

Melanie Carvalho

Bordering on the region of palms
By Ross Birrell

'... the loftiest and noblest of all vegetable forms, that to which the prize of beauty has been assigned by the concurrent voice of nations in all ages; for the earliest civilisations of mankind belong to countries bordering on the regions of palms...'

- Alexander von Humbolt, Aspects of Nature

I

The house is surrounded by snow. The dead radio alarm suggests a power cut. Sure enough, when I check the bedroom radiator it is cold to the touch. There must be a power line down somewhere on the Peninsula. I have to force myself to leave the warmth of the bed but I can no longer suppress the desire to venture out into the virgin snow in the garden. It is a scene transformed, the outline of plants and objects transposed into unfamiliar, alien forms; antler-like azaleas, outcrops of terracotta mushrooms. The slender branches of a rhododendron have fallen under the weight of snow across the footpath. It's a long way from its native China. I am told that people on the West Coast of Scotland is conducive to the propagation of Palm Trees and Rhododendrons as the rainfall and moisture in the atmosphere, mixed with the warm air of the Gulf stream resemble a tropical climate. I crouch down and measure the depth of snow with an un-gloved hand pressing until the tips of my fingers feel the

moist hidden soil beneath. It takes the whole depth of my hand. Back in the house I measure my hand, 7 inches. I begin to build a fire to thaw out, but find the coal is almost finished, less than half a scuttle. I slowly begin to freeze. So much for the approach of spring. Tropical Scotland? Typical Scotland, more like. Hunkered down and shivering before a dwindling fire, my fingers begin to turn numb as I type these thoughts into the laptop.

II

In the eighteenth century, prior to the rationalizing impact of empirical science and philosophy, it was fashionable when visiting the countryside to look at a particularly compelling view through a curved tinted mirror or 'Claude Glass', which reflected the scene in the manner of the 17th century Italianate landscapes of Claude Lorraine. Nature was only fully experienced, in effect, when it was, that is to say, when it had become aestheticized. The Claude Glass is often offered in the context of the experience of landscape painting as example of the aestheticization of nature and thus evidence of a culture which prefers mediation to direct experience, the simulation to the real. According to this logic it is a short step from the hills and valleys of eighteenth-century Europe to the fake waterfalls and theme parks of Disneyland two centuries later. Furthermore, the Claude Glass offers the

experience of delight in a world rendered coherent and tame before an untroubled, unified gaze. In short it is an artistic attempt to order the world according to the enduring principles of beauty, harmony and truth. I dwell on these points because the 17th century classical landscape not only influenced 18th century depictions and experience of the British landscape, it determined European representations of the Tropics and shaped their reception as the New World and realized utopia.

III

I am looking at a series of botanical drawings and collages resting on the floor of Melanie Carvalho's Cable Street studio, East London. In their combined confusion of references, perspective, scale and temperate zones, the collages transpose landscapes and localities from Scotland to Switzerland and from Nepal to New York. As the cut-out foliage spills beyond the borders of the paper support the collages remind you of scientific experiments gone wrong, organisms over-growing the Petri dish to contaminate the world beyond its sterilised borders, a universe overtaken by an endless proliferation of images. Although the collages are framed with tropical vegetation, I resist the temptation to describe them as a jungle of images because they also remind me of the faked photographs of fairies at the bottom of a suburban garden. The collages are literally cuttings, seedbeds of cultural dissemination, not so much Leo Steinberg's 'flatbed' as 'raised-bed' picture-planes. But the compositions, none the less, possess an echo of tropical landscapes and borrow from the conventions of classical landscape -

framing trees, elevated viewpoint, water feature, architectural structure - an echo also found in Carvalho's recent project Expedition. But despite this proximity to classical landscape painting, as visual organisms the rhizomatic flow of these collages disrupts the spatial logic of the ordered, rational world of retinal classification served by the very tradition of botanical drawing which Carvalho references in her drawings and paintings. The reference to the conventions of botanical drawing and classical landscape in Carvalho's work, then, are not attempts at the classification or codification of experience - or even impressionistic efforts to transpose natural phenomena into visual experience. Rather, they preserve the remnants of wonderment in the material world.

IV

Although European painters first depicted the topography of the Tropics according to the conventions of classical landscape, it was not long before the tropical landscape was to return the gaze. As Bernard Smith notes in his discussion of the approaches of the 18th century English painter William Hodges and the 19th century explorer Alexander von Humboldt: 'Whereas Hodges had sought to make tropical landscape conform to the taste of his time by adapting it to the Italianate landscape, Humboldt, himself inspired by the paintings of Hodges, asserted that the noblest forms of landscape are to be found in the tropics.'¹ To Humboldt, who's writings

¹ Bernard Smith, *European Vision and The South Pacific 1768-1850: A Study in the History of Art and*

went on to influence Ruskin's ideas on landscape, the tropical landscape 'was the noblest of all; and a landscape painter could serve no higher purpose than to bring its beauties (manifest in its plant groups) to the notice of the European public'.²

V

As I look at the blossoming chaos of the collages, in all their imaginative flows, leaps and interruptions, and then turn to the botanical paintings and drawings - the intense pink blossom, the dusky petals emerging from the charcoal darkness of Night-time Rhododendron - a word keeps playing on my lips; a small apparently innocent word which was until recently an embarrassment to the rigorous claims of art theory. The word is beauty. For many artists and critics, beauty is an exhausted word, worn out from over-use in the annals of art appreciation. Beauty was also a favourite way to tame and Westernise the exotic. But to say that Carvalho's collages, drawings, paintings and films possess beauty is not to say that they are unproblematic aesthetic objects which resist and defy language and critique. It is simply to recognise the facts.

Carvalho selects those images which we are invited to see as beautiful; blooms in gardening magazines, mountain ranges and beach scenes in travel magazines and tourist advertisements; she mixes them the superficial and the banal, she plays with scenes of beauty, isolates them, repeats them, celebrates them, questions them. What prevents Carvalho's work from being consumed purely in aesthetic terms, however, is the fact that it is increasingly undercut by uncertain narratives. For example. who in London today can look at an abandoned rucksack below a canopy of trees and simply see a signifier of a camping holiday or a trek in the Himalayas - particularly if the title of the work is Tunnel? It has long been held that the sublime always contains an element of terror, and that landscape painting is always bordering on the sublime. But the rucksack lies abandoned at the boundary of the canvas. Maybe, then, Tunnel tells us something about the existence of a peripheral sublime: perhaps here, in this liminal zone at the threshold of a future landscape, a terrible beauty is born.

Ross Birrell, 2006

Ideas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 157.

² Ibid. p, 153.