

A Billboard Commission to Nasri Sayegh In the framework of *Art, Ecology and the Commons. Together in Agony We Persist*

Taking over the edges of the Beirut RiverLESS forest, we invited Nasri Sayegh to intervene on a billboard. Challenging the clear-cut line between art and design, the multidisciplinary artist subverts the traditional advertising function of the installation. Through his project, "Paysages Exquis", he blurs as much as outlines the frontier between highway and sylvestrian landscape. The billboard commission was inaugurated on the Saturday, June 12, the Anniversary Maintenance Day of the Forest.



How do you see this commissioned project resonating within the context of *Art Ecology and the Commons*?

When invited by TAP to intervene on this billboard, I spontaneously thought about using it to "write a message". Using letters. Words. But no word could fathom the extent of the catastrophe we are currently witnessing and living. I then decided to take refuge in my forest of images. To choose the solitude of bare landscapes. The nudity of images as opposed to the mundane aspect of words and messages. Granting a billboard the status of

receptacle of landscapes, I chose to juxtapose *Forêt de Fontainebleau* (1846), a painting by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, a pivotal figure of landscape painting, with an old slide from my archive collection showing a forest in Germany. It is not so much the origin of these images that interests me, but rather their belonging to what I would call a world-geography (*géographie-monde*). My fascination with landscapes transcends borders and geographies and times. This diptych is taken from my research project entitled *Paysages Exquis*.

How did this project emerge ? Was it more responsive to an external context or an internal impulse?

The dictionary of the French Academy defines the masculine noun "landscape" as follows:

- *The extent of a territory that the eye can embrace.*
- *Extended area whose appearance is specific to a place, to a region, which presents particular characters.*
- *Graphic or pictorial work taking as subject the representation, the description of natural sites. By extension. The genre consists of works where the representation of nature is not taken for decoration but is the motive, the main subject.*
- *Set of phenomena, combination of elements that are offered to observation, to reflection.*

Paysages Exquis [Exquisite Landscapes] is a research, an attempt to make sense of my incurable obsession with landscape. Is this an operation of displacement through collage and other incongruous and

sometimes exquisite marriage of images? A surreal apposition of images in service of a new narration, another history, an after-image? Whether via mobile phones, cameras – be they digital, disposable or instant – or medical imaging (as I sometimes probe my own interior landscapes using MRI and other kinds of X-rays), all mediums are crucial to attempt the image and exhaust the motif. In the footsteps of Aby Warburg and Roland Barthes, *Paysages Exquis* presents itself as an essay with the inner ambition to construct a new atlas.

How does *Paysages Exquis*, originally a photography project, morph under the new context of the billboard as a graphic commercial medium? Does it subvert it?

While waiting to cut down, to behold these tacky billboards, one can dress them in vulgar and vain artist images. The nudity of the landscape as an attempt at an antidote – or a cry? – in the face of disaster. Nothing to me is more subversive and more humbling than nature.



Natural, historical, political, interior, textual, fantasised, sensual, anatomical, surgical, ideal, ancient, mental, intimate, mythological; landscape as motif or image falls through my wanderings. Diurnal or nocturnal pilgrimages, my travels are populated with lakes, cities, forests, moors, the Mediterranean, bodies and, often, with follies as well. Grinning, lush, and enchanting or sometimes bitter, desolate, and wild, my landscapes tell, whisper, try, and humbly construct a self-portrait in negative. As obsessive and frenetic images, this landscape mania of mine comes from a deep respect for the pictorial motifs of nineteenth century Europe.



Nasri Sayegh's images (from photographs and collages to embroideries and words) are blurred and furtive, at all times risking erasure and disappearance. Drawing from his private and intimate visual archives, Sayegh deconstructs the image so as to reconstitute his own historiography. Dissecting the body of a picture and crisscrossing visual data become pretexts to invent, unearth, and propose new layers of images and phrases. This in-between, this 'interstice' or glitch, become in a way the artist's portrayal in negative. *An image pre-text to written language.*

Nasri Sayegh (b.1978) is a multidisciplinary artist based between Beirut and Paris. He was previously exhibited at the French Institute in Beirut and the Beirut Art Centre.