

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Linda Yablonsky, "Beautiful Ruins," *T Magazine*, April 10, 2013.

Beautiful Ruins

CULTURE | By LINDA YABLONSKY | APRIL 10, 2013, 9:00 AM | [Comment](#)



Cyprien Gaillard navigates both geographical sites and psychological states in his multimedia works. *Mark Borthwick*

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The artist Cyprien Gaillard recalls the moment he discovered poetry in the most unusual places: decaying landscapes, demolished building sites, even cracks in the pavement.

Until Cyprien Gaillard came along, the "Monument to Joe Louis" in Detroit had about as much in common with Abu Simbel temples as the ancient Egyptian structures did with high-rises in the Bronx. But "Geographical Analogies" — a series of collages that the 32-year-old artist assembled over five years from 963 Polaroids — unites sacred pyramids, failed resorts, public toilets, marble caves, modernist buildings, classical columns and other anomalous artifacts of civilization as if they were estranged members of a single family extending across all time.

The restless Gaillard grew up in San Francisco and his native Paris, where a keen sense of "cultural suffocation" drove him to seek more exotic locales. His first forays were teenage trips to Detroit to buy underground techno records and then to parks in Parisian suburbs, where he used stolen fire extinguishers to create painterly clouds for his silent first films. If his earliest projects began as amateurish pranks, "The Lake Arches," shot in 2007, and which Gaillard describes as "a field trip gone bad," was a defining moment. His plan was to film two friends swimming in an artificial lake at the grandiose, Ricardo Bofill-designed housing project outside Paris. When one friend's impetuous dive into unexpectedly shallow water causes a head wound, Gaillard's camera doesn't flinch and neither does the bleeding friend. In that minute, Gaillard turned a vague desire to create visual poetry into a continuing confrontation with the landscape of human folly. Neglected architecture, urban decay, desecrated national symbols and civic disorder became the central themes in his art that reveals a universe where civilizations prosper and decline simultaneously.

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These ideas collide in two of his earlier films. "Cities of Gold and Mirrors" juxtaposes images of spring breakers partying at a decaying Mayan-themed resort in Cancún, Mexico, with the nearby ancient ruins. And in the three-part film "Desniansky Raion," the artist links hooligans warring in a Russian parking lot to abandoned apartment towers in Ukraine and a fireworks display celebrating the controlled demolition of a building outside Paris. Set to an electronic soundtrack by the French composer Koudlam, the hypnotic 30-minute video was a runaway hit at the New Museum's "The Generational: Younger Than Jesus" show in 2009. This past winter, for his show "The Crystal World" at MoMA PS1, Gaillard continued to explore cycles of renewal and decay. In his 2011 film "Artefacts," he weaves shots of a pillaged, postwar Iraq with that of Babylonian antiquities including the Ishtar Gate, now located in Berlin's Pergamon Museum. His wanderlust and his art, he explains, frees him from the weight of human history. For his next show, which opens at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles on April 20, Gaillard is looking not outward but down, at manhole covers, his latest obsession. "They're the gateway to the underworld," he says with a laugh. "But they say, 'Made in India.'" *LINDA YABLONSKY*

CYPRIEN GAILLARD, IN HIS OWN WORDS: I didn't grow up wanting to be an artist. In my early 20s, all I wanted was to get away. To a certain extent, that's what has defined my work — wanting to be outside. I had been thinking in terms of visual poetry, but I wasn't sure what I would do. I just wanted to be out.

I went on "suburban odysseys," Robert Smithson's term for his walks in New Jersey, where Smithson compared Passaic to Rome. The geography of his work is great, but the important thing for me is that he was always out. In the beginning, I would explore the outskirts of Paris with two friends, and make small films. After a year of art school in Lausanne, I went to Eastern Europe — to Warsaw, Belgrade and farther east to Kiev, Odessa, Moldavia. It was stimulating to be on these trips. When you're in a different culture, you're here, in the present. Which is sometimes difficult when you're in your own country.

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Later, I remembered these crumbling buildings, the Desniansky Raion, in the suburbs of Kiev. They were in a round formation that reminded me of Stonehenge. To film it I had to be above it. We did it without permission, in a kind of paraglider. At the time, I wanted to have the vocabulary of National Geographic, those well-produced documentaries shot with an HD camera. They always have this music that has influenced me, a kind of world music made by white people. It sounds like pan flutes but is made on a synthesizer. So I went to Koudlam for the music and the sound is very much that — pan flutes.

I like what J. G. Ballard says about high-rises in his novels — that the outer landscape is an inner landscape. I relate to that when looking at some crumbling structures. I find peace, not sadness, in these places that have accepted their fates. I find much more sadness in places where the walls are still standing, in malls or in Potsdamer Platz for example.

For me, decay is a starting point. I don't just record it or picture it. What I'm interested in is creating a form of equilibrium within the decay. In "Geographical Analogies," I put pictures of Paul Rudolph's Tracey Towers in the Bronx next to Angkor Wat, a more official ruin. What interests me is this idea of extreme anachronism. You go to Babylon, one of the first cities of civilization, and in front of it you have American soldiers with the most high-tech things — lasers, night-vision goggles, these anti-mine tanks that look like fossils. That's what first interested me about Iraq, the scandal in the archaeological community of American soldiers setting up base on Babylon and filling up sandbags with the sands of Babylon, carving their names in bricks and so on.

I tried to imagine how that site would look through the goggles, the crystal world, and look at ancient things through this prism of technology. I thought "Artefacts" could not be just about anachronism. It had to be anachronistic in its craft. So I filmed with a pocket cellphone and then transferred the data back to 35-millimeter film. The defects of the cellphone camera — the shifts of movement, the flashes of light, the lapses of color — all these errors are called "digital artifacts," and they're enhanced when transferred to film.

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In "Cities of Gold and Mirrors," my film in Cancún, you have Mayan ruins and the ruins of this utopian Hilton resort literally built on top, and next to it a golf course and a parking lot. You have the utopia of 24-hour bars, the wrist bands and all these Americans who don't know where they are. And then there's the natural disaster of a hurricane hitting the beach. It's quite nice when they all meet and create this weird sense of equilibrium.

There's always the possibility of an architectural hangover, something we regret that we built. That's entropy — the impossibility of getting a site back to the state it was. One could be nostalgic, but I think of all these layers as one great, expanded archaeological site. There's no nostalgia in my work. It's always about now.

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