

The Geometrical Determination of the Sunrise
Noémie Goudal

10 July – 14 September 2014

Exhibition guide

The Geometrical Determination of the Sunrise comprises new photographs, films and installations by French artist Noémie Goudal. Through the work, Goudal explores the relationship between reality and artifice and the intersection between nature and the man-made. The title refers to the history of architecture, in particular the way great buildings in the Archaic and Classical periods were constructed according to precise mathematical rules and the path of the sun.

Goudal's first series of black and white photographs (*Observatoires, 2013-14*) is inspired by cosmic Indian architecture. The images refer to the eighteenth century astronomical observatories built by Maharajah Jai Singh II in Jaipur and Delhi, India, which were constructed with the Heavens in mind and took the sun, moon and stars as inspiration. Man-made structures orientated towards the sky—stairs, pyramids and domes—are pictured in incongruous natural environments such as the ocean, beach or vast planes, creating a half-real, half artificial landscape. The images are intentionally ambiguous to allow space for the viewer imagination to flow.

Three-dimensional in appearance, the structures are, in fact, two-dimensional backdrops, constructed entirely from paper by the artist and re-staged in natural space. The folds in Goudal's cut-outs are left deliberately discernable, highlighting their fleeting existence in photographic space and their rough and ready construction. The imperfections also point to the rapid speed at which many of the original urban structures were erected; and to their inevitable disintegration. Just as Goudal's backdrops risk destruction from a sudden wave or gust of wind, the man-made structures in *Observatoires* are vulnerable to erosion and collapse.

The original Brutalist structures were photographed in Germany, France and the United Kingdom and bring to mind the work of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher, specifically the duo's 'typologies' of European industrial architecture. However, whilst the Bechers were concerned to highlight the need for preservation of our industrial heritage through their documentation of disappearing water towers, gas tanks and coal bunkers, Goudal's *Observatoires* emphasise the ephemeral nature of such concrete edifices.

Conceived especially for this exhibition and with the *Observatoires* in mind, *Study on Perspective I*, 2014 shows a deconstructed photograph taken inside the campus of Ruhr University Bochum (German: Ruhr-Universität Bochum, RUB), the first university to be founded in Germany following World War II. As with her backdrops of stairs and pyramids, Goudal creates the illusion of three-dimensional space through her 'slicing' of the pictorial space into four layers, which accentuates the depth of perspective. As spectators, we experience the unsettling feeling of standing on the threshold of a cave-like room but being prevented from entering.

As with *Observatoires*, Goudal's *Satellite* images combine two scenes within a single image and again involve the creation of backdrops, this time, placed in the depths of the Amazon rainforest. The images are inspired by sound mirrors or reflectors, which were built on the south and northeast coasts of England between 1916 and the 1930s to provide early warning of enemy airplanes and airships approaching coastal towns. A forerunner of radar (RADIO Detection And Ranging), sound mirrors were used extensively in World War I but, with the development of faster aircraft, they soon became less useful for defence because an enemy aircraft would be within sight before it had been located. The mirrors worked by focusing the noise of aircraft engines into a microphone which amplified the sound, hence they became known as 'listening ears': man-made structures designed to listen to the sky. Goudal's *Satellites* refer to some of the most famous surviving concrete sound mirrors at Denge, a site in Dungeness on the Kent coast.

The relationship between the earth and the sky, man-made and natural forces is also explored in two related films commissioned by The New Art Gallery Walsall, *Tanker* and *Diver*. They are presented here in adjoining rooms for simultaneous viewing. Each of the films are

diametrically opposed: in relation to environment (man-made/natural space), the light (darkness and daylight), and in action (industrial and spiritual). In this way, the films respond and reflect upon each other, extending concerns present in Goudal's photographic work.

Tanker, 2014 plunges the viewer into the bowels of one of the world's largest oil/chemical tankers, 'Cielo Di Guangzhou'. Crew members are seen climbing down a seemingly endless ladder into the depths of the tank. The crew's repetitive action recreates the mechanisation of industrial space on a human scale, while the act of descending the ladder becomes a contrary metaphor for Jacob's ladder as described in the Book of Genesis: each step brings the crew further away from Heaven while the ladder becomes a symbol of the connection between the earth and sky. The constant noise of the tanker pump resonates like cuffs inflating and deflating between two heartbeats, weaving a subtle link between reality and illusion.

Just as the structures in Goudal's *Observatoires* are orientated towards the sky, the vertical thin line of light leaking from the tank hatch provides a pathway to Heaven, pointing to humankind's age-old fascination with reaching the sky. The liquid refers to man's relationship to nature: the tanker shelters in its centre some of the products mothered by the Earth. The crude oil, molasses, and palm oil travel through the ocean in the heart of the tank, intertwining humankind with nature.

In contrast to her usual method of personifying natural elements, Goudal's second film features professional divers jumping in succession from the top of a metallic diving board and into a vast and otherwise unoccupied mountain lake. The repetitive movement of the divers echoes the actions of the crew aboard *Tanker*. Each leap represents humankind's omnipresent aspiration for infinity, our tireless obsession with ascending to the sky to reach the Unknown.

Emerging from the water, the diving board repeats the intersection between nature and the man-made elsewhere in Goudal's work, prompting the viewer to reflect on their own experience of isolated spaces and upon notions of truth and actuality. Intertwining human construction with naturally-occurring forces of the world, the diving board offers a step to the sky.

Rocks, minerals, islands and mountains form the subject of images contained on plates inside a series of stereoscopic viewers in the gallery, which convey the artist's ongoing interest in remote spaces with huge narrative power. This interrogation of space and humankind's attraction to isolated places is extended on a monumental scale in *Ciels*, a site-specific print that envelops the breadth of a wall in the gallery space. The photograph is a variation on a previously unexhibited 2012 image of the basement of Derwent London plc. Modified and adapted for this exhibition, *Ciels* explores the possibilities of the photographic image – the dialogue between representation and actuality. Like *Study on Perspective I*, the image invites the viewer to enter an imaginary, yet seemingly three-dimensional room. Giving the impression of an extension to the Gallery space, the image offers the illusion of an escape through a door into the sea.

Zoë Lippett
Exhibitions and Artists' Projects Curator

Noémie Goudal is represented by Edel Assanti, London and Galerie Les Fillies du Calvaire, Paris. *The Geometrical Determination of the Sunrise* marks a new international collaboration between The New Art Gallery Walsall and Foam Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam, where the exhibition will tour in 2015. *Observatoires*, a new limited edition artist book featuring a text by esteemed curator, writer and Director of Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris, Marta Gili, is available to buy in the shop priced £8.99.