

**RADISIC AND THE HEAVENLY BODIES**, Henri Van Lier, in *Heavenly Bodies*, 2005, Ed Thinking Prints, Bruxelles

*Except perhaps a constellation*

Mallarmé

First, the spectacle suffices. For the *structures*, an explosion of volumes and broken contours of female nudes throws us into a cosmic commotion, into the body factory. For the *textures*, the female bodies exhibit bumps and blemishes, beauty spots and naevi that are covered by the patterns of the 89 constellations of our atlas of the sky. With two or three constellations occasionally grouped on the same body, that makes sixty-five positive images, on which the pattern-generating skins stand out, and sixty-five negative images, on which the constellations are enhanced by lines drawn with a ruler. The excellent title – Heavenly Bodies – marks the superimposition of stars and naevi well. Superimposition is the fundamental mathematical operation, *application*, fold by fold, as the French-speaking mathematicians call it, reciprocal *mapping*, as the English-speaking mathematicians call it. The title gives no more information about what layer is superimposed, but the dimensions of the developed photographs are such that we can not only see them, but also inhabit them, wander amongst them at leisure. This is doubtless done for a few tricks, but we can also hope it is for some crucial views.

All extreme art is cosmological or cosmogonic, which is to say it strives to touch the mores of the Universe, the recipes whereby sufficiently compatible cosmic constants form our galaxies, stars, oceans, continents, plants, animals, and us. In other words, through shapes, the artist hopes to catch a glimpse of formations; he is more formational than formal. In the sixty-five negative images gathered together here, the constellations hark back to the Heavens, thus to the original galactic and stellar *formations*, with as yet very few *forms*. And the sixty-five positive images explore the most accomplished form produced by these *formations*, at least in our immediate Universe, namely, the human body, and in its most formational mode – the woman's body. But seen with what gaze?

To start with, an *embryological* gaze, for it is no longer everything for us to recognise in a woman the creases, ruffles, swallows' tails, butterflies' wings, and three navels (the elliptical, parabolic, and hyperbolic), in a word, the seven catastrophes that painters and sculptors have recognised from the very beginning. Since the 1950s René Thom has taught us that this number, seven, was not a chance occurrence, that the seven catastrophes were elementary, that they corresponded to the fundamental equations of differential topology and so controlled the embryology and ultimately the anatomy of all living things, since they are involved in the conditions whereby a ball becomes a tube, a tube seals to become a stomach or bladder, an eyelid opens and closes. Similarly, when a thigh splits off from a trunk and a breast from a shoulder, they reveal deep, prenatal, organic labours. On this score, Pierre Radisic's "photographic catastrophic gaze" is very different from Pisanello's "pictorial catastrophic gaze". The structures that he seizes result from dermal layers (the mesoderm, endoderm and ectoderm) in conflict, in invention, in resolutions in the musical sense. In this he is assuredly helped by the fenestrating-fenestrated window-like nature of today's gaze, since *drawn images* – the only type known to *Homo sapiens* until 1850, have been supplanted by the *grainy images* of photography, cinema and television, with their unlimited capacities for editing and embedding.

However, it would be insufficient to perceive here structures' embryological constraints, for, with a clairvoyance of which the Ancients had nary the foggiest notion, not even the inkling of a suspicion, we now know as well that living things contain *ultrastructures* as well as *structures* and *textures*. Our histologists were forced to

create this term "ultrastructure" in 1939 to characterise the *as yet unformed forms, less formal than formational clumps*, that micrometre-thin tissue sections showed them. My old atlas of 1971 bears the declarative title *Human Histology and Ultrastructures*. Now, while Radisic's embryological eye can neither see nor show ultrastructures, he has always rummaged where they are closer to emerging, almost suffusing, so much so that the subject of his photography was the skin, the more or less glabrous human skin, and thus one that is transparent to the *formations* that give rise to and continue to work within it. Under the effect of the spotlights that multiply instantaneous local diffraction, he has ceaselessly tracked and spotlighted regularities and irregularities, where skins are shown at work, in our sixty-five positive images, through their naevi.

I know of no photograph by Radisic that escapes this approach. Already in *Couples* in 1980 the juxtaposed men's and women's faces, confronted in two separate frames, were about skin's hills and dales rather than psychology or even types of faces. On that occasion, Micheline Lo and I were *desingularised* at the same time as we were *universalised* as a meeting of accidents of nasal septa, of maxillary symphyses, of the tilling of wrinkles, with bushes of beard for one and a burst fever blister for the other – so many local and fleeting events of the Evolution of terrestrial species with the Universe in the background, to the extent that the violence of the spotlight erased the background. The only purpose of the final retouching with the brush – for that existed at the time – was to not to "picturalise" the biological catastrophes but, on the contrary, to "photographise" them more, given that the very resource of photography is to be able to go to the formational of forms in both the infinitely large and infinitely small.

