Noémie Goudal: *Telluris*

In Noémie Goudal’s photographs, strange towers appear to float on water, vacant modernist buildings meld with gothic architectures, and mysterious orbs hover over seascapes and mountain ranges (fig. 1). These surreal scenes result from her interest in our understanding of nature through myth, religion, literature, and early scientific discovery. Using trompe l’oeil techniques, Goudal’s images confound the eye and challenge our perception of depth and dimension. Her work possesses an air of fantasy, as the viewer is never quite sure if what is presented is reality or construction.

Goudal achieves this fluctuation through a process that involves travel to remote locations, large-scale installations, analog photography, and digital collage. Working with a small team of assistants, she mounts her photographs on cardboard and wooden frameworks, installs them in unexpected environments—deserts, rainforests, abandoned buildings—and then re-photographs them, creating uncanny visual spaces. The technical expertise and precision with which she photographs these installations recall German conceptual artists Bernd and Hilla Becher’s documentary typologies of water towers and other
The surreal quality of Goudal’s work, however, situates it in the realm of science fiction and magic realism. Where the Bechers used a straight, objective style to record buildings subject to the passage of time, Goudal adapts this approach to document scenes that transcend time altogether, as they often never existed in the first place.

For the twentieth iteration of deCordova’s PLATFORM series, Goudal brings her otherworldly photography to the Sculpture Park, where *Telluris*, an image from her newest body of work, is printed at a monumental scale and installed near the Park’s front entrance. To create this photograph, Goudal traveled to the Mojave Desert in California, using the barren landscape and distant mountains as a backdrop for a series of stark geometric formations made from wooden cubes (fig. 2). Arranged into the rough silhouette of a pyramid, the structure in *Telluris* (Latin for earth or ground) rises from the desert floor like a mirage and evokes the abstracted form of a mountain. Reaching up to thirteen feet in height, the pile of pine boxes shares similarities with Sol LeWitt’s Minimalist sculptures, inspired in part by his time spent working in an architect’s office (fig. 3). Using the cube as a basic unit, LeWitt created a series of modular structures that allude to ancient ziggurats and modern skyscrapers, much like his *Tower (DC)* (1989; 2009), which stands nearby in the Park. While LeWitt’s sculptures maintain clean, square lines, Goudal...
rotated her cubes at irregular angles in order to suggest the rugged contours of a mountain.

The history of humankind’s relationship to natural phenomena has long been a source of inspiration for Goudal. Previous series such as “Observatoires” (2013-2014, fig. 4) and “Southern Light Stations” (2015-2016) investigate how early civilizations used the stars as wayfinding tools, interpreted astronomical phenomena as messages from the gods, and constructed buildings to bring them closer to the sky. With Telluris, Goudal further develops this link between nature and geomorphic architecture, in which structures are designed to meld with or respond to natural forms. She describes it as the “mathematical ‘prototype’” of a mountain, built “in order to better understand both its relief and its interior.” The wooden cubes resemble scaffolding and allude to the constructed environments found in zoos that emulate an animal’s mountain habitat, or amusement park rides like the Matterhorn Bobsleds at Disneyland Park (fig. 5). Taking a cue from these staged sceneries, the structure in Telluris becomes the unadorned framework of a towering landform.

Goudal’s interest in mountains stems from their history as symbols of the sublime in art and literature, as well as sites of sacred worship, representing an earthly access point to the heavens. Because of their proximity to the sky, mountain peaks...
are a central part of many cultures’ folklore, legends, and religious stories. It is no wonder that these towering masses of rock capture the human imagination. They are mysterious and awe-inspiring, with sawtooth forms that fracture the land, summits sometimes treacherous to traverse, and valleys and lakes secreted away in their heights.

The mountain as a sacred landform is at the heart of French author René Daumal’s *Mount Analogue* (1952), a novel that significantly informed Goudal’s *Telluris*. Synthesizing science, history, fantasy, and a touch of the absurd, Daumal’s text encapsulates Goudal’s own approach to image making. The narrative follows a group of explorers on a quest to find the elusive Mount Analogue, a purely “symbolic” mountain that represents the spiritual “path uniting Heaven and Earth.”

Throughout their journey, the mysterious mountain hovers between a concrete, attainable landmark and a conceptual theory. As one character insists: “The gateway to the invisible must be visible.”

Printed on a billboard and installed within deCordova’s distinctively New England landscape, *Telluris* can also be seen as a gateway. Framed by the curtains of two majestic weeping beech trees and situated within a world of lush color, the black-and-white desert terrain appears as a window into another time and dimension. Like Daumal’s fictional mountain, Goudal’s photograph exists “between real geography and subjective projection, where the collective consciousness plays an activator’s role of exoticism and discovery [of] the unknown, letting the imagination extend indefinitely.” *Telluris* encourages us to reflect on the associations we establish between fact and fiction, abstract symbols and physical objects, and the manufactured and organic. It reveals the slipperiness of the boundaries that separate these opposing realms while embracing both.

Scout Hutchinson, Curatorial Assistant

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5. Ibid.
CAPTIONS


Fig. 1: Noémie Goudal, Satellite II, 2013, lightjet print, 66 x 82 inches. © Noémie Goudal, Courtesy of Edel Assanti, London.

Fig. 2: View of wooden structures being arranged for Telluris. © Noémie Goudal, Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 3: Sol LeWitt, Progressive Structure, 1997, painted wood, 48 ¾ x 52 ½ x 24 ¾ inches. © 2017 The LeWitt Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Pace Gallery. Photograph by Ellen Labenski.

Fig. 4: Noémie Goudal, Observatoire V, 2013, Lambda print on Baryta paper, 59 x 47 ¼ inches. © Noémie Goudal, Courtesy of Edel Assanti, London.

Fig. 5: View showing the Matterhorn Bobsleds ride under construction at Disneyland Park, Anaheim, California, c. 1958-9. © Disney.
BIOGRAPHY


PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of one-person commissioned projects by early- and mid-career artists from New England, national, and international art communities that engage with deCordova’s unique landscape. The PLATFORM series lets artists expand their practice and visitors experience new approaches to contemporary sculpture.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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