of reference. Monet incorporated the leisure industry into his painting: people boating down the river to look at the villas, eating at the restaurants, and generally relaxing *en famille*. There is a unity and a charm; people are enjoying themselves. There is orderliness and domesticity. In an act of complicity Monet allowed painting to become more light-hearted. For M&J landscape is sensation and concept, a matter of what can be done with it. It carries, hidden in the bushes and undergrowth, a critique. It is overwhelming and confusing, garrulous and somewhat tormented, a rotting decay that never stopped asserting its own indomitable instinct for survival. Framed as a genre, it stands as a powerful statement.

However, what they really share with Monet is the element of spectacle, of a vast and overwhelming presence. Monet started painting the Lilies back in the 1880's but the works we see in the Orangerie date from 1917 until 1926. In other words, they are being produced in the midst of the dark aftermath of World War I, one of the major carnages in human history. Monet was consciously looking for the decorative, perhaps as a kind of panacea. He had already suggested back in 1908 that he was thinking of using "the theme of the *Nymphéas* for a decoration. Carried the length of the walls, enveloping the entire interior with its unity, it would attain the illusion of a whole without end, of a watery surface without horizon, nerves overstrained by work would be relaxed there, following the restful example of the still waters, and to whomsoever lived there, it would offer an asylum of peaceful meditation at the centre of a flower aquarium."[8] We can all recall what Matisse had to say about searching for an art of equilibrium, purity and tranquillity to produce a sedative for the intellect. For Monet, it was a fight, with his health, since he was having trouble with his sight, and with the politicians to come to an agreement about where and how the work should be

[8] Monet, C., in C.Stuckey,*Waterlilies,* McMillan, N.Y, 1988, p.18.

installed. He was constantly destroying pieces because he was unsatisfied with the results, but the decorative is certainly present. Indeed, two of these pieces from the series were reproduced as Gobelin tapestries. M&J, however, are not interested in representing landscape but allowing it to speak in its own terms.

Cezanne once said that Monet had muscles. It was a strange term to use in the late 1890's but we can see what he means. He made it after a visit to Giverny. Monet had now been working on this theme for over three decades and was now living in style, having reached the stage in life where he could indulge in grandiose gestures whenever the fancy took him. He met Cezanne in the garden dressed in his English brogues and ruffled pastel shirts. This sense of aura would undoubtedly leave them feeling very uncomfortable but a similar sense of muscle can be felt in the way in which M&J subtly move materials across the surface, using a palette knife to paint the sky with a slightly liquid plasticine spread out in blue.

Impressionism dealt with the kaleidoscopic play of light, as registered instantaneously on the retina in a glance. What was interesting for Monet was the way he was able to incorporate two distinct senses of time into the work, both the brisk surprise of a glance and the extended wonder of meditation. M&J are engaged in an equally complex operation, transferring the photographic image to the work but also introducing the improvisational play that is associated with the freedom of painting, selecting and framing lyrical and dramatic elements from what they had seen, bringing them into the tensions of a whole, and fusing different times, moods, and perspectives.[9]

Whereas Monet was able to feel the direct presence from a range of artists able to help him in clarifying some of his interests and whose work served as a contributions and addition to the language of Impressionism, such as Renoir, or Caillebotte's use of decorative ensembles with circular motifs, or Morisot's exploitation of mural scale, or Boudin's sense of the fleeting condition of clouds; M&J gather a much more eclectic mix, characteristic of a contemporary disposition towards image-plunder that is, in all events, much a part of the day to cday iconography of their work: Poussin, Kiefer, Richter, Hockney, Monet, Berni, Friedrich, and a long etcetera. Monet and M&J have both felt the siren calls of working in series: the former, with St Lazare, Haystacks, and Rouen Cathedral; and the latter, with skulls, still-lifes, and Red Riding Hoods. Monet's works tend to be fragments implying a larger enveloping whole; M&J's document the seasons but seek to stage a spectacle. Monet gives us above, below, and upside down reflections; M&J constantly change the angle of viewing and the viewer's distance from the scene, so that we move in and out as entangled witnesses.

