

Nuages

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The small village in Southern France, Saint-Jean-de-Fos, picturesquely situated at the foothills of the Cevennes in the Languedoc region, is a meaningful place for Heike Negenborn's work. In 1989, she visited there for the very first time, on the occasion of an excursion headed by her university teacher Peter Lörincz, who became her overall mentor. For the young artist, this stay marked the discovery of landscape, the beginning of an engagement with the perceived environment, which in the meantime has been ongoing for over thirty years. Lörincz, a renowned representative of new realism, was an exceptional teacher with a vital impact on the artistic assets of his students. He proved equally influential for Heike Negenborn, whose artistic development he fostered through offering advice and exemplary artistic work. In 1995, she spent an entire year in Saint-Jean-de-Fos. Once more, this experience led to a significant change, this time palpable in her style. Whereas she formerly used to draw her landscape depictions freehand, she then began to organize the surface and space of her work by means of an intense focus on stringent perspectival construction – this eventually became the structural foundation for her further work.

To see in perspective, to think in perspective is clearly an option towards the future, an idea against the infinite. The boldly used linear perspective in Negenborn's realized creations focuses on an infinite, far-away vanishing point, joined by metaphysical implications. Through the relation between point of station and vanishing point, the perspectival picture conveys "a feeling of powerful subjectivity, the observer experiences himself as an individual."<sup>1</sup> This rational construction in her works, which adopt the perspectival achievements of the Renaissance and transfer them to the present, constitutes the static component of Negenborn's landscape, which the artist dialectically contrasts with the motif of movement.

Anyone who has listened to *Nuages* by Django Reinhardt can imagine what clouds meant to him: a representation of the original homeland of the homeless Sinti and Roma, because they keep wandering like the clouds. However, these clouds are not only a sentimental melancholic allegory for travelers, rather, they represent the everlasting journey per se. For Reinhardt, their musical description was a vehicle for his concerns, his life, and his art, driven by the certainty

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<sup>1</sup> Jochen Schule-Sasse, "Perspektive", in: Karlheinz Barck, Martin Fontius, Dieter Schlenstedt, Burkhard Steinwachs, Friedrich Wolfzettel, *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, Volume 4 (Stuttgart, Weimar 2010), p. 770.

of their metamorphosis, for even the most intimidating cloud formations promise hope, even though they eventually dissolve.

Sometimes Heike Negenborn cheerfully refers to herself as Nuageuse: unlike music, which is ephemeral, she uses artistic means to transform clouds into solid beauty, although, of course, clouds do embody an idea of motion. Since 2004, the artist has been incorporating clouds in her creations by making them the key motif of the subject matter. Her work is motivated and inspired by Dutch landscape painting of the seventeenth century, in particular by Jacob van Ruisdael, who introduced the category of flat landscape with a low horizon and a high cloudy sky as a true depiction of landscape into European painting. Thus, Heike Negenborn becomes part of a specific tradition of realistic representation in landscape painting, whose artistic style with clear, authentic, and scenic realizations deeply reminds one of the landscape painting of German Romanticism.

To her, cloud formations are foremost aesthetic moments without further content-related implications. Nevertheless, clouds are iconographically defined by tradition; this means their pictorial meaning has long been determined and handed down. In Western Christian culture, clouds are symbols of concealment, as they are in Islam, too, where they specifically represent the inscrutability of Allah. In the second book of Moses, God leads the Israelites in the form of a pillar of clouds, as they are leaving Egypt, and the resurrected Christ is veiled by a shroud of clouds. In illustrations of the Last Judgment, the throne of God is formed out of clouds; moreover, in early medieval art, the creator is depicted by a hand parting the clouds. Up to this day, this image represents divine omnipotence. On a more secular level, we contemplate the fair-weather clouds with a cheerful, free spirit and a positive state of overall happiness lets us float on “cloud nine.”

For Negenborn, clouds are a heroic idealization of landscape, regarded as a symbol of internal scenic drama. With a strong emphasis on towering clouds, she accomplishes a vivid intensity of the dialectic pair of sky and earth, showing it with a straightforward access. This is complemented by the contrast between movement and stasis, projection and moment. She has been photographing her clouds since 2004. Photography, next to her preliminary drawings, to her is sketch, design, and archive, a realistic set-piece that she brings and integrates into her paintings. In her creations, reality and illusion blend together, become inseparable.

In the East of Africa, the Kilimanjaro, a mountainous massif of almost 6000 meters in height, soars above the clouds. Beneath his most western summit, known by the Massai as the House

of God, lies the frozen skeleton of a leopard. During an attempt to ascend, the animal had failed, forever remaining in the ice, along with its secret, as Ernest Hemingway once wrote: “No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude.”<sup>2</sup> The *frozen leopard* as an image of eternal, frozen beauty in ultra-white landscape metaphorically portrays the pursuit for the sublime. It is an allegory of artistic endeavors to reach an explicit and pure statement. Heike Negenborn is also on a quest for pure expression: her “frozen” landscapes are entirely free of trivialities, they breathe an astounding clarity of the spiritual in art, and are connected to pantheistic reasoning, originating in Spinoza’s maxim “Deus sive Natura.” In this sense, her creations are naturalistic, aiming at the inner quality of natural objects, the essence beneath the surface. Along these lines, Negenborn creates an entirely distinctive form of magic realism, a magical presence of landscape. To some extent, the true topographical subject matter is freed from one location through staging and stylization, and respectively transformed into an ideal landscape.

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<sup>2</sup> Ernest Hemingway, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”, in: *Esquire*, New York, Aug. 1936, Intro.