Visuality and Opticality in the Art of Tania Mouraud

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Tania Mouraud (b. Paris, 1942) has consistently pursued the relationship between the body and opticality in her art. Her *Borderland* series (2008) comprises landscapes that have been photographed with a filter made out of the same transparent plastic that is used to bale hay. The result is an image of the landscape that is unevenly reflected in the plastic wrap. The landscape is, in effect, mutated by a material that is toxic. The reflection evokes in the viewer a desire to imagine a “natural” landscape in its place. As a result, the viewer experiences a reverberation between sensations of the body and fomentations of the mind. Looking, filtering, distortion, and looking again together form a recurring strategy in Mouraud’s work.

This relationship between the body and the mind is but one of the many dualities explored by Mouraud. Others include the human and the animal in *Roaming* (2008), the public and private in *How Can You Sleep?* (2005), and night and day in *Entrer dans la nuit* (2009). A consistent characteristic of Mouraud’s art is its inherent challenge to the hypos tatized ideological (capitalist) order in which it is situated. Her work is destabilizing, directed foremost at the viewer’s entrenched sense of self. Reminiscent of Didier Anzieu’s concept of the “skin-ego,” a viewer at a Mouraud exhibition is often discombobulated in terms of what she is seeing. But this is done with critical purpose, with socio-political implications in terms of the naturalized rule of dominant ideology.

Mouraud’s work is often highly optical. This contributes to a temporary sense of disembodiment in the viewer: opticality can be defined as disembodied visuality. For Mouraud, it is a necessary precursor toward a newly defined and more humane visuality. In his celebrated essay “A Short History of Photography,” Walter Benjamin wrote of an “optical unconscious,” an unconscious visual dimension that remains hidden from social consciousness but for its exposure through photographic technique. He described it as “a different nature which speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye: so different that in place of a space consciously woven together by a man on the spot there enters a space held together unconsciously.” Mouraud is similarly interested in employing the procedures of modernist and abstract art to comment on humanity’s alienation from the world. Through the use of architecturally scaled text that is optically difficult to read and large projected images of animals that require the obscurity of night to see, Mouraud’s art is as visually arresting as it is socially engaged; it seeks alternatives to seeing and understanding the world within monolithic scopic regimes such as the prevailing positivistic order.

Opticality was also addressed by the American art critic Clement Greenberg, who described the alignment of visuality with modernity by

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way of the code of modern painting. For Greenberg, “good” art exacts a demand on the way we see and experience the world that eliminates the problem of mediation with the world.3 The model of painting that calls attention to itself interpellates the viewer to become self-aware. The art historian Victor Stoichita has referred to paintings that are concerned with their own art as “self aware images.”4 In Stoichita’s rhetorical terms, he called such paintings “meta-paintings” because of their capacity for agency through containment. By this he meant the ability of painting to question its own ontology and critical positioning in the world. Mouraud’s Borderland photographs seem to suggest that humans exist in a world of containment without agency, a world that is filtered in various ways so that what we see are representations, always distorted. In Borderland, the containment of hay acts as a metaphor for the containment of the natural spirit—but it is not an absolute containment, as the viewer is still able to sense the proximity and profundity of land and sky.

In confronting a work by Mouraud, one is never sure of what is seen or experienced despite, paradoxically, the artist’s insistent technical transparency. The renewal of vision through the self-awareness of one’s body in social space, and the corresponding hope that such renewal evokes, is at the heart of the art of Tania Mouraud.