[9] Also, perhaps, worth commenting that if nobody stepped forward to buy, say, the Rouen series so as to keep them all together, despite the efforts of no less a figure than Clemenceau, then one should also wonder about the fate of this series in the crowded, ill-defined space of Argentinean contemporary art. Monet in painting these reflections was obsessed with conveying what he felt and that helps to explain why he destroyed so many. M&J's methodology allows continuous correction; they select the forms that tighten the conflictual web that seems so essential to any reading. They need each other and should be kept together!

Monet used two metre high and four meters wide canvases to complete this decorative suite. He worked outside in Spring and Summer, and then refined what he had done in the studio in the Autumn and Winter. To house the work he had to build a new studio – an eye sore in his opinion - where he was able to set out as many as twelve canvases, twenty three metres in length, twelve in width, and nearly fifteen in height. It is very different from the cramping situation of M&J's studio, reflecting the choking restrictions of today's economy that, ironically, constitute part of the larger meaning of these works. Monet refused to make any photographic record of the work's progress until satisfied with the results; M&J have used photography as a support mechanism for the construction of their images: they are part of its documentation!

Clemenceau tried to persuade Monet to donate his entire suite to the state as a monument to peace!! Initially the government had talked of commissioning a building to house the series but they failed to find the money. Negotiations stretched on and on. Monet insisted on curved walls and was far from convinced that the Orangerie was the ideal site. He. The project was finally ready three years behind schedule in 1927; it had all been a huge inner battle but he refused to compromise on his demands. In 1926 he was diagnosed with a lung tumour and he died on Dec 5th, 1926, without ever having seen the works installed. On his desk was copy of Baudelaire's poems, open at the "Stranger": "I love the clouds … the clouds that pass over there … the wonderful clouds" and these words may well have sustained him as he painted the triptych. It is to be hoped that history will not be allowed to repeat itself and that the Kirchner Government or some other public or private institution will act to preserve this series intact.

The case of Richter

Nothing sublime about these landscapes, no Friedrich style encounter of man standing astride between life and death, between one world and another. No, M&J are inevitably rereading a tradition but, above all, they have been bowled over by a visual experience. Richter and Kiefer both consciously relive Friedrich's encounter and so in a culture that is acutely aware of its immediate history. After the debacle, murderous insanity, and guilt of the Second World, War they are, perhaps, devoid of ideological belief and orphaned in terms of country.[10] Richter keeps a cool distance or, at least, the appearance of one; M&J are emotionally involved, their conceptual clarity is necessary because it helps them to stop sinking into the mire. Richter's first landscapes came from a trip he made to Corsica in1968. He has always tended to consider them as something apart but he has continued to produce them ever since that time as a key part of his work, especially in their relationship to his abstract paintings. Richter has frequently argued that all he has ever wanted to do is to paint a beautiful image. This can be construed as a tacit acknowledgement of the Kantian *sensus comunis*, not a common sense but a common sensibility, that allows us, whatever our culture, to recognize something as being indisputably beautiful: a rose, a sunset,

[10] Surely the best way to understand their fascist salutes is as a gesture recognizing the impossibility of separating themselves from the overriding sense of guilt, as the ironic assumption of a *mea culpa*.

a seascape, a landscape. It is interesting that for Richter these landscape motifs were only paintable if he disassociated them from his professional career and interests and saw them as private objects for his own pleasure. It was a clear strategy of resistance to the avant-garde project of progress. Yet, having said that, it is also true that Richter soon included these works in his exhibitions and thus saw them as important to his artistic discourse. To turn to landscape, commonly seen as a highly conservative genre, at this point in the late sixties, implied a subversive positioning on his part that went against the grain of the time and carried a sublime charge that might effectively permit comparisons with the work of Gaspar Friedrich. Both artists had lived for a time in Dresden and that may have given them a similar experience of nature. Richter notes in a letter to Jean-Christophe Amman that Friedrich's works do not die, what dies are the surrounding ideologies that accompany them. He insists that a good work goes beyond ideology and stands as an art that needs to be defended and seen. By extension, therefore, there is nothing to prevent an artist from painting in the way that Caspar David Friedrich did. Richter, however, does not do so through a direct confrontation with nature but by representing his surroundings through images drawn from a mechanical means of reproduction, approaching landscape painting through the technical conditions of photography.

