

ABENDSONNE

Reviewed by Adam Bell for photo-eye Magazine 2011

Misha de Ridder Abendsonne

Photographs by Misha de Ridder

Schaden.com, 2011. Hardbound. 14 pp., 8 color illustrations, 11-3/4x14-1/4".

*The horizon [is] a kind of temporal hinge between immediate apprehension and a constant postponement of closure...The very fact of the horizon is what is immutable; it is an infinite dividing line between infinite entities, a place toward which the mind journeys and yet a place that appears as a continuous, productive, deferral of place.*

*-Susan Stewart, "What Thought Is Like" from The Open Studio Essays on Art and Aesthetics*



Rooted in 19th century Romantic notions of the sublime, Misha De Ridder's images are subtle and beautiful, but also utterly contemporary. *Abendsonne* is a narrowly focused book that contains a mere eight large images (seven inside and one on the cover) printed on a heavy card stock, but is full of nuance and visual sophistication. The title, translated from German, means "setting sun" or "evening sun," but more specifically refers to a phenomenon in northern Europe during late autumn and early spring where the sun barely rises in the sky. In the mountainous Swiss towns where these images were made, the sun hovers briefly above the peaks before sinking back and shrouding the landscape in darkness - the cool otherworldly light, temporally transforming the landscape and shifting our perception.

Looking at De Ridder's book, I was reminded of a tiny show I saw more than ten years ago entitled *The Sea & The Sky* at the Beaver College Art Gallery in Pennsylvania. Containing works by Vija Celmins, Elger Esser, Linda Conner and various other artists and photographers, the show explored contemporary representations of the sky and sea. Accompanying that exhibition was a pamphlet with the absolutely brilliant essay "What Thought Is Like" by Susan Stewart. In that essay, Stewart traces notions of the sublime from Immanuel Kant to Henry David Thoreau and his contemporaries to the artists exhibited in the show. She also grapples with an issue that is central to De Ridder's work - the paradox of visually expressing a phenomenon that can only be experienced.

All the images in *Abendsonne* contain a similar view of a mountainous landscape mirrored by a lake. In each image, the light has a hazy openness that flattens and abstracts the landscape. Cutting through the center of the frame, the horizon creates a doubling effect that is simultaneously disorienting and hypnotic. Although writing about other work, Stewart's words offer great insight. As she writes, these images "draw us into the act of looking, even as they draw us to the limits of our looking." Stewart continues to talk about how images of the sea and sky often leave us with a "vertiginous loss of position or location." This same phenomenological effect is present in De Ridder's work. As viewers, we hover disoriented above the glass-like surface of a lake - ground and sky seemingly transposed, shimmering out of reach, like a mirage.

As an artist, De Ridder makes images that could easily become saccharine calendar art or empty exercises in sublime kitsch. Arctic sunsets, verdant dunes and dense forests have all been De Ridder's subjects, but he has always succeeded in pushing them to a new level and forced us to look again - either through inventive design in the case of *Wilderness* or editorial restraint and focus, as in the case of *Dune*. In some ways, De Ridder's works are so forcefully anachronistic that they are contemporary. It takes a brave and talented soul to tackle the sublime landscape and succeed like De Ridder.

In the 19th century, writers such as Edmund Burke and James Addison wrote extensively about the sublime and puzzled over the problem of representing vast and spectacular natural phenomenon such as the sea and sky. They also wrote about the feelings of terror and grandeur that accompany one's experience of the sublime. It is easy to forget, or ignore, the mysteries of the natural world. We live in a modern world largely divorced from, and oblivious to, the kinds of natural phenomenon that Burke, Addison and others wrote about so long ago, and De Ridder explores. Separated from the natural beauty of the world, it is always good to look again -- even if it is in awe and confusion -- with fresh eyes.

Please note: All quotes from Susan Stewart, "What Is Thought: The Sea and The Sky," originally printed as a pamphlet to accompany the exhibition *The Sea & The Sky*, Beaver College Art Gallery, 2000; reprinted in Susan Stewart, *The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) p. 99-110.