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"Point de Vue"

Eugénie Shïnkle, *Point de vue*, Quartier Éphémère, Montréal. December 5 1996-January 25 1997

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MONTRÉAL

POINT DE VUE

Eugénie Shinkle, *Point de vue*, Quartier Éphémère, Montréal. December 5 1996-January 25 1997

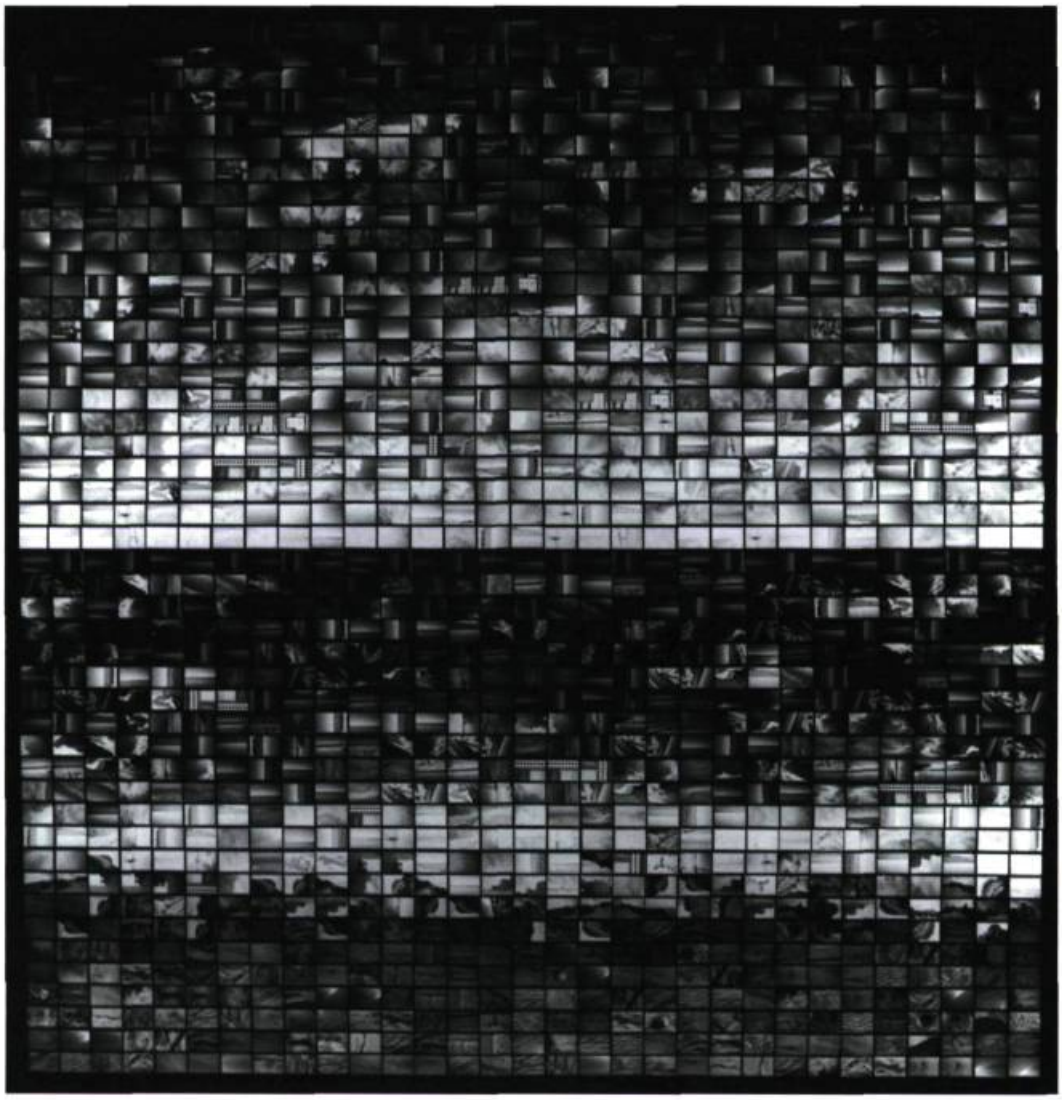

PHOTO : GUY L'HEUREUX

Eugénie Shinkle, *Ligne d'horizon*, 1996.