How, then, does all of this relate to M&J's extraordinary series? Both revitalise landscape for human contemplation using photography as a medium for registering and organizing what they have seen and both transpose the image into something more intense, more sensual perhaps, more physically and visually alive. Richter uses sea and sky, a vast expanse of nothing; M&J recover a dank, unprepossessing, flooded woodland and charge it with new energy. Richter asks us to loose ourselves in these seascapes, works such as *Korsika* (1968), *Seestuck* (Marina) 1969, or *Seestuck* (Marina) 1975. They appear not so much as individual works since he is pasting or collaging together clouds from one photo with a sea from another where the wave and cloud formations are often incompatible. M&J also adapt the photographic image to produce the final result. Richter's perversion is not so much a strategy as an attitude; his commitment to a beautiful image remains unconditional. M&J seem less programmatic they too are engaged upon a quest for the breath-taking image: a complex monologue. M&J are now around the same age as Richter in the late sixties but their context is radically different. They are part of the global *chill*, part of the high-tech chatter, part of a repeatedly bruised economy where much of the population exists below the poverty line and where the middle-class is being dismembered. Their definition of beauty is not something polished but rather an uncontrollable crude blossoming that affirms the power to survive. Where Richter pushes us out, they draw us in, making us part of a dense choreography of death and resuscitation; they sing with voices that have not been heard. This is a choral series; and we should listen to it!

Richter has said, as if wanting to leave no doubt about his position: "Landscape is beautiful. It's probably the most beautiful thing there is. [11] And, as if wishing to

[11] Interview with Rolf Gunter Diest Gerhard Richter *The Daily Practice of Painting, Writing 1962-1993,* edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist, MIT Press, Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, 1995, p.64

elaborate further so that there can be no doubts: "I wanted to correct the false impression that I had adopted an aesthetic viewpoint. I didn't want to see the world in any personal way. The abstract pictures show my reality, then the landscapes and stilI-lifes, show my yearning. This is a grossly oversimplified, off-balance way of putting it, of course; but though these pictures are motivated by the dream of classical order and a pristine world – by nostalgia, in other words – the anachronism in them takes on a subversive and contemporary quality." [12] *Show my yearning*, we can understand that phrase and looking at the works of thee artists we can feel it going on within, not in the same way, but manifestly happening! Richter's dilemma in the late sixties was rooted in the socio-economic and cultural conditions of Germany, as well as in his struggle to find a place in the international context. His landscapes and seascapes ask specific questions concerning tradition and also the possibilities of contemporary art; M&J, within their very different climate, are also asking specific and pertinent questions through this enigmatic image about the directions being taken by both culture and society in Argentine i.e how are contemporary practices affected by national conditioning, how will these landscapes of Entre Rios be understood in local and global contexts, and how can art critique society?.

Richter, in fact, turned to painting landscapes when he felt that his work was being pushed into the wilderness that it was no longer central to the discourse around *urgent* contemporary practice. Landscape appeared as old fashioned, conservative, somewhere to take a breather and sit out for a time, especially after Palermo had reduced it to a horizontal blue line or when Smithson was literally out there in it, like Pollock, producing *the Spiral Jetty* and digging desert craters. As I have just said Richter, in turning to landscape, was exploring critical questions for contemporary art and M&J may well be rephrasing these questions at a remove. Both artists refrain, even though for entirely different reasons, from using the figure as a rhetorical presence. [13] In the German context it would have not only romantic overtones but also fascistic ones since everybody would recall the fact that the Fuhrer retreated to the Alpes in the late thirties. Argentinean politicians seem unlikely to adopt any grandiose gestures of this kind; the heroic has no place. M&J present the human as a disposable plastic toy, as an anti-social element who has emerged scarred but also survived. Richter refuses to see the mountain peaks as monumental or majestic forces. In the panoramic *Alpen (*1968) he collapses the view, dissolving the image of the peaks in troughs and twists of grey paint. M&J are inside what they doing, astounded by the power of the ordinary, the tough and taciturn profusion of the commonplace!

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[12] Richter, G., ibid from a letter to Benjamin B. Buchloh, p.98

[13] It is curious that Richter, in his digressionary tactics, was also to get into skulls as a theme, although his intentions were very different I can't help wondering if that had any impact on M&J or not?

