

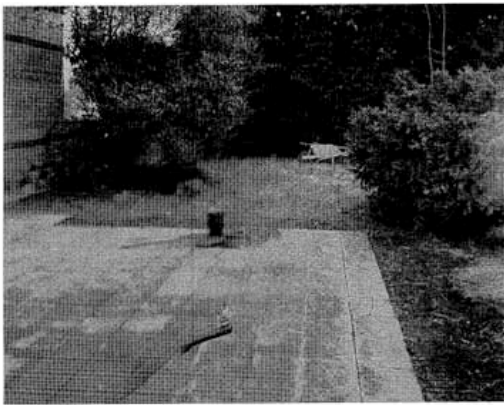
GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kuspit, Donald, "Three Photographers: Luis Mallo, Jean-Luc Mylayne, Tokihiro Sato," *Art New England*, October/November 2003

REPORT FROM NY

Donald Kuspit

Three Photographers: Luis Mallo, Jean-Luc Mylayne, Tokihiro Sato



Jean-Luc Mylayne, *No 810 Novembre Decembre 2000-Janvier 2001*, C-print, 47 1/4 x 59", 2001. Courtesy of the Barbara Gladstone Gallery.

The irony of intimacy, the deliberate construction of intimacy subverting itself into cool detachment, a purely formal display: It's this dialectical quality that draws me to these photographers. Photography has been said to be about light and darkness, the close-up and the distant view, focus and framing, but these are only means to an existential end: finding significance in changing appearances. A good photograph is a fragment of an unexpected experience. It is the sudden realization of the novelty of reality; it discovers the familiar in the strange and the strange in the familiar; it is a moment of empathy that breaks through the defensive indifference that keeps the world at a distance. Casual yet intense, it reveals the plenitude of the passing scene. Ultimately, it is a means of articulating the mystery of space-time.

The viewer of Degas's scenes supposedly sees them through a keyhole, and the viewer of Duchamp's *Etants Donnés* becomes a Peeping Tom visionary. One sees through a barrier, assumed or actual—the door with Degas's keyhole, Duchamp's wooden door—suggesting that seeing occurs only when one finds or makes an opening in the barrier, breaking through its resistance. Thus what one sees has an aura of mystery about it because it was originally hidden, repressed. Seeing becomes a violation of privacy, a breach of decorum, a moment of intimacy with the hitherto unknown that is all the more intense for being unexpected. We are drawn into it, free to visually explore the terra incognita of a novel world.

Luis Mallo's photographs are less about seeing through the barrier than about the barrier itself. It is usually a scrimlike fence, a kind of veil—partially open Venetian blinds, an opening cut in a graffiti-covered sheet of metal, a narrow crack between two concrete walls, their white paint peeling and dirty. Mallo lets us see through the barrier, usually to an anonymous place on the fringes of society that is nonetheless necessary to its functioning: an industrial landscape, a parking lot, a railway yard (in one image, a busy street, another nowhere place). Yet he zeros-in on the barrier, revealing its detail with excruciating exactness. The fence is his subject matter, a theme in itself, a boundary between worlds that creates an inside and an outside. Mallo is outside, and he seems to want to stay there, because what he sees through the fence is a wasteland. The revelation is disappointing, the secret is mediocre.

The brilliance of Mallo, however, is more than emotional: The fence becomes the picture plane, a purely formal device, an abstract construction. Its hypnotic geometry—a grid, parallel bands, the two sometimes integrated—is more immediate than the scene visible through it. The fence acquires presence through its abstractness, which "realizes" it in a way its material reality never can. Mallo's insight into the barrier, his articulation of its abstract quiddity, gives him the detachment necessary to endure the vacuous scene behind the fence, the strange bleakness of modern space in which both nature and human presence seem out of place.

Coleridge once said that art's mission is to find the moments of transcendence in everyday experience. It is an intimate moment in which one is attuned to the abstractness of things. Abstraction is the transcendence within the materially given, and the givenness of abstractness implies the illusory character of material givenness. The world beyond Mallo's fence seems illusory—a kind of mirage, however matter-of-fact it might appear—compared to the abstractness of the fence. It is not only light and shadow that become metaphysical nuance in Mallo's photographs but open space itself seems metaphysical, for Mallo subverts its physicality by showing its abstractness.

