Interview with Peter Krausz

Paule Lemieux

Paule Lemieux: *How did landscape first become an elment in your work?*

Peter Krausz: The *Petit Robert* defines landscape as "that part of a country that nature presents to the observer." Landscape has been a part of me since my childhood, most of which I spent in the village of my great-grandparents in Transylvania. Perhaps it's this landscape that haunts me, and that I've been seeking ever since. Landscape was also very much a part of the work I did in the 1980s, but it served then mainly as a support for other concepts, as a background for figures, portraits or objects. Since 1985-1986, it has come to play a much greater role, entering into a dialogue with the figures (*...Champs (paysage paisible*), but it functions first and foremost as a tomb (*Katyn* or *Même ouragan, même vaisseau, même abîme*).

Then, toward the late 1980s, landscape assumed a preeminent role while maintaining its relationships with other subjects: the gulag in *Stations* in 1987, the Holocaust with *Night Train* in 1990, and the urban landscapes of the *Berlin* series from 1988-1989. With my 1991 exhibition at the Saidye Bronfman Centre, landscape became the central concern of my work and has remained so ever since.

P.L.: *Why did Mediterranean landscapes become so important to you?*

P.K.: With the beginning of agriculture in the Mediterranean region over 10 000 years ago, man began leaving traces of himself *on* and *in* the Earth. My landscapes draw on the memories of these traces and express my interest in history and archaeology.

The Mediterranean also takes me back to the sources of my education to the extent that it puts me back in contact with the period when I was a student of mural painting at the Bucharest Academy of Fine Arts, where I learned the technique of fresco by copying works by Giotto and Pierro della Francesca on the outdoor walls of the school.

But my connection with this region is due to other aspects as well, such as its legendary colours and light, the routes supposedly taken by my family in its peregrinations, the wine and food, and so forth.

P.L.: *Does it may sense to talk about* interior *landscapes in your paintings, even if they are based on actual Mediterranean landscapes?*

P.K.: Selecting a landscape, this fragment or part of nature that is also a whole or a unit, and working in the studio to attribute the value of a whole to this part is a very personal process. Why does this landcape, as opposed to some other one, become the source of such intense emotion for me? It's inexplicable, and this perhaps is precisely why the notion of interior landscape (that imprint of everything that has shaped me, genetically and culturally) comes into this work which consists in rediscovering and reconstructing the initial emotion.

P.K.: *Do the many layers of paint in your frescoes refer to the strata of history?*

P.K.: I couldn't make such a literal connection. It's more a matter of technical requirements, since the richness of the colours is achieved by building up successive layers of paint until the surface is saturated.

Such a link could be made more readily with respect to my earlier work, in which I covered portraits with tar only to bring them back up to the surface. Then, the links with archaeology and with the strata of history and the Earth were more obvious, even intentional (see, for example, *Fields,* 1986).

P.L.: *Does painting enable you to capture a poetic moment in landscape? And if so, do the elements represented possess symbolic value?*

P.K.: The link between poetry and painting is both intimate and paradoxical. After all, "painting comes from the place where words can no longer express anything" (Gao Xingjian). For me, the moment of the initial emotion before a landscape is already the work *in statu nascendi,*[1] and from then on it is mainly a matter of distinguishing between the Beautiful and the Sublime, between "what draws the eye" and "what draws the soul" (Diderot).

One can attribute a symbolic value to everything in nature. The solitary tree in the middle of a field (a typically European image, if one compares it with the immense flat expanses of the American West) may be percieved as an alter ego, a Crucifixion, a link between Earth and Sky. And it is also the shaded spot where a farmer takes his rest, or more simply, a visual necessity, the introduction of a vertical element into a horizontal composition. Mountains, of course, are very weighted symbolically: one immediately thinks of Chinese paintings in which the mountain occupies a key place—the Chinese word for landscape is *shanshui,* literally "mountain and water."

Mountains, as raw masses, have become more and more prominent in my paintings, where they play off against tilled land in a dialogue between nature and culture. I use mountains not so much as symbols, but rather as constituent elements of the Sublime, whose verticality, austere solitude and destabilizing function endanger the Beautiful.

