

Nicolás Rupcich's Palm trees of the Infrareal

By María Berríos

The absurd occurrences of anonymous landscape designers worldwide is not a new issue, nor is the fact that ideas such as building a pool as large as a small village, or the vision of a palm tree in the middle of an eight lane suburbia street, are realized with dreamy fervor by real-estate investors and ambitious mayors alike. Nicolás Rupcich's work focuses on this sort of phenomena that reaches far beyond the delirious populist fantasies of city planning bureaucrats worldwide.

Nevertheless, it would not be precise, despite some common points, to simply categorize his work within that of contemporary photography dealing with spectacle of grand-scale human intervention of nature and landscape, and their depictions of what some have called "architecture without shadows". Rupcich's work is not about grandiose artifice and simulacra, or at least his work is not only about this. Underlining his proposal is an ironic and almost humorous disbelief in the high-tech beautification of the world; his explorations pry at the clumsiness of technology, and in his use of advanced media there is always an uneasy disbelief at play.

In one of Rupcich's characteristic photographs (Berlinmiami, 2006) we see a lonely palm tree stub looking stranded and lost in a flowerpot like road divide, its leaves covered with a thin layer of snow. The image is in itself a saturation of bizarre contradictions, a sort of paradise island image for an extremely impoverished sort of windshield tourism. In the first of the video pieces presented here, (Landscape Design, 2007), the same absurdity of everyday urban landscape is shot in a straightforward documentary style, where what we see is an amateurish use of heavy machinery (two big cranes, a tractor, a truck and at least six men in construction gear and helmets) struggling to place a relatively large palm tree in a not so big road-medium. This operation ends with one man armed with a tiny shovel accommodating the palm in its new site. The totality of the oversized and over-mediated procedure takes place at night. The video ends with a day sequence where we see the unfortunate palmas in its new habitat, surrounded by traffic and miscellaneous office and residential high-rise buildings. The shabby palm tree's small scale epic is accompanied by an almost sweet soundtrack: Mozart's "Eine kleine Nachtmusik", serenading the plants stoic resistance to its unfortunate providence.

In an apparent glorious counterpart, the other video piece presented, and made in collaboration with the architect Emilio Marín, (Big Pool, 2009) portrays a huge second housing resort located in the center costal area of Chile, a well known seaside summer destination for the local middle class. The flamboyant protagonist -as the title straightforwardly indicates- is the world's largest swimming pool (equivalent to six thousand domestic pools). The video pans the breathtaking seaside setting -in a slow almost therapeutic way- showing the melding of the artificial pool landscape with the sand and sea horizon. The shots mostly provide a general vision of the resort complex, accentuating the vast quality of the image, but once in a while a detail appears: a small rowboat; a man standing on the edge of the pool poking at the bottom with what looks like a long stick; a big round floating device roaming the pool surface. The crystal clear hygienic images introduce us, in a perfectly cut and harmonious sequence, to a small army of disparate pool janitors engaged in various maintenance and cleaning tasks. As in many of Rupcich's works playing with the ironies of the landscape technologies, we as spectators are surreptitiously confronted with the low-tech human scaffolding holding up the surface of apparently insignificant suburban paradise.

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