Buchloh says of Blinky Palermo's work that we are talking about "the manifest articulation of the culture of chasm". [14] It is a remark he could, just as easily, applied to Richter. The contemporary artist lacks the spiritual foundation that supported Romantic painting: the feeling of God's omnipresence in nature. Things have lost their transcendental edge; they are emptier and encroach upon us in a darker and more threatening sense. We seem to be returning to wild and uncultivated excess; the times are out-of-joint but hopefully – and it is a vague hope – the energies for renewal still survive. Desire for the panoptic is thwarted and there is often a dimension of loss and alienation, of bare bones, chaotic structure, and a crescendo of budding energy. We are caught between our tendency to seek to domesticate what we see, to bring it into some kind of order, or to stand back in awe before its thrusting, vital poverty, Each one of us will find his or her own way into these works. If Richter, compared to Friedrich, shows a landscape of unprecedented emptiness, having removed the figure with which spectator identified; then M&J, compared to Richter, have allowed nature to invade and the signs of the human are token presences. They don't compete or comfort. Richter creates desire but the desire is unfulfilled; M&J, in fifteen panels, 300x200 cms, that is say in forty-five meters of work, hold nothing back and we can only surrender to the song!

The case of Hockney:

For M&J, Hockney is, perhaps, emotionally closer as a figure than Richter. Hockney has been working on this wondrous series of landscapes in North Yorkshire over the last few years. We can find the same kind of passion and commitment, the same seasonal awareness, and the same kind of obsessive return to place. M&J don't paint *au plein air* as Hockney frequently does but they return, as if hooked, to Entre Rios, following the seasonal changes and some of the lives of those who are living there. Each artist has his own reasons. Hockney wanted to get back to the land and to the origins of his own life. He also wanted to explore the medium of watercolour. M&J felt the metaphoric presence of this landscape and they also found themselves becoming interested in the intimate pleasures of watercolour whilst working on this series that has stretched over a five-year period and gone through numerous stages. It is as if they have been swamped in green, in sky, water, and undergrowth and needed something else!

In both instances the landscape have led to a torrential production and to a certain sense of inner relief that we as spectators also participate in. Hockney was dealing, as one does at his age, with the issues of life and death but, in facing these issues, Hockney also discovers "its opposite … the love of life. Which I think is a much greater force."[15]. His mother was ill and living in a nursing home in Bridlington where he also took up residence. His friend and patron, Jonathan

[14] The Palermo Triangles" in Cooke, L., *Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964-1977* DIA Foundation, N.Y, 2010, p.43.

[15] Weschler, L, *True to Life, Conversations with David Hockney*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p.98.

Silver, was also dying. Hockney used to drive across the moors to see him, repeating the same journey for weeks. This act of repetition led finally to a pair of astonishing works, the *Road across the Wold* (1997) and *Garrowby Hill* (1998). They give us a view of the plains and the city of York as the climb moves up to eight hundred feet. He gives us composite landscapes, using the details that had stuck in his memory. They stand as indisputable celebrations of life, M&J also present a composite. It is a response to external social conditions and their own inner dramas. In other words, it a therapeutic return to the healing powers of nature and to its cyclic sense of occasion.

Our encounter with these works is intense and immediate; nature is barbed, chaotic, and overwhelming and, at the same time, robust, prolific, and versatile: exposed roots, wind-swept trees at an angle, bits of wood left behind after the flooding or snapped off by the wind, paths trodden between the trees, opened as much by water as by man, sodden leaves, moss- covered trunks declaring where the wind comes from, slanted rainstorms pushing up the level of the rivers and flooding the meadows, nothing human just leftovers, traces, sad objects like scattered evidence at the scene of a violent crime. Few people wander here for pleasure. It lives in forgotten time, disturbed only by nature herself. Yet, it has moments of stillness and quietude. There is life after the battle with the waters, still, sweet waters left behind in a sky blown blue; there are bare trees pushing towards their next spring, a green flurry of new life on the ground, reflections caught in the water that soften shapes into liquid lines. Go in and you will not come out unscathed, something will cling to you or scratch you from behind, your feet will sink into the mud, yet you will also feel the surge of life, the dazzling intricacy of the dance, the light and shadow, the ability to adapt, and an innate flexibility. Here is a song, chorused not only to impress us with its beauty and fertility but with also its resilience and will to survive.

