

Géraldine Sfez "Non compatibles – Painting without qualities"

An exhibition by Catherine Perrret

Les presses du réel, Dijon 2006

Emmanuel Pinard likes places without quality. He drives round in his car looking at them carefully, without any a priori judgements of any kind. His method - which in his case almost takes up the etymological sense of the word meaning route or path - consists of making several visits to a location and wandering around there before actually beginning to photograph it; he inhabits it in the sense of taking it over and creating habits specific to it. As Eric Lapiere says in his analysis, "One of the basic elements of his way of working consists of enlarging the scope of photography to include locating a place on the map, going over it on foot, and generally joining the urban drift, mostly in a car in his case because of the nature of the areas he chooses."

For the first time ever, Emmanuel Pinard's *Paysages périphériques* [Suburban Landscapes] series is now on show in the corridors of the Villa Tamaris. All the work he's done over the last ten years is based on this series, whose theme has obviously (via the principle of porosity) been enriched by his work on other series. Their logic demands some explanation here. With his WC-NCa series (NC = Zones with no building permission and NCa = Agricultural zones with no building permission) (1995-1998), he established a true protocol, photographing the Montesson plain in black and white during dull weather periods, (as a pose to the colour shots of his *Paysages périphériques*). Montesson is an agricultural plain tucked inside the suburbs west of Paris, only a few kilometres from the business district of La Defense; for the artist it's "a typical example of the landscapes that develop and shift as the city expands". Montesson led him to some serious thinking about town planning and its almost constant failure to organize the environment in any coherent way. Similarly, in his photographs of Brasilia, he observes the maximum entropic tension a modern-day city can produce; just as his shots of the districts to the north of Marseille's Vieux Port show the strategies of resistance a city can put up towards any efforts to organize it. Emmanuel Pinard uses photography as a means to develop an extremely coherent criticism of the rationale behind town planning and its many aberrations. The series outlined above have all brought something to the on-going approach he was developing alongside them in his *Paysages périphériques* series, begun in 1993. His method and the questions he was tackling have become clearer over time and he still goes regularly to Sarcelles, Bagnolet, Aulnay-sous-Bois, all in the Paris suburbs, to take photographs there. Ten large-scale (95 x 120 cm), unframed colour prints from this series, on an aluminium backing, are on show in the Villa Tamaris. He has used the same methodical approach as for the Montesson plain, applying himself with the same professional rigour to produce shots "without quality", that have nothing anecdotal or picturesque about them. So concrete and scrubby undergrowth appear side by side, as do the road and the dirt track, the motorway interchange and a piece of wasteland. The artist is not looking for any particular qualities, in fact he shuns what he calls "artistic depth". Nor is he aiming at the spectacular or the photogenic, but rather at the most faithful reproduction of reality possible, with the vast mixture of heterogeneous and trivial detail this implies.

Emmanuel Pinard has designed something special for visitors to the Villa Tamaris, which acts as a form of introduction and entry into the whole subject matter of the exhibition. A large panoramic reproduction (95x320 cm) of the *Bale de Lazaret* welcomes visitors at the entrance; it anticipates and foreshadows the real view from the windows of the Villa. In the photographer's opinion, this wide-angle view with the vast blue expanse of sky and sea, coloured boats dotted here and there, and wooded slopes, is nothing but a typical cliché of the Mediterranean bay. With the territory defined in geographical terms, the photographer can now begin breaking up this space into its component parts, the beach, the port, the seaside resort, which he covers in his series of ten 95x120 cm prints, thus breaking down the panorama into as many different images, so that where the eye tends instinctively to see things as a whole, the photographer has introduced an element of discontinuity. The individual fragments of the mosaic reveal a totally different image of the panorama, nothing like the idealized, photogenic version: the pieces all bear the stamp of the commonplace of everyday life which the inhabitants of La Seyne-sur-Mer do not see and which tourists don't even look at, because they're all far too busy gazing at the "main view". In fact, this "extra-ordinary" view emerges out of the reconstruction of reality produced by a series of juxtaposed images of totally ordinary landscapes and scenes; whether he lives in La Seyne-sur-Mer or not, the viewer is disturbed. For what becomes strikingly clear at this point is the sad banality of these scenes: the beach is not a picture postcard beach at all. A boat stranded on the shore is clearly visible, as are some spindly palm trees, a street along the seafront with its banal blocks of flats, an adjacent carpark, used so frequently as to be central. Emmanuel Pinard has also photographed the wastelands where some little huts have been erected, as well as the ordinary architecture of the bay, with special emphasis on the district known as Les Sablettes, La Seyne-sur-Mer's first post-war seaside holiday resort. His camera has captured the way the strata of daily life, with the neon signs of the chemist, the betting bars, the discotheque, and karaoke bars, shops selling souvenir and postcards etc. have gradually settled onto the purer lines of the original. The street signs, clouds or passers-by are not disturbing in themselves as long as they're on the same scale as the decor they find themselves in, and fit into it quite naturally. By passing from one scale to another, from one standpoint to another, Emmanuel Pinard reveals the mechanism at work here; he is able to observe how selective the viewer's eye is when it takes in a place and reconstitutes it. These photos are not trying to tell a story, they are recounting what is real, telling it how it is and how we do not look at it. For Emmanuel Pinard feels that taking photos means taking a piece of reality out of its context, and thus stopping the process of the real. The strands of several themes - questions about the real, about photography and about the ordinary - run through Emmanuel's work in his constant efforts to define a certain territory. His documentary approach inherited from Eugene Atget, Walker Evans and the Dusseldorf school, is the mark of a more long-term one, where he asks some penetrating questions about our view of everyday reality and nondescript places that have been abandoned or closed down; places which are in some way a "no-man's land", "uncategorized", "without quality".