

## Phillip George: Night Vision and the Post-Oriental

The succession of crises between the Middle East and the West that have marred the opening years of the new millennium has made a reexamination of the term Occidentalism inevitable. The key issue is not how the West perceives the Other, but rather, how the Other perceives us. This already complex reversal becomes even more complex when we consider that this abstract Other is only thus viewed from a Western point of reference. "Asia," for instance, is a grand generalization left behind by Western imperialist anthropology which, as we know, relished such generalizations. Hence the Western artist who would otherwise be labeled "Orientalist" is faced with an aesthetic and ethical conundrum: He must shape his vision as "Post-Orientalist," a position that is not exactly Post-colonial, but rather one based on the imprecise notion of what the Middle East thinks of nations on the outside. He must, in other words, speculate on what is beyond his ken. As opposed to the Orientalist ethos based on the false presumption of an absolute point of view, Post-Orientalism is skeptical of anything but an imperfect, disordered knowledge of external cultures.

Phillip George's recent photographs attempt to surmount the problem of the destabilized observer using the ingenious metaphor of night vision. Save for the deep green glow that tints certain images, the imagery in the artist's two most recent photographic series, *Lost Stories* (2003-04) and *New World Order* (2005), seems to be of a traditional Orientalist cast—that of the enraptured Western observer observing. Yet viewing these works together, it seems that the artist is struggling with something.

This struggle arises because George, who has traveled extensively in the Middle East, is sharply aware that there is no ideal position—on either side— from which to observe. His work hangs upon the irony that cultures define themselves in contrast to others, yet the Western conception of the Middle East and its corollary are both fraught with misconceptions and bad faith. Although his color