Here the poor and the primordial, the battered and the broken, the down-and-outs and the nearly dead, the buffeted, the beaten, and the blessed fight their endless battles, day after day, year after year, and season after season. It has all been done before and will be done again! It is one of the key metaphors of Argentine's social history and it is a long way in mood and meaning from Constable's lush water meadows or Hockney's tunnel of trees and well-trodden track that leads to a well-husbanded farm. This is not a domesticated English landscape but something more basic and brutal, more anguished and direct. Hockney wanted to paint where he came from - the Wolds, the chalk hills with tiny little valleys without any rivers running through them, a deeply human space with changing surfaces: "I was going back and forth watching the surface changing, . These are the terms, I believe, in which primarily we feel these landscapes. I began to notice how last week what was golden now it had all these little dots on it from those machines, which were like pregnant insects laying eggs. In the evening shadows one field would be green and another would have those drops on it, another would have sheep."[16] M&J meet the untamed virgin and the populace, crudely disposed to rape; Hockney the English gentleman who saunters on his family land!

[16] ibid., p.102.

Hockney's landscapes give us a sense of domesticated living; whereas M&J make us feel more as if we were crawling through them to find a way out or bumping into them close up as we suddenly emerge into a clearing, they don't belong to us. Hockney has no single point perspective; M&J constantly vary the distance from which we approach. Hockney introduces multiple horizon lines into the same work; M&J leave us entrapped in a hostile fascination. Hockney has worked here in the fields during harvest-time in the fifties; M&J come across it almost accidentally but feel the latent power.

Both want palpable immersion and are searching for meaning. Hockney believes photography deals badly with space and M&J agree but use it as an aid to the construction of the image. Hockney talks of the way Vermeer catches the vibrancy of colours and how he manages to make his images glow through the layering and the building up of thin layers of colours, one on top of another. M&J's materials appear to allow no such subtlety but, if carefully mixed, they are equally capable of blending colour and show the freshness of oils. Hockney seeks to capture the experience of space; M&J are more concerned with how nature crowds in, chatters, broods, and asphyxiates. And then there is the treatment of trees! Hockney goes back to the skill and intimacy of the hand. He talks of Rembrandt and of the calligraphy seen on the Chinese porcelain pouring into Holland at that same time in the mid 17th century. He also points to Christen Kobke's - a Danish painter from early 19th century - mysterious meditation on landscape,: "see how he is clearly tracing the exterior silhouette of the trees – much the same way, once again, that Andy Warhol did when he would trace from photographic slide projections. Simultaneously recording the contours of the object while effacing, as it were, to the extent possible, any trace of the hand doing the recording."[17] M&J have centred on the strong graphic lines that articulate branches and trunk, the filigree of new shoots, and dead pieces of woodcbroken by the wind or moved by the water, as well as all the ways in which trees talk about themselves in Winter and Spring to declare their relentless upward surge!

Some last thoughts on landscape, art history, and inevitably the Chinese:

"Rembrandt ," says Hockney, "evokes the life-force of the tree but he recapitulates that force, how it is, growing out of the ground towards the light, in his act of drawing with his bold and lively up-and-out stroke."[18] His own landscapes are steeped in memory, impregnated with a sense of how alive the land is, and witness to the changing colours, texture, and feel. He feels that watercolour or painting allow the eyes to wander: "trees are very beautiful. I've always felt that. They're the largest plant, which is one of the things I love about looking at them, probably everybody does. And another thing about them is you get to see the life force."[19] Tree pulls us out; time pulls us down. Constable was first English painter to engage the English landscape in an authentic manner:

[17] id.,p.191

[18] id., p.192

[19] id., p.202.

blustery skies, groves stripped bare, trees stark and skeletal. "With Gainsborough, for example, by contrast, you merely get a generic backdrop. But Constable is clearly out there traipsing through the Suffolk countryside; you can almost sense the mud on his boots."[20]. Hockney would then go back and paint the sketches in the studio. He wanted to paint at the scale of Constable and thus to the problem of how to transport that size of canvas out to the country, to work and be able to see past the expanse of canvas itself. He used to anticipate colours, by checking the weather forecast before he started out on his trip. M&J work in the studio, initially they have the whole image visible but as they begin to work the photo images that serves as a kind of ground gradually gets obscured and replaced by a more tactile version that accepts changes according to the demands of the work.