The verb " to landscape ", according to the dictionary definition, means " to improve the natural features of a garden, park, etc., as by creating contoured features and planting trees. " This is a salutary reminder that the word " landscape " was originally used to describe a specific type of painting, in which the world " out there " was ordered by being subjected to intellectual principles of visual organization. There is an essential semantic differentiation here between landscape — ordered, rationalized and made beautiful — and Nature. The latter, insofar as it has tended to be defined as existing in a nonideological state outside the conventions of social organization, is a phenomenon too vague, vast and distant to be grasped as a clearly comprehensible entity. It is inherently unrepresentable; as a pragmatic concept it is not very plausible.

Hence the attempts, present throughout history, to transmogrify Nature into landscape. From our supposedly enlightened standpoint at the dusk of the twentieth century, we may look back with condescending amusement at the *milordi* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who viewed Nature through pieces of smoked glass so as to

PHOTO : GUY L'HEUREUX

Eugénie Shinkle, *Rebuild I*, 1996. Épreuve argentique; 127 x 101,6 cm.

beautify it — authenticate it — by giving it the hazy, golden, unified character of the popular paintings of Claude Lorraine (1600-82). Yet are our expectations about the world " out there ", and about our relationship to it, any less naive ? In the end, all those phenomena that we define as landscapes are bracketed expanses of scenery as viewed from a single aspect : mediations between that which is unrepresentable (Nature) and the act of representation. Eugénie Shinkle's landscape photographs are reminders that we are involved in a constant process of remaking Nature, usually according to criteria of unification and harmonization that we too casually assume are neutral and transcendent. Shinkle's landscapes are conceived not as objective facts, but as slices of subjective reality. In this way they show us more about ourselves and about how we understand the landscape than they do about nature itself.

One key way in which Shinkle's photographs do this is by foregrounding the presence of the viewer as a reader of landscape. For example, in her exhibition at Quartier Éphémère, *Ligne d'horizon* is one of four large (46" x 48") collage landscapes, constructed of hundreds of tiny contact prints of landscape views, in this case laid down on a neat, regular grid plan. Standing close to the work, the viewer is overwhelmed by the wealth of competing detail in the multitude of photographic fragments. At this distance the work collapses into optical noise : a visual dictionary of landscape. Despite the jewel-like richness and easily recognizable imagery within the individual contact prints, the overwhelming reaction is one of frustration, because of the failure of vision to make sense of this seemingly chaotic juxtaposition of snippets of raw Nature. At a greater distance, however, these details blur, come together, into a coherent single landscape, complete with foreground beach, middle-ground water, a horizon line, sky, and spatial recession. The experience is exactly akin to that of moving away from a pointillist painting: the same shift from indecipherable visual chaos to the sudden emergence of children running across sunlit grass, musicians in the distance, a stylish couple with their pet monkey. On their own, each contact print in *Ligne d'horizon* represents a trace: an image of one particular thing, an evocation of an instant of experience, taken or viewed from one particular angle at one specific moment in time. Taken together, however, they coalesce into a whole that embodies within itself both discrete singular moments and a larger, unified narrative.

The " natural landscape ", thus represented, is revealed as nothing of the kind. It is, rather, an artificial construction, and the quality of constructedness is underscored by the fact that the larger view only achieves its status as a readable image through the active engagement of viewers. We, the viewers, are conscious of our mental attempts to reformulate a conglomeration of apparently unrelated bits into a coherent narrative. In the process, we may come to a realization that this reformulation depends utterly upon our physical placement with regard to the image. Far from

