

## **Images in search of lost time**

*Haris Epaminonda's recent series of Polaroids dovetail reality and imagination. Isla Leaver-Yap investigates. / Isla Leaver-Yap is MAP's editor-at-large*

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In Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, the novel's protagonist K comes across a prison chaplain on his labyrinthine journey through the municipal legal system. During their first meeting the chaplain enquires about a book tucked under K's arm. 'What are you holding in your hand? Is it a prayer book?' K answers the chaplain in the negative, explaining instead that the book is 'an album of the city's tourist sights.' The chaplain demands that K throw away the book, to which he immediately acquiesces. As the book falls across the floor its pages are inadvertently torn.

Tucked under K's arm during half the novel (a handbook he plans to pass to a group of Italians), this photo album is an apparently minor detail. In fact, it appears to be such a casual feature that the album is mentioned only twice: once when K picks it up, and once when he discards it. Yet this is nonetheless an intentionally curious element. The compendium of images K carries is already framed within the register of 'the foreign' or 'the exotic' while, on the other hand, K becomes increasingly incarcerated within the concrete reality of the very city whose portraits he carries. These images are not intended for the protagonist's familiarised consumption, nor any character in the novel, but rather it is meant for those that do not yet know their content. Up until K's meeting with the chaplain, the album contains an unexpected space of representation – it proposes a re-reading of a familiar city space that is, in the end of this photo album's life, fundamentally misread as an object of worship.

Touristic images, ethnographic photographs, pastoral landscapes, and portraits of strangers, taken by strangers and viewed by strangers: all these images are complicit in the proposition of singular worlds. And where such photographs pose as bona fide representations of those same worlds, artist Haris Epaminonda (born Cyprus, 1980, lives in Berlin) appears acutely attuned to the suggestive content of these types of images. The artist is aware the malleability of such material. In many of her videos, collages and, most recently, her 365 Polaroid films, Epaminonda exploits this space of representation to create symbolic realms.

For this latter photographic series (all *Untitled*, 2008-ongoing), lately installed in Malmö Konsthall, Epaminonda shot hundreds of Polaroid images of printed matter. In her sequenced display, these re-imaged images smack of an Everyman traveller. The time frame of these images is hesitant to divulge itself, while the contemporary style of each image's cropping seems anachronistic to the thing it depicts; frame and photograph are always at odds. Yet despite this formal discord, there is an undeniable seductiveness to Epaminonda's series. The viewer encounters camels, peacocks, and zebras; oddly cropped palms, and impossibly steep ravines; painterly landscapes and cinematic vistas. The grain of the photograph – sometimes a burnished auburn glow and other times a classic monochrome – renders each image into a wistful and painterly abstraction of the concrete.

One particularly memorable photograph, for example, shows a coastal vista. With a silhouetted tree trunk bisecting the image in two, the image is seemingly shot from a forest overlooking a bay. A chromatic aura, meanwhile, sweeps across the image but is indistinguishable as either a chance rainbow or an accidentally over-developed surface of the Polaroid. The romanticism of such images mimics the register of fin-de-siecle expedition journals and the utopian

exoticism of twentieth-century travel writing. Shown in their hundreds, Epaminonda's Polaroids become a hallucinatory image of travel's own desire.

In its generalised form, the tourist's photographic album flattens multiple worlds into one single continuous plane. Ordered according to the traveller's personal logic, a compendium of travel images portends to know territories and peoples. It carefully documents the elusive moment of voyage in the frame of leisure, and it is stored later to become nostalgia – the memory of travel. It creates its own classification system, and builds up a sequence of singular horizontal images, and creates another zone divorced from the context's initial context and condition.

And despite its carefully deployed similarities, the tone of Epaminonda's Polaroid series is inherently distanced, critical and watchful. Her excursion into the photographic archive of the well-travelled image is, ultimately, a decisive one. It does not celebrate a retreat into the past, but uses nostalgia as a conduit between past and future. 'Images,' explains Epaminonda, 'need to keep open the potential of reading them always as if anew.'

