

The patio of earthly delights

Three synchronized video channels exhibit, like a triptych, a panoramic view of a barren landscape: a garbage dump in the municipality of Alto Hospicio in northern Chile. The three panels articulate a sequence split up with fades-to-black of five shots documented with still cameras taking pictures in the early morning hours, when the “official” activities of the place have not yet gotten underway. As such, an unsettling tranquility reigns here, an apparently dead time that is accompanied by nothing more than the sound of the wind, in a place where, at first glance, nothing special seems to be happening. After the first few seconds, we begin to hear sounds and see little scenes as they begin to unfold, and the place begins to come together as an enigmatic “scene of the crime” where one begins to guess or suspect the cultivation of marginal and deliberately illicit activities. In effect, nervous laughter, cars speeding up and slowing down, bonfires and stray dogs poking their noses in the garbage function metonymically here to tell us about the garbage dump as a frontier, the back yard of the city where prostitution, drug trafficking and consumption, and shady sexual relations are practiced; it is a place where garbage is part of everyday life and constitutes, moreover, a source of income.

It is worth mentioning, too, that the trash dumps in Alto Hospicio hold a place in Chile’s collective memory, thanks to a true-crime saga that took place years ago, when a local psychopath and serial killer dumped the bodies and personal belongings of his victims here. We also might reflect on the fact that in the global (or first-world) collective consciousness, the garbage dump is emblematic of poverty and underdevelopment, primarily because wealthy countries recycle, incinerate or simply dump their trash in the third world—the well-known electronic waste dump of Ghana being one example. In fact, in both Ghana and Chile, we find the figure of what, in Spanish, is called the *cartonero*, a roving collector who collects and resells unwanted cardboard (and other items), creating an informal, parallel economy as well as an unintentional process of recycling. In the case of the Alto Hospicio garbage dumps, the first sequence of Schopf’s three-channel video shows a fire that refers to crack addicts and their practice of burning garbage to obtain tin, which they exchange for money or directly for their drug of choice.

The format and montage create a dialogue between the reference to the cinematographic panoramic view, on the one hand, and the pictorial triptych, particularly Bosch’s altarpieces, on the other. The location and themes chosen are situated halfway between humanist documentary photography and the cinematographic reference of typical “places in the middle of nowhere.” In this movie, however, action is not literally shown; in this document the denunciation is not explicit, and in the end this “garden of earthly delights” is precarious and underdeveloped, a place of the low-budget sins committed by certain members of humanity.

The garbage dump, as a symbol of the marginal condition and a symptom of the less-visible side of globalization, constitutes some very rich material for contemporary artists. The South African artist Pieter Hugo, with his photographic series *Permanent Error*, and Brazilian Vik Muniz, in his documentary *Waste Land*, have used the third world garbage dump as the focal point of their works, whether to make critical social statements or to pose the possibility of hopeful resignification and fiction. But in Demian Schopf’s work, with regard to the reinterpretation of art history, there is no spectacular restaging of the representations of sin, just the depiction of a state of things. At the same time, from the perspective of political bias, there is no literal victimization, either, not even stories of personal triumph over hardship, just the abandonment and emptiness so typical of wastelands and marginal places. They are, in fact, just banal micro-histories that dialogue with one another to attest to a marginal but, by now, everyday reality.

Nathalie Goffard, 2013.