



Nick GOSS

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Picturing Human Absence

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In an article on Luigi Ghirri, the writer and art-historian Teju Cole, muses that “things in Ghirri’s pictures are rarely simply themselves; they look like themselves, or look like images of themselves, or bear their own names, or are framed like pictures.” What they are not, Cole implies, is straightforward representations of objects. Ghirri, who pioneered the use of colour photography as a medium for fine art, was concerned with clarifying in his photos a distinction between seeing and understanding; he mapped out new ways to capture man and his relationship with the landscape, to ‘re-educate the gaze’ in order to de-familiarise landscapes that had been photographed, drawn and replicated countless times before.

In Ghirri’s work, the concept that a picture of the world will contain infinite numbers of reproduced images is constantly interrogated; local landscapes become enigmatic and hard to pin down, while humans in his photos are always kept at a distance, partially obscured. A sense of place is the undisputed protagonist of Ghirri’s oeuvre. Human presence – whether it is figured in maps, the seaside, interiors or exteriors – is never the definitive subject, but subsidiary to concerns with how to decode the world if it is full of replications. This disconnect between man and nature, exploited by Ghirri to create uncanny, cerebral photographs, is a theme that can also be traced in the work of Nick Goss, who cites Luigi Ghirri as one of his direct influences.

Mostly working on raw linen, Nick Goss uses tonal washes and pastel colours to render evanescent spaces of no fixed origin; they exist in a liminal zone between memory and imagination, with an absence of resolution that recalls Ghirri’s work. Paintings like ‘Blue Clam Shirt’ (2016) depict three sunbathers on the edge of the green banks of Hyde Park, a familiar landscape to any Londoner. Yet it is not the human presence, but the peripheral landscape that is the most arresting element of the work; the gentle brush-strokes that pick out the lake; the swathe of red paint that serves as a blanket; the leaf that upon closer examination appears to be a tropical moth; these recognisable objects undergo subtle transformations under Goss’s imaginative gaze that engage the viewer. The sunbathers themselves look away across the water, their faces obscured. Their significance in the landscape is intended to remain enigmatic and concealed a concept that is evident in Ghirri’s photos where people are captured in motion.



In Ghirri’s Ostiglia, Centrale Elettrica, (1987), a young girl walks across an empty road, her head turned towards the camera. A pointed distance is kept between her and the photographer, emphasising that she is not the central subject of the work. Yet her pink skirt matches the striped detail of the chimneys behind her; she is undeniably of the landscape, but appears out of reach. This represents what Ghirri calls ‘our epochal cipher’: geographical space is not separated into the artificial and the natural, rather, pathways between the two come to represent the modern way of life.



For Ghirri and Goss, the ultimate destination in their work is one where the human and earthly merge; this creates a space where the viewer can insert themselves into an unknown and immaterial world and modulate the landscape with their own interpretations. In Goss’s ‘Atlas (After Ghirri and Leavitt)’, an open atlas is depicted, positioned immediately before the viewer as if to suggest they have opened it themselves. Faint lines sketched by an absent figure pick a pathway across the map, altering its surface but never overwhelming it; a gentle intervention that perfectly summarises the negotiations between ‘man, things and life’ that Ghirri attempted to capture in his photography. For Goss, the spectre of human presence haunts his work in order to remind us that representations of landscapes, exteriors and interiors are subject to the distortions of memory and imagination; they take us to what he calls ‘a new sense of place’, an uncanny location, that like Ghirri’s work, is infinitely unresolved, and never a direct experience but one separate from ‘objective’ reality.