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Fosters Pond, 2015



Woman in Blue Skirt and Black Top
Dreaming of a Bombay Saffire Martini,
titled by A.R. Minkinen

DECISIVE PLACE

The Radical Proofs of Pierre Radisic

Graph paper is the musical score sheet of geometry, at least for me in junior high school it was, with those faint, baby blue lined boxes that with pencil and ruler could be enlarged into interminably bigger ones, and later in solid geometry class, expanded into endless universes of three-dimensional meditation reaching beyond infinity.

In that sphere, studying mathematics surely unbolted the door of religious faith. Saint Peter and Pythagoras of Samos not only fought it out in the margins of my church hymnals, but the outcome was also a given. That there could only be one answer and that the proof could be resolved ipso facto, assured the existence of a rational world far quicker than what Kierkegaard's faith-based proofs might have required of a teenager.

Of all geometric constructions, triangles in their defined self-containment were the most down-to-earth shapes of all. Proofs stating that all angles of a triangle add up to a straight line never failed to capture my amazement. How could that be possible? When drawing a triangle, the first line thrusts away from the starting point without hesitation, the second line has second thoughts, while the third, truly homesick, makes a beeline straight to the point from where it started, completing thus the triangle. The photographs of Pierre Radisic to be witnessed in this delightful volume can be viewed in similar fashion. Housed inside a simple square, the geometric spills and

chills are there in every image. Our eye is treated to a roller-coaster journey of ups and downs, ins and outs, spin around jump shots, all held together by the flashing sideboards of a pinball machine.

Speaking of turnarounds, spatial geometry took a dramatic turn, quite literally, also back in junior high where, after filling the front blackboard with all sorts of geometric gibberish, the teacher would march our attention to a freshly washed blackboard in the back of the room, pivoting everyone in their seats, along with a catty-corner cutie behind me who, pretending to be mildly unaware, never failed to present a triangle flash of that day's underpants to me. It was all about vantage point: from where I was sitting. What I could see. What she must have known would be revealed. Juvenile as that experience was, the memory never escaped me. This was geometry in motion.

I could imagine that the photographs in this devilishly delightful, mind-and-eye-bending volume by Pierre Radisic—a true master of the square in art—might have been inspired by similar down-to-earth childhood encounters with the terrors and pleasures of geometric discovery. I do know that outer space fascinated the young Radisic. The media overlap of Stanley Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey* and the *Apollo 11* moon landing in 1969, Radisic's first cinema and TV experiences respectively, figured largely in his ennui about life in general. "I dreamed a lot," he wrote in a note on Facebook, "of intergalactic trips and found earth so boring until I discovered that space travel was above all an inner journey." He discovered he could create the constellations on the human body by simply connecting the dots we all live with on our bodies and photographing them. Some viewers wondered if indeed Radisic had manipulated the dots but just as we cannot move the stars, we cannot move the oceans, shorelines, or where our blemishes choose to take hold.

How math and science seep into our DNA is surely more visual than anyone knows. The camera and the eye are one and the same, as eight-year-old Jacques-Henri Lartigue knew (well before Papa presented him with his very own camera). Little Lartigue called his picture-making device a "piège d'ange" (literally trap angel). The

little boy would close his eyes and spin around a few turns, then open and shut them as fast as he could. What he saw was a photograph, what the shutter of a camera sees the moment it fires. Time wasn't sufficient to catch how the picture was framed—all blurred at the edges, of course—but how things lined up became readily available and decisive.

The precision of place-to-place, point-to-point line-up of objects in space is an element of visual language that when applied to painting can often stretch credulity. A willing suspension of disbelief works in theater because everything is in flux, we don't have time to doubt, whereas in painting, canvases stay put forever. Photography, because we believe photographs to be true, allows the double take to happen instantly. Lenses don't lie. Of course, it's different when painters like René Magritte tackle our gullibility. The wondrous inventiveness of his imagination is the great marvel to behold, the construction of tangents that reality can only envy. The pitfall of credulity is the hallmark of his wit. Magritte's spatial happenstances engaged a variety of subject matter, of course. Pierre Radisic, in turn, works exactly in the opposite manner, out of the limitations of a singular subject—the seascape—and it's meager components: sand, wooden fences, painted pipes, concrete blocks, the dark blue distant sea, and those impenetrable thick blue skies. "Out of limited means," George Braque wrote, "new forms emerge." Pierre Radisic's viewfinder says it all. From where he sees it becomes the defining "decisive place" of his art.