The very material of Epaminonda's series, however, presents a paradox in the project's relationship to renewal. Since 2008, when she began the project, the Polaroid Corporation had recently ceased production of its instantly developing photographic papers. And while Fujifilm is one of the few remaining producers of instant film, the medium edges closer into the site of its own obsolescence and, inevitably, nostalgia.

Polaroid's cameras and its accompanying instant film were both developed by Edwin Land in the late 1940s, reportedly from his daughter's question: 'Why can't I see them now?' And, unlike the film camera or the digital camera, Polaroid's instant film presented a simple gimmick that was also a helplessly rare magic – it allowed the photographer to be both maker of and witness to the transformation of a single moment into a single image. The instantaneousness of this process demonstrated the mobility and casualness of image making, and showed photography not necessarily as a tool of consecration, but rather one of rich metamorphosis. A possible precursor to digital instantaneous, there was something exceptional about the transformative properties of the Polaroid that proposed an interstitial moment of an image's becoming. Yet Epaminonda's Polaroids retain a touch of that lingering instant, just before the image reveals itself in crystalline form. On the precipice of placelessness and timelessness, they present an *a priori* image.

The Polaroids series is not an isolated investigation of the archived or near-forgotten image, however. Although distinct in its seamless editing process, in many ways the project is another facet of Epaminonda's extensive photographic collage and video practice. Her work variously weaves through ideas of the unconscious, diaristic or historical image, and within each medium she persistently investigates the porousness of past images as raw material through which to construct new visual 'passages' to our present.

Many of Epaminonda's collage works, such as 'Untitled 03c/a', 2007, are carefully nuanced composites. Presented in an intimate installation in the Neue National Galerie as part of bb5 (Berlin Biennial), 2008, 'Untitled 03c/a' depicts a landscape, which is barely visible and used primarily as a border to an overlaid ethnographic portrait of a group of young boys. A few small incisions at the centre of the portrait reveal what lies underneath. Also part of the bb5 installation, 'Untitled 009c/g', 2007, extends this scenario in a more explicit gesture. The collage shows a photograph of figure in a landscape. From the

figure's cupped hand, a golden pyramid has been cut into the photograph to expose a sheet of yellow paper below. The image appears to stand in for speech or else an imaginary Euclidean calculation of the landscape. Unlike Epaminonda's Polaroids, however, this manner of editing deals not with the collusion of one type of photography with another, but rather with the explicit edit and intervention of the artist's hand. Detail is unambiguously removed or else directly recomposed.

In this sense, the Polaroids series has more in common with Epaminonda's collaborative project initiated with Daniel Gustav Cramer, entitled 'The Infinite Library'. In 2007 she and Cramer began creating an archive of books. The pair would swap pages, rebind whole catalogues, create impossible montages using photographs culled from a diverse range of sources, and reorder the publications according to their own arbitrary logic.

Both 'The Infinite Library' and the Polaroids series are contingent on seriality and association for the construction their other-worldliness – both play on the traits of the traveller's picture album. Yet the photograph-of-a-photograph format presents different territory for Epaminonda. It overtly plays with the idea of vision and its memorialisation, as well as the space in which a moment becomes an image. 'With the Polaroids, I am revisiting and recapturing a world that seems to be full of fragmented moments and instances,' says Epaminonda. 'But I am doing so from a future perspective.' Thus, for the artist, time folds in on itself. 'What is in the image is the past caught in the present, which is the future,' she adds.

If shared memory of civilization is not only represented by the memorials it chooses to erect, but also by those it chooses to photograph, then Epaminonda's work interrogates this mobile memorialisation to her own ends. It prises open the static immobility of photographed objects to reveal the plausibility of other worlds.

'Images have no bones or flesh,' says the artist. 'They are more like air, having the capacity to "ressurrect".'