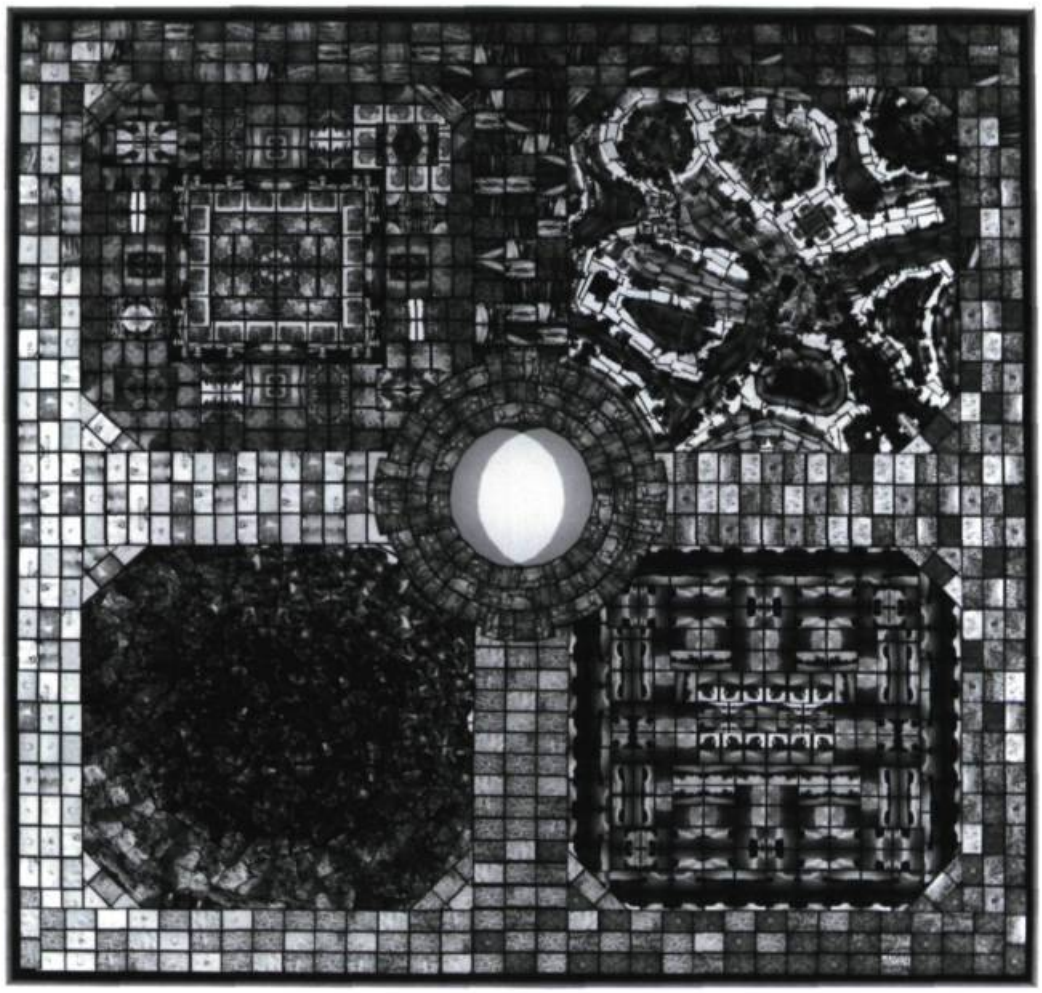

PHOTO : GUY L'HEUREUX

Eugénie Shinkle, *Le jardin de Brunelleschi*, 1996. Planches contact, bois; 127 x 127 cm.

conceiving of ourselves as disinterested, atemporal and decorporealized eyes that survey the world with a kind of metavision, we discover that our spontaneous assumption of coherence in the world around us is premised upon the recognition of a close link of dependence between our physical embodiedness and the ambient world within which we find ourselves.

Shinkle's mosaic assemblages insist that this is a lesson to be absorbed not only by the viewer, but also by the artist. The traditional conception of the artist as someone who in authority vis-à-vis " mere " viewers is under attack here. Shinkle freely acknowledges her own inability to deal with — or even to " simply " view — Nature in terms other than those of a human structuring agent. The clearly painstaking and time-consuming work of affixing hundreds of tiny contact prints into larger narrative wholes is thus not an attempt to imply that she is in a position of being able to collapse the gap between Nature and landscape; indeed, it insists upon the impossibility of such a project. Similarly, the present exhibition includes small assemblages — *Cloud* and *Cap Saint-Jacques*, for example — consisting of a few contact prints sewed together into rectangular wholes by means of highly visible stitching. Here the artist is a seamstress creating landscapes with contact prints and thread. The tension in these sutured works between their identity as images and as objects is deliberate, and suggests the status of " real " landscapes as intellectually and physically manufactured objects. That status is emphasized by the small size of the works, by their clear references to craft and labour, and by the consequent associations with useful handmade objects. In these ways works such as *Cloud* and *Cap Saint-Jacques* seem very personal, as if to lay stress on the photographer as an agent who intellectually and perceptually moulds Nature so as to make it more containable and thus more comprehensible : more like a " real " landscape.

A comparable point about landscape as personal construction or reconstruction is made in a triptych consisting of three large works : *Fragment, Rebuild I and Rebuild II*. *Fragment* is a close-up black-and-white photograph of a rock face. Hanging to its immediate right, *Rebuild I* shatters much of the same rock face into the grid of tiny contact prints that also appears in *Ligne d'horizon*. Hundreds of these contact prints, all showing discrete details of rock, combine to create the illusion of a " rebuilt " version of the original rock face. Only the central section of the original image is left untouched. In *Rebuild II*, however, it is this central area — not the surrounding areas of rock that were mosaicized in *Rebuild I* — that is subjected to the scrutiny of artificial reconstruction. Here, piles of contact prints of rock imagery, each print smaller than the one immediately beneath it, simulate the projections and concavities of the rock face from *Fragment*. In this sense it is of interest not only that *Fragment* is framed, but that the two " rebuilt " versions of it — *Rebuild I* and *Rebuild II* — hang from wooden slats rather than being

placed within frames and behind glass. This presentation technique, along with the titles of these two works, accentuates their status as in-progress, handmade objects. From here it was a logical step to the creation of *Ligne d'horizon* and of the small, sewn-together works, in which the overall views are built up, constructed, in more thoroughgoing ways.

