

Catherine Bodmer: Lacs

by Pascale Beaudet

Catherine Bodmer is not a photographic specialist. Her interest in the city, where she has begun to photograph abandoned spaces, is fairly recent. Previous work by this emerging artist dealt with cleaning as a daily ritual: cleaning the body, cleaning spaces. Her artistic career has been focused on these seemingly banal, trivial aspects of life, to which her work gives added dimension. Recently she turned her camera on one of Montreal's vacant lot and its spring metamorphosis.

An older meaning of the French word vague (vacant) was "vagabond." Vacant lots are wastelands: although they have owners, these people or any visible signs of them are absent – unlike the buildings with company logos shouting their trade names from the rooftops. City dwellers often appropriate these ambiguous spaces — places in which to wander, to take shortcuts across, or detours through — since their owners seem to be neglecting them. Fencing them in is useless, for people stubbornly cut the wires, knock over the posts. The implicit message is "Occupy the space or we will until you do."

But in Bodmer's photos, no living thing crosses the unbuilt expanses and the broad, formless puddles that threaten to flood them in spring. Instead, strange mountain chains protrude discreetly. Since the Alps are not part of our urban landscape, these incursions bring the truthfulness of the photograph into question. The vacant lot denies, in a sense, the sublimity of the mountainous heights, defiles its sacred aura. Moreover, the image itself contains various clues suggesting that it has been manipulated. These humorous *clins d'œil* flag the image as ambiguous and requiring investigation. The ambiguity inherent in the place has spread to the medium.

These photographic manipulations may seem reminiscent of the work of artists such as Isabelle Hayeur, in which places are subtly disguised. But this kind of dissimulation is not the main intention here. Bodmer's aim is to send us reeling between different emotional states and different aesthetic levels.

The texts incorporated into the photographs enhance this destabilization. By projecting us into a space totally alien from the one depicted, the words create a breach that leads us to re-examine the image. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but these are not the ones we were expecting. Logic vacillates and is replaced by a poetics or politics of visual expression.

Normally we would expect sociological commentary to accompany this kind of photograph, or perhaps poetic wanderlust. But by juxtaposing the banal with the fantastic or surprising, Bodmer obliges us to reconsider our frame of reference. Her abrupt juxtapositions set the viewer's imagining in motion, opening up a multiple of possibilities.

In a recent series titled *Déplacer des montagnes* (moving mountains), Bodmer gave prestigious names to ordinary piles of snow (*Mer de Glace, Mont Cervin, Monte Verità*) in a fondly ironic look back at the mountains of the artist's Swiss childhood. But from the perspective of a Montreal childhood these mundane mounds take on an entirely different significance: memories of tobogganing and playing on what seemed at the time like the heights of Everest but were in fact just puny banks of snow obstructing the streets and sidewalks.

Incongruity of scale, blatantly obvious in this previous series, also comes into play in *Lacs*, where it is in the contrast between the shallow pools of water and the high mountains or multi-storey buildings. It is the contrast between nature on a small scale, cowed into temporary submission,

and culture, here in the form of architecture, asserting its domination. In this case, Bodmer's subject is vanquished nature rather than architecture as a reflection of human arrogance.

The puddles of water are also a non-subject in the sense that by being located in a despoiled and abandoned place they are unworthy of landscape photography. The things we usually associate with vacant lots – debris, weeds, homeless people, occasionally violence – are things we consider disorderly and verging on chaos. The point here is not to pass moral judgment but to indicate that the paradoxical linking of such a humble subject to the sublime one of mountainous heights is accomplished with tact. The shifts from banal to sublime, mundane to imaginary, human disorder to natural order, are subtly rather than jarringly made.

Catherine Bodmer endeavours to divest the landscape of the aura of romanticism with which it is often imbued. But instead of banishing romanticism she opts for the more judicious strategy of dispelling our sense of its reality.

First published in *Image et imagination*, Le mois de la photo à Montréal 2005, edited by Martha Langford, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca, p. 244.