This same suggestion of dermal ultrastructures was woven, much later, by the black torso of the African, *Lucky*, and the white Vietnamese woman *Marilou*. Then came the troubling barks of the Schumannesque *Waldszenen*, since in a forest skin is called bark, and the storerooms for the *Monnaie Opera House's* sets - that other forest and set of barks of our decomposed dreams. In the open suite of *Bustes musicaux contemporains* (Contemporary Musical Busts), Xenakis, of whom we ordinarily see only the right profile, is taken in face view, and we discover his left cheek furrowed by a grenade. The recent *Pornscapes* go so far as to record the most germinative, the most apparently ultrastructured, catastrophic, and formational – since they are erectile – tissues, that is to say the coital mucosa, in all their concavity, convexity, and tumescence. And the naevi in our *Heavenly Bodies* hold their own against the fever blister in *Couples* as outcroppings of ultrastructures.

But why, then, the mapping of celestial bodies on women's bodies? In both cases, we are definitely dealing with *clusters*: clusters of naevi, clusters of stars. Still, what an abyss! The clusters of naevi are natural formations, whereas nothing is less natural than a constellation. Today's *Cassiopeia* is a group of stars of different ages and movements and from different layers in space. Its giant W did not exist fifty thousand years ago and will be no longer fifty thousand years hence. On the other hand, given the zodiacal precession, all of the constellations of 2000 years ago have shifted a notch on the zodiac. In short, it took the Greeks and Romans besotted with "shapes standing out against the sky" and "integrated wholes of integrating parts" to distinguish in their somewhat blurry maritime skies the horse Perseus, a Hercules, a snake, and big and little bears. The Arabs, being desert-dwellers, were struck more by solitary meteoric points of light in their very dry sky, signs of the solitary meteoric Allah, the most prestigious of which we have kept, e.g., Aldebaran and Altair. So, why map such coincidental clusters of naevi and stars, depending on such different forms of chance, on each other? Unless these *chances*, these cadences, these co-in-cidences (*cadere*, to fall, *in-cum*, together in) also have cosmogonic scope, like embryological catastrophes and ultrastructures.

As physicists and mathematicians, the Greeks saw chance as a *concussive encounter*, *tukHè*, from τυγχανειν, to meet, which was often coupled with *αναγκη*, necessity. So, Democritus wanted to believe that the impacts of atoms falling in the void sufficed to create our cosmetic world. Aristotle, being less optimistic, was more sensitive to the meetings between falling roof tiles and the heads of passers-by. Be that as it may, the

Greek *τυχαί* could not be calculated. In contrast, the Arabs, who liked points (and thus the coincidences of series of points that are logarithms, according to Eva de Vitray-Meirovitch), noticed that when points formed closed sets, the odds of drawing one point from the set could be calculated. That was the roll of the dice (*zahr*), which gave the French *hasard* and English *hazard* and suggested to Pascal a way to calculate probabilities. To close the chapter on tradition, besides all these *physical chances*, let's not forget the *semiotic chances*, *i.e.*, those by means of which certain nervous systems see Scales, a Lion, or Castor and Pollux amongst the clusters of heterogeneous stars. Enough about odds and chances in our sixty-five negatives. We are now ready to weigh the biological chances that work on the naevi in our sixty-five positives.

Since 1953 and the great revolution of human intelligence we have known overall by which *biochemical* paths the *physical chances* become *biological chances*. (a) The five most common elements in our terrestrial environment, *i.e.*, hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen and sulphur, suffice to form the *twenty amino acids* found in all living things known to us. (b) Indeed, these twenty amino acids (nitrogen compounds) have two portions, one that enables them to form short or very long chains, and the other by means of which they engage in the five fundamental types of chemical bonding. (c) So, because of their number but above all the diverse sequences of the twenty different amino acids, these chains fold dynamically over themselves in infinitely different ways to form infinitely different bundles called *proteins*. (d) In regrouping to form first ultrastructures, then eucaryotic cells, these proteins suffice – with a few structural, energy, and replicative adjuncts, such as their RNA-DNA photocopies, which were discovered that same year (1953) – to produce all the anatomical and physiological properties of all living things. In a word, the *biological chances* that give rise to the natural Variety of living things, which is a precondition of their natural selection, as Darwin stresses, could be called *protein chances*, *amino chances*, *hydrogen-oxygen-nitrogen-carbon-sulphur chances*. The *series* is no longer solely the species, as the Ancients thought, but each organism. We can thus map the naevi – as biological chances – with the skies of the origin – cosmic chances – via the constellations – semiotic chances, when the stellae “constellate” and the naevi are called “beauty spots”.

We shall leave it to the viewer to fantasize about the fecundity of this mapping, to notice that we are touching the crux of contemporary *admiration*, that is, the unforeseeable AND with hindsight explainable singularities that make up our Universe. The contact sheet, on which simple *suites* and true *series* coexist, is predestined to foment meetings in which universal constants, biological innovations, and indexicality and semiotic indexing are exalted. The photographer is exemplary when his eye is obsessed with this focus.