Thus, Shinkle insists in all these works that both artist and viewer acknowledge landscape as a phenomenon that is intrinsically corporeal, objective and intellectualized rather than visual, objective and natural. The implications of this stance, beyond the parameters of landscape as a subject to be constructed and viewed, are noteworthy. If our physical placement determines the legibility of the landscape (and what are gardens and parks if not vistas intended to be seen — or make sense — from specific placements of the viewer within them ?), the landscape is also a factor in the determination of our own legibility as subjects. The landscape view confines the viewer to " correct " viewing positions, legislating his/her mobility and imposing a grid of expectation and delimitation. Frederick Law Olmsted knew what he was talking about when he argued that his casual-seeming landscape design for New York's Central Park would encourage visitors along the path toward good citizenship. The viewer/stroller's brute nature and " natural " freedoms were to be delimited by the artfully constructed " naturalness " of the Park. He/she was, in effect, situated and identified as a subject within a civil society that, like landscape, maintained its integrity by imposing order upon the natural, in opposition to all the latter's assumed inherent tendency to slip out of control.

But Nature is not so easily boxed in, tamed and neutralized. Beyond all individual and social efforts to circumscribe it, it remains essentially unrepresentable and unknowable. It constantly threatens to crack the ground beneath both ordered landscape and civil society. Hence the almost desperate attempts both of landscape architects and of social organizations to deny its anarchic presence. Another of Shinkle's large mosaic landscapes, *Le Jardin de Brunelleschi*, offers an aerial view of the four English gardens at Wisley, Stowe, Stourhead and Blenheim Palace. The composition of the overall view is exquisitely symmetrical, and the gardens themselves are structured into clean geometric outlines surrounded and interconnected by a mathematically precise set of paved walkways. However, just as in *Ligne d'horizon*, the view is entirely artificial, with gardens and walkways alike consisting of assemblages of contact prints (the prints making up the four gardens being fragmentary views of the gardens in question). Further, the arrangement of all four gardens into a single, coherent and unified aerial view — one which looks eminently believable to our naive eyes precisely because it is so abundantly ordered — is itself a false representation of the actual relations between these four gardens, which are in reality widely separated geographically from one another. It seems singularly appropriate, therefore, that right in the centre of *Le Jardin de Brunelleschi* is a representation of an ornamental pool : a circle that has been cut through the image's wooden support. On the one hand, it recalls the hole drilled by Brunelleschi into a painted view of Florentine buildings as part of his demonstration of single-vanishing-point perspective. The latter — with its artificial character masquerading as objective truth and with its well-rehearsed implications for the reciprocal ordering and controlling both of the viewer and of that which is viewed — is of obvious relevance to Shinkle's investigative project. On the other hand, the pool/hole's initially reassuring quality of geometric order and stability (it is perfectly circular) opens onto the wall behind the image and thus onto another realm that forcibly reminds us that, behind the picturesque ordering, calm and apparent inevitability of the image, is a void that perpetually threatens to overwhelm the latter's artificiality.

In all these ways Shinkle's landscapes, seen through the lens of subjective reality, tell us at least as much about ourselves and our ways of structuring our knowledge of the world as they do about what the world itself looks like. This attack on our tendency to see the landscape as fundamentally separate from ourselves, to attempt to impose order and vision upon it, and to convert it into a static, mastered view, is a timely undertaking. In an era of wholesale environmental plunder and devastation, when we are being overwhelmed by the consequences of the long-standing, self-imposed division between ourselves and the natural world that we have chosen to rule rather than inhabit, these photographic constructions require us to revise our definitions of the landscape and of our place within it. In addition, our ability to inflict massive change on our physical environment is almost always accompanied by a desire to preserve certain exemplary landscapes in their " natural " state — a state that, as Shinkle's photographic project demonstrates, is ultimately false because it is inherently *un*natural. At a time when our impact upon the environment is often catastrophic, these photographs remind us that mature environmental management strategies ought to be based upon more than culturally invested images, arrayed for the omnipresent but ultimately detached spectatorial and intellectual pleasure of the viewing subject.

BRIAN FOSS