

Benjamin Parsons x Hannah Payne

A walk across Borrowed Landscapes

On entering the gallery, you'll be drawn to the main piece in the space. A minimalist yet enigmatic work, *Black Out, Black Landscape* is the start of this journey, a question into how a landscape is constructed using the visual illusion of depth and distance. By manipulating the photographic negative, Aliko Braine reorganises foreground, middle ground, and background, in a game of positive and negative space. The area corresponding to the middle of the landscape - where one would expect to see the main content of the scene - is 'punched out' of the photographic negative and transformed into a blacked-out space. It now exists as a void but also as a new mysterious object, its colossal scale emphasised by the size of the few sheep grazing in the field, oblivious of its presence. This piece presents the main theme of this exhibition; a creative examination of the landscape in western painting, and how it influences how we see and compose the landscape through photography.

Directly opposite *Black Out* is the series entitled *Horizontal Shift*. For this work Aliko reconfigures an 'erroneous' composition of a landscape by cutting out a section of the photographic image and 'straightening' the horizon. By printing the shifted cut-out and its surrounding image together, she transforms the experience of looking at the landscape, to find hidden geometries and - with the sharp sense of humour that defines her work - challenges the basis of the representation of the landscape and its undefiable horizon(tal) composition. As with the *Black Out* series, *Horizontal Shift* plays with the rules of the photographic process, rendering the voids left by the shift of the cut-out section in a deep black, balanced out by the white areas where the two negatives overlap. The result emphasises the idea of the 'construction' of the image and invites us, echoing the title of the work, to shift our preconceptions of the landscape genre.

Aliko's artistic practice is directly connected to her work as an art historian, especially looking at how different artists have made the rules for the construction of the painted landscape their own. The third series in this room *The Leaning Tree or In Search of a Perfect Diagonal (after Corot)* uses compositional lines 'borrowed' from paintings by the celebrated French landscape painter, to fold abstract photographic negatives and reveal the hidden geometries behind the construction of his landscapes. Corot often included a leaning tree trunk to create a diagonal line in the composition which would question and disrupt - as this series intends - the established horizontal proportions of the landscape as image.

Thinking about folding as a creative device in Alikí's work, you continue into the second room of the gallery to find another two works after the French painter. The series *Folded (Homage à Corot)* takes the experiments of *In Search of a Perfect Diagonal* one step further, folding the negatives of forest landscapes from Alikí's archive. As with many of her works, these folds highlight the materiality of the photographic negative, and render it on the photographic print as a sculptural object. The landscapes in these 'homages' fold onto themselves, creating unexpected blends and overlaps. The resulting image further reinstates the playful invitation of *Black Out* and *Horizontal Shift*, evidencing the possibilities of the analogue photographic process to be directly manipulated and endlessly reconfigured.

In the centre of the room, flanked by the two Corot homages, is Alikí's most recent body of work, *Borrowed Landscapes*, which also gives the title to this show. Made with punched out fragments of photographic negatives, this series takes inspiration from historical paintings and their use of windows as a device to frame the landscape. Using different hole punchers, Alikí designs and recreates the shapes of different types of windows. The illusion of looking 'outside' through them and the darkened rooms where the imagined viewer stands, are also constructions, to further explore the different ways of 'borrowing' a landscape. Here a note from one of our recent conversations:

"The shapes of these 'borrowed landscape' images, which are then floated on the enlarger - which is why they are floating in black - mean the negative edge is no longer a square or rectangle, they resemble the incidental shapes of windows in either religious or portrait paintings of the mid 15th and early 16th Century, particularly Netherlandish, but also in Italy. I was drawn to these early views of the landscape as seen through the window, but often partly obscured by the central subject, as they were painted before the emergence of landscape as an independent subject for painting in the 17th Century."

The wall opposite presents a series of different pieces selected together with Alikí as an introduction to her wider artistic practice. This group of works demonstrates the expanse of her creative exploration of the landscape and draws connections between her work with photographic negatives and her interventions on printed reproductions from old art history periodicals. Both attest to the mass production and re-production of images, but also to the potential for them to be deconstructed and reconfigured. This selection includes works made directly from Alikí's archives of negatives and historical reproductions of paintings with experimental 'homages' to painters like Carracci, Cozens, Constable and van Ruisdael.

In contrast to the linear compositions of Alikí's folds, the works on this wall focus on the circle, and the use of the hole-punch and the sticker - constant devices used in her work. *Black Hole* and *14 Ugly Spots, (after Carracci)* connect this wall with *Black Out*, *Black Landscape 3* as they are instances where the negative image has been punched out, to create voids. Other works in this wall are made by a converse process of addition, using stickers of different sizes and colours as a way of intervening on existing images. Examples of this are *Circle/Square, homage à Wals* and *Masterpiece in Coloured Dots (after Rubens)*, where the stickers block out the protagonists of the scene, directing the viewer's attention towards the periphery of the image, especially the distant landscape and in the background.

Unseen Plate 13 (after Constable) is a hint of Alikí's obsession with the English landscape painter John Constable and a preamble to the different pieces in this last area of the exhibition which allude to his work. *9 Species of Sky (after Constable, after Cozens)* references the different 'borrowing' of renditions of clouds in the landscape, first by Constable, who copied them from Alexander Cozens, and then from Alikí who borrowed them from Constable. Having photographed Constable's drawings, Alikí then pinpricked (a creative device which predates her punch-out works) their outlines and displays these twice-borrowed clouds in reverse. *Blind Landscape* is created using the same technique and likewise points to the idea of image reproduction before photography. The use of the pin prick alludes to the historical practice of 'prick and pounce' where artists transferred their preparatory drawing to their painting surface by pricking their drawings and then pushing fine charcoal dust through the holes to copy the image.

The walk across these borrowed landscapes ends looking up at the clouds and how these historical painters 'constructed' them. *Sugar Sky* and *Sugar Sky (after Ruisdael)* are creative explorations into the essential geometry of the romantic rendition of clouds. Using white circle stickers, Alikí directly intervenes both her own photographic print, but also a found reproduction of a landscape by Dutch painter Jacob van Ruisdael. A second version of this same work entitled *Turbulence (after Ruisdael)* retakes her experiments with punch-outs, in this instance using the device of cutting and rotating sections of the image to rework Ruisdael's clouds into a turbulent sky.

Thinking about the proximity of this exhibition with the V&A Museum, just a few blocks away, this walk might just lead you there, an invitation to walk through the different galleries to their collection of 18th century English landscapes, and specifically the room which hosts Constable's sketches. You might then want to look at them through Alikí's eyes, as part of a rigorous process of construction, leading to a masterful artistic creation:

"What's really interesting is that Constable's experience and recording of the landscape are just elements that are then amalgamated into his final large-scale paintings. It was those [sketches] that I was endlessly quoting and thinking about when I was making these cloud works. I am fascinated by the underlying geometry of all images, my eye searches for these underpinning shapes". Alikí Braine, 2024

Rodrigo Orrantia 02.03.24