Sauer tells us that by definition the landscape has identity that is based on recognizable constitution, limits, and generic relation to other landscapes. It is part of a general system: "Its structure and function are determined by integrant, dependent forms. The landscape is considered, therefore, in a sense of having an organic quality. We may follow Bluntschli in saying that one has not fully understood the nature of an area until one has learned to see it as an organic unit, to comprehend land and life in terms of each other."[21] Landscape has a generic meaning. Croce one said that the geographer who is describing a landscape has the same task as a landscape painter. Well, perhaps, but the geographer always has in mind the generic and proceeds by comparison, whereas the artist reacts to specific sense impressions. M&J are reacting to something they think is relevant to us all: the sacramental nature of poverty.

In correspondence M&J have mentioned ancient Chinese scrolls as an influence on the way they wanted to show this work: a similar hiding and revealing of scenes. I take their point but I happened just to have read an article on the reasons behind the almost disproportionate size of Chinese contemporary painting that mentioned Yun-Fei Ji's, *Water Rising (2006*). Contrary to traditional display in which the hand scroll is shown in sections, this piece shows the entire painting at once. M&J do something very similar, forcing the viewer to shift back and forth, caught between wanting to see the entire piece and wanting to follow the details by focusing on discrete sections. Scrolls were, of course, laid flat and not mounted vertically as Ji has done on a wall. The eye naturally moves vertically to read the details. This work is 57.2cm x 1143 cm and the size creates a very different experience since a number of the figures are truncated in the middle. The miniaturisation of the figures, reduced to a quarter of the height of the work, draws us in to see what is going on. M&J occupy an even larger space and we are swallowed up in nature; the details are yielded only through scrutiny; and the human is secondary. Both works take issue with any tendency to fetishize the individual and his or her capacity for agency.

I have mentioned Poussin, the exemplary classicist, but what can he offer M&J? Possibly, the idea of the placement of detail within a landscape or, to put it

[20] id.,p208

[21] Sauer, C.P, *Land and Life*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, 1963, p.321

another way, the discipline of thought. Poussin turned to what would have seen as pure landscape fairly late in his life. One wonders why, especially given his belief in the essentially moral character of painting? The answer seems to be that he wished to give logical form to even the natural disorder of landscape by exploiting the harmonious balance produced by the vertical and horizontal elements in his design, thus creating a sense of permanence. That would seem an anathema to M&J who are engaged with an organic chaos that structures according to its own order, seemingly the result of a spontaneous procreation. Poussin used the golden section as a means of imposing harmonious balance on landscape, ecognizing that landscapes lack vertical elements (except trees) and deciding to introduce architectural elements to compensate. He thus guarantees a scheme of balanced proportions. These ideas would come to influence Cezanne and Seurat. M&J, however, do not inhabit a social space capable of believing in any ideal order; neither do the inhabitants of Entre Rios! Poussin sought to establish right angles, an order that nature herself does not provide. Such order can only be imposed by a society that itself believes itself in the possibility of order: the ideal order that Poussin came to define as the heroic landscape. In his illustrations for the story of *Phocion* he warned against the fickleness of the mob who dangerously threaten all established order. Nature was applied to his own purposes, stressing the inherent order of an unimpaired nature: the sensuous mixed with abstract thought, the ideal and the real, through a sense of design nourished on observation. M&J, however, seek the order of disorder, including fragmentary details. There is no coherent narrative, nothing except beginning again and again further impoverished. Do these Poussinesque details introduce symbolic elements? Maybe, but, above all, they are slithers and chips that talk of abandon, plastic waste, city life, or the indomitable will to survive that characterizes both battered nature and battered human life. Care is one of the best definitions of love - and we all need it, even if in these dank woods some will lose their reason!

Kevin Power.