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Jean-Luc Mylayne's photographs also have this air of abstract revelation, and they convey an odd mix of intimacy and isolation. A small bird appears in space, a much more beautiful, dynamic space than Mallo's, yet one that is still alien to the bird. It is a fragment of nature in a humanized world, a miraculous presence that is out of place yet welcome. The spiritual import of the bird, traditionally a symbol of the soul, is strongly suggested in a luminous "negative" of a color photograph, also in the exhibition. Bleached white, the bird in flight becomes as magical as those in Braque's studio; and indeed, several photographs show a drawing of a bird close to one that has alighted in a garden, in effect a kind of studio. There is the sense of the solitude of the studio, of introspective creativity, in all of Mylayne's photographs, even when they are taken outdoors rather than on the boundary between outdoors and indoors. For Mylayne, the bird is a work of art, an esthetic masterpiece, and the drawing of the bird is a poor substitute, an artistic trace hardly equal to its living presence. Mylayne is a precise observer, empirically responsible to the scene. Sometimes the bird is hard to see. Part of the magic of Mylayne's photographs is that the viewer has to work to see: The bird becomes a perceptual breakthrough, a kind of epiphany in the foliage.

For all their verisimilitude, Mylayne's photographs are abstract and formally poised. He relies on the angles of a house, the vertical of a tree, and, more subtly, the intricate gesturalism of leaves and grass. In many of Mylayne's photographs the geometric and the organic play off each other, making for an exquisite sense of balance. The abstractness of the organic comes through in a different way than the abstractness of the man-made environment, but it is nonetheless evident. Where Mallo uses abstraction defensively and ironically, to ward off the ugly social reality in which it is embedded, Mylayne uses it appreciatively. It signals the aliveness of nature, and Mylayne's works are about aliveness as such. The bird is a precious embodiment of it, and it is also evident in the rich color of Mylayne's vivid photographs, which have the sensual resonance of Baroque paintings. Acknowledging the abstractness of nature, Mylayne affirms its inherent sublimity.

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Tokihiro Sato, *Utsunomiya 3*, gelatin-silver transparency over light panel, edition 2/12, approx. 36 x 48", 2001. Courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects. Utsunomiya Museum of Art, Tochigi Prefecture, Japan. Architect: Okada & Associates, 1996.

Tokihiro Sato also deals with the relationship between abstraction and representation, the embedment of abstract form in the perceptually given. Holding a flashlight, Sato moves through architectural spaces, bringing them luminously and gesturally to life. His photographs are time exposures, sometimes as long as three hours, and the architecture is hyperminimalist, the exaggerated white cubes and quasi-sublime emptiness of fashionable museums. The buildings are pure geometry and the light pure gesture. In the most brilliant works, glass planes becomes sheets of light—a seamless integration of geometry and gesture, subtly reflected in the large windows of the darkened structure. All the works are back-lit, black-and-white transparencies. There is also a group of gelatin-silver prints of snow-covered Japanese landscapes spotted with flashed lights. Again, the effect is abstract, but



Luis Mallo, *In Camera #15*, Type C print, 40 x 50", 2001. Courtesy of Ricco/Maresca Gallery.

in Sato's case the abstractness is not so much discovered in the subject matter—often viewed at night—as imposed upon it. Sato does not bring out the geometry of the buildings, which is self-evident and at times overwhelming, but makes it unexpectedly intimate, contradicting its remoteness and detachment. One senses a certain desperation in his effort: He is not simply searching for new perceptual effects but trying to bring a dead (night) space, such as a winter landscape, to life. It is as though by countering geometrical abstraction with gestural abstraction he will generate a spark of life.

These works by Mallo, Mylayne, and Sato are living photographs because they bring abstraction to intimate life without denying its transcendental import. And they bring its transcendence to a world in need of it to be taken seriously.

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