P.L.: *Why are there no people in the landscapes you have done in recent years?*

P.K.: You can only begin talking about landscape once the human figures disappear. I got rid of human figures along with all signs (houses, cars, electrical wires, fences, and so on) that locate landscape within a specific context of time and place, quite simply because I'm interested in a universal place, in the archetype of landscape. Even if humans literally do not appear in my compositions, their traces furrow and shape the landscape. My works are, as it were, empty landscapes that are nonetheless inhabited ...

P.L.: *In your previous answers you often mention that history leaves its traces in landscape. I'd like to know how art history leaves its traces in your landscapes.*

P.K.: The Russian-born conceptual artists Komar and Melamid used to say that "people who don't know history are like cows," and "an artist who doesn't know history paints like a cow because cows have no memory." I think this applies even more so to art history. I had the chance to immerse myself in this subject from a very early age, my father being a painter and my mother an art historian and critic. This certainly made it possible to lay a solid foundation for my art.

When speaking about landscape in particulier, I often refer to sources and artists that inspire me. I have somewhat eclectic tastes, so I can jumble together the minor Sienese masters, the *vedute* and *vistas* one sees behind the people in the work of Renaissance painters ranging from Mantegna, Sassetta and Pierro della Francesca to Van Eyck, Brueghel and da Vinci, in the landscapes of Velázquez and El Greco, in Rembrandt and Goya, illuminated manuscripts and books of hours, and the frescoes in Cappadocia, Matera and Moldavia. But there's also Corot, Gauguin, Monet, Soutine, Hopper, Balthus, Kiefer, Frank Auerbach, Andy Goldsworthy, and I'll stop there.

[1] In a nascent state.

I don't think that all these interests and influences leave visible traces in my work, or not any more, in any case. However, art history provides me with nourishment and the artists I like are silent partners in my creative endeavours.

P.L.: *What do you think landscape represents for human beings, and why paint landscapes?*

P.K.: Here we must distinguish between the concepts of nature and landscape. When landscape made its somewhat belated appearance as a genre in Western art, the word was reserved exclusively for painters. Grasping the concept of landscape therefore presupposes a certain visual culture. One sees nature but one looks at a landscape; one extracts it from a whole, and it becomes an object in itself. A peasant, for example, will not perceive Mont Sainte-Victoire in the same way as Cézanne.

I think that, in the 1980s, in works like *Miserere* and *Night Train*, I was interested primarily in the concept of nature counterbalanced with the monstrous, with the unspeakable side of human nature, with the Holocaust, the gulags and the concentration camps set against the background of the superb and bucolic landscapes that cover up their traces. In this respect, while completing the works for *Stations*, I kept thinking that, on the other side of the Earth, at almost the same latitude and in the same magnificent northern climate, human beings (like Varlam Shalamov, whose *Kolyma Tales* recounts his 22 years in the Kolyma Gulag) were perishing in gold mines.

Another aspect that fascinated me was the ease and speed with which nature covers up the remains of fields, towns and mass graves, wiping out even the traces of their existence. From this perspective, I was quite awed by the images in Claude Lanzman's film *Shoah* at the point where the filmmaker revisits the concentration camps in Poland. These sites were magnificent. The birch forests had managed to cover up and obliterate the mass graves along with the memory of the people living in the area. In 1990, these reflections led me to do *Night Train*, which is now in the Jewish Museum in New York. Lately I have been concerned mainly with landscape as a genre, that is, as *removed* from nature and *reframed*.

P.L.: *You once said that landscape "can cover up everything one does with its beauty, at least one hopes that it can." To what extent do your landscapes cover up the painter's past, since your work has gone through a major change in ceasing to represent tormented figures and in depicting lush landscapes?*

P.K.: I hope that this interview will show that this change has not been as radical as that! Landscape's hold over me came about in a much more organic manner.

There is, however, a detail that bears mentioning. In the 1980s, I was concerned with the history of humanity, with what man is capable of doing to man — *homo homini lupus est*[2] in the very midst of this nature that is so beautiful and so indifferent to his passions. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the collapse of the totalitarian system in Eastern Europe, including Romania, affected me deeply. These events marked the end of a phase of my life. I must say that, at this time, I had naively become more optimistic about the future of humanity, before soon coming to the realization that it was worse than ever.

In the early 1990s, another aspect of my interest in nature came to the fore, partly, perhaps, as a form of flight or *escapism*,[3] but mainly as a way of taking a position against the massive destruction of nature taking place throughout the world. My reaction to this devastation consisted, then, in turning to the beauty of nature, and more particularly that part of nature with which human beings have already learned to live in harmony.

[2] Man is a wolf to man (Plautus, *Asinaria*, l. 495).

[3] Jean-François Lyotard, "Scapeland," *Revue des Sciences Humaines* (1988), 209: 39-48. According to Lyotard, *dépaysement* (a change of scene or a feeling of strangeness) is a condition of *paysage* (landscape).

At the same time, I was coming to the end of a 10-year stint as a curator of contemporary art. I was very involved in the art world, both here and elsewhere. Toward the end of my mandate, I had become rather cynical and disappointed at what was happening in this milieu. I, who previously had had such a thirst for modernism, now couldn't stop myself from seeing a connection between it and Communism: ideology had become a faith. Working exclusively in the landscape genre became, then, a way for me to defy the laws that the contemporary art world had put in place in order to determine what was acceptable. Of course, I got completely caught up in this new undertaking, and for the moment, landscape and the pursuit of its ideal took up all my time and energy, constantly setting me new challenges.

P.L.: *Does the fact that you are of Romanian origin and have lived in Québec since 1970 have consequences for your art? And, if so, how?*

P.K.: I'm Jewish by birth, and my birthplace is in the Romanian region of Transylvania. Hungarian is my mother tongue, and I studied in Romanian in Bucharest. I arrived in Montreal in 1970, after spending a year in Rome. In the beginning I taught and worked in English, but I've been working mainly in French since 1990. Landscape, Romanian culture, my training in the fine arts, the frescoes of Moldavia and the territories of Europe in general permeate my memory and have contributed to my work in ways that are more than subliminal. Arriving in North America, living in Montreal and receiving such an open welcome have enabled me to be open to other forms of contemporary art, to another cultural milieu with which I am deeply involved.

P.L.: *What are the distinctive features of the* secco *technique, and why use such an ancient technique to make contemporary works of art?*

P.K.: I began using this technique after several trips to Italy, and after reconsidering the techniques I'd learned at the Academy of Fine Arts in Romania. It's a method that uses pigment powder in an egg emulsion, which serves as a binder. I apply this mix freely to surfaces resembling wall fragments. The final effect is that of *secco*, or wall painting on a dry surface. *Fresco* is a similar method, but done on a wet surface. Using and breathing new life into an ancient technique was also part of a challenge I'd set myself, as I said earlier, but with time I discovered all of its advantages and disadvantages. It's painstaking work, touch and go at every step. The surface is built up from successive transparent layers of pigment. You have to anticipate the final result ... But *secco* enables me to position myself in time, to sense its passage. What's more, this technique has the advantage of yielding saturated colours that are and remain very rich and pure.

P.L.: *With time you've acquired a sure hand in working with oil paint. The* secco *method you're now using is more complex. Are technical challenges important to you?*

P.K.: My curiosity and training have always made me very eclectic in the means I employ to create my works: drawing, printmaking, photography, painting in boths oils and acrylic, installation, sculpture, and so on. (At the Université de Montréal I give a course on painting techniques and procedures to art history students.) These are, in the end, merely tools to facilitate creative work; but with time I grow tired of results too easily obtained. I always need challenges, but this has to do mainly with the expenditure of energy, if you will. I'm now running the marathon instead of the 100 metres ...

P.L.: *Colour is undeniably an essential element of the work you've done in recent years. Can you tell us how it came to play such an important role in your painting, where it's been more in evidence since the early 1990s?*

P.K.: Colour is no more challenging than monochrome, like the black I was using in the 1980s. Of course, the things that interested me then lent themselves less to the use of colour. But even today, I use only a fairly limited range of colours: blues, violets, yellows, ochres, browns, greens, oranges. However, the layering required by *secco* makes for saturated colours, which become so pure that the light seems to emanate from within the surface itself. I'm very taken with colour as an object and still have a lot to learn about it; I use only 12 to 20 colours from among the hundred or so pigments I collect.

P.L.: *Do you see yourself primarily as a painter?*

P.K.: I am an artist who, for the moment, is using painting as a medium of expression, and drawing and photography as research tools.

P.L.: *How does working in series invest what you do with meaning?*

P.K.: A number of my solo expositions have included the idea of the series in their titles: the *Canti* series, the *Berlin* series, *Entre chien et loup* ... Thematic series enable me to explore many facets of the same subject, until I've exhausted it, or until the show opens! Ideally, therefore, works in the same series should be hung in such a way that they form an installation that leads viewers to reconstruct the subject from different fragments. One thinks of series of abstract works that play off against and complete each other, like Rothko's chapel in Houston and the series of grey paintings by Yves Gaucher that were hung in the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1979. And one could also mention Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, or Benozzo Gozzoli and Masaccio in Florence.

P.L.: *How do you go about preparing the oil pastel sketches and photomontages that serve as a sort of preparatory drawing for your works (in selection, composition ...)?*

P.K.: I bring sketch pads along on my research trips, and I take a lot of slides. As much as possible, I try to capture the emotion I feel before landscapes that affect me. I generally work very early in the morning or in late afternoon, when shadows are drawn out and colours become denser. Then, in the studio I use the material from my studies to make series of works. I remove, add or combine elements. Once I've made a selection, I work the pieces out first on paper and then in paintings, where I attempt to recover the memory of the landscape. Two years might pass between the first sketch and the exhibition.

P.L.: *You stopped making installations some years ago. Why?*

P.K.: I was really fond of the installations and other works of the Arte povera artists, but the more I travelled, the more I saw installations everywhere, and not only in galleries and museums but in scenes of daily life: in store windows, the meat carcasses hanging in the New York Meat Market, the bales of compressed paper in the recycling plants on rue Notre-Dame, the shipyards in Denmark, the still-deserted factories and lofts along the Lachine Canal, and so forth.

To me, installation as an art form seemed too easy and ephemeral, but also too complex, to the extent that I couldn't see how I could do anything new with it. I also felt a need for permanence. I wanted to work on things that viewers could interact with for longer periods of time. In this way, painting became a greater challenge for me.

I'm not denying the value of objects and installations. I think that I've done works with found or made objects that still hold up well today. It's just that I think I've eliminated everything that was superfluous about painting from my creative process and transposed the idea of installation into the use of space in my exhibitions. Still, nothing prevents me from going back to installation or from acting directly upon nature if I feel the need to do so.

P.L.: *In your experience as a curator of contemporary art, an art teacher at the Université de Montréal and an artist, what place do you think painting occupies in today's art world?*

P.K.: Painting enables me to make works of visual art in the same way as video, photography and lithography. As with all other processes, there's good and bad painting. This said, it seems to me that painting and drawing are attributed a greater role, and are more easily accepted, by institutions outside Québec. One day, I think it was sometime in the early 1990s, I was struck by an article by the painter Avigdor Arikha that appeared in the magazine *Connaissance des Arts.* It concurred with my opinion and illustrated my concerns rather well. Arikha wrote that the avant-garde proceeds by means of exclusion and prohibition and that those who excel in their genre and try to perpetuate the pictorial tradition are condemned as throwbacks to the past, or modern failures. As an example he cited the case of Edward Hopper, who was scorned during the heyday of American Abstract Expressionism.

P.L.: *How important is it for you that the public appreciate your work? And is artistic creation a way for you to communicate with viewers?*

P.K.: Struggle, uncertainty (sometimes), anxiety and, much more rarely, joy before a work manifest themselves in the studio. The fact that the public appreciates my work is a reward but also a challenge, a requirement that drives me to work harder, to want to always do better.

I think that artistic creation is a solitary occupation that mainly enables me to communicate with myself, to discover who I am, and to look at the world through myself in an effort to understand it. One sometimes manages to strike a cord with viewers, to have them feel the same emotions as oneself, to make them see their surroundings in a different light, or, quite simply, to bring them aesthetic pleasure.

P.K.: *Where do you see your work leading, and what are the next challenges you'd like to take up in your work?*

P.K. : I still have much to learn about painting landscapes and using pigments. My upcoming solo exhibitions will give me all the time I need to experiment a bit more ...

I'm also thinking about doing installations again, but on a grander scale this time. And why not outside, in the landscapes that have inspired me in recent years?