

ARTFORUM

MAY 2000



Michael Ashkin, *Proof Range* (Detail) 1999 Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, NY

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

MICHAEL ASHKIN

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

Michael Ashkin has always been attracted to wastelands. Since the early '90s, he has evinced his unmistakable affection for dystopias in his signature works—tabletop models of stagnant waterways and desolate strips of interstate. This show was a departure into photography and video. The abject subject matter remained consistent, but the models' dollhouse quirkiness has evolved into poetic or philosophical gravity, with mixed results. Both works exhibited here invoke the idea of the garden as an intentional landscape, a place of contemplation where the viewer can be engulfed by the sublime. Given his decidedly ungrandiose ecologies, Ashkin's approach to this idea is not without irony. But neither is it derisive.

The concept of the sublime is introduced in *Garden State*, 2000, an artist's book accompanied by a 1999 edition of twenty postcard-size photographs. Views of the New Jersey Meadowlands—turnpike, landfill, polluted lagoon—are juxtaposed with poetic text by the artist, including a heady reference to Edmund Burke's seven charac-

teristics of the sublime: obscurity, power, privation, vastness, infinity, succession, and uniformity. In the context of these cruddy, vitiated sites, the terms are intriguing. But with its tasteful framing and lush silver-prints, *Garden State* aestheticized rather too much. Conceptually, it recalled the work of Robert Smithson—specifically his famous photo-essay "The Monuments of Passaic," which appeared in these pages in 1967. Smithson's idea of entropy has always been a touchstone for Ashkin. But where Smithson saw emblematic monotony, Ashkin has found softer, less compelling reveries.

The show's second, central work was more successful, and in it the oblique allusion to sublimity paid off. The video triptych *Proof Range*, 1999, consists of sleek monitor-on-plinth combinations arranged in a wide horseshoe around three heavy wooden viewing benches. Each monitor offered a view of an abandoned architectural emplacement—eroding concrete bunkers, ramps, and stairways overgrown with weeds. Municipal facility? Amphitheater? Warehouse? Here was the quintessential entropic site, degraded to an enigmatic ruin (*obscurity . . . privation*). The stationary camera lingered, patient and impassive, for a full minute and fifty seconds on each scene. There was time to note moments of beauty in the static image: blue sky, sparkling cinders on a path, a swath of

whitewash on a crumbling wall. The slightest movements—a bird flying or grass blowing—constituted focal events (*vastness . . . infinity*). Then, just as attention wavered, one of the pictures would change. All three monitors were looping differently synchronized versions of the same twenty-two-minute DVD, a total of twelve images surveying the site from various angles. Internal edits and timing across the installation were carefully orchestrated, establishing a musing, hypnotic rhythm (*succession . . . uniformity*). This was augmented by the sound track, a blend of wind and crickets amplified to a growly but soothing feedback. Subtle manipulations of scale and perspective prevented the images from fitting together and made a mastering overview impossible (*power*).

Ashkin shot his footage at an abandoned ordnance-testing ground, or "proof range," near the Jersey Shore. Smithson would have read the site as a palimpsest of the military-industrial complex. But Ashkin—balancing between critique and homage—sees it as a local, available version of the sublime, a landscape manipulated by human design to generate tranquillity and awe in equal measure. Seated before the monitors, caught by the almost motionless images, the receptive viewer will admit the slippage Ashkin is so fond of, from tranquillity to banality, from awe to desolation, and back again.

—Frances Richard