John Szarkowski, in *The Photographer's Eye*, that now ancient, but yet highly influential, self-tutorial book about what makes photography photography (MoMA, 1966), defined vantage point as being the place from which something is viewed, but not the variety of juxtapositions in space that can stack together once such a viewpoint is chosen. At the time, Henri Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment dominated the greatest challenge aspiring photographers at the time felt compelled to conquer.

In HCB's photograph titled *Madrid, 1933*, set against a background of tiny windows on a white wall, a gigantic one-legged, top-hatted, belly-punctuated cartoon character saunters

through a playground of kids mugging for the lens. Cartier-Bresson cropped the image to reveal the top rim edge of the building—about the thickness of a slab of sliced ham—to let us know that the background wall was a building and not some futuristic, Hollywood backdrop. "We cannot develop and print a memory," HCB writes in *The Decisive Moment*. But had he sliced the ham off the picture he would have created an illusion of infinity, in short, a background for a dream. And it is in this realm—between dream and reality—that Pierre Radisic cooks up the impossible. His precise line-up of objects in space—when seen through a camera and printed as a two-dimensional photograph—can take on the immediacy of a brief miracle because the overlap happens in a photograph the way it can in reality. Or can it? If we shift our head up or down, left or right, we instantly annihilate the little dollop of visual magic. In a painting, of course, the more amazing these kinds of overlaps and juxtapositions are, the less inclined we are to believe them.

The surreal, painted assemblages of the French photographer George Rouse operate from "decisive place" principles in a kind of reversal of what Pierre Radisic appears to be after. From a fixed spot, Rouse's disparate abstract panels suddenly come together to form a circle, or a square, or a brilliantly red rectangular bar on diagonal sticks inside historic sites such as *La Conciergerie* in Paris. If we were actually looking at the scene, say in a warehouse space where many of these installations are produced, the fixed-point illusion would immediately self-destruct with even the slightest nudge of one's head. It is the photograph that locks in the sleight of eye. Earlier, the American photographer John Phahl played with these same effects using tape, string, or aluminum foil wrapped around trees to create the illusion of straight lines running across the horizon or as in a piece titled Bermuda Triangle, producing a sense of perspective where there was none.

We want Radisic's reality to be real, to be discoverable, to exist in a real time and place, to be around the corner or zoom-able on a Google map. Seeing the unseen doesn't mean the unseen doesn't exist. We want Pinocchio to become a real boy, Geppetto's wish to come true. It is precisely our trust in the existence of the unseen lines,

tangents and contingencies that Radisic reveals to our eyes that draws our breath away. You could not blow out a candle with the breath left if the reality was not there to begin with. But that questionable issue—disruptive element—may be at the core of Radisic's mischievous eye and mind games.

I must say I am always looking for the disruptive element in a work of art, something that is about to knock the chair off the flowerpot, if you know what I mean. My favorite parts of travel are the thousands of escalators I have climbed and descended all these decades. I hold on to the rail without letting go just to see if the rail moves at the same speed as the steps.

The precisionist pleasures of Pierre Radisic shorelines meeting fences, poles, and bicycle racks rest often on that notion of imperfection. Yet, whether they would have been concocted on a computer or created from the moment of seeing, we want the reality of the image to have been seen in the reality of his viewfinder. We want to believe them. *And they are real*: real flagpoles, railway platforms, breakwaters, lifeguard cabins, toilets, handball goals, concrete ping pong tables, Colombian families blowing bubbles, and even a police station.

We need to believe all that (*and it's all true*). Or do we?

Which raises one other possibility here, of course. That all of these images are but that: images. It's like those soap bubbles. We love watching them and hoping they will never burst. But they do, and that knowledge is what makes watching them anything but boring. What if these images had no reality base and were just visual looking things with scant simulacra attached to them; they've all been carved from pixels, bringing us back to the paint brushes of Magritte, dipped this time into the now age-old seesaw of reality and imagination, fiction and nonfiction, memory and what really happened, taking turns to touch the earth and sky. Pythagoras himself was credited with conceiving the possibilities of opposites: limited and unlimited, day and night, nowhere and somewhere. Perhaps that teasing classmate in geometry class never did spin around in her short skirt but was bored silly by the effortlessness of the subject matter (pretty smart kid) and chose instead to place her head

on the desk for a snooze while I, barely fourteen, simply imagined what could have been a far more exciting theorem from where I was sitting.

This surmise on the *Rubik's Cube* seascapes of Pierre Radisic appeals most all to my hope that I could have and might have been hoodwinked, that the world can never be this perfect, that the pleasure we take out of our existence doesn't derive exclusively from what is in front of our eyes but what is invisible inside our minds. Artists who succeed in such balancing acts belong to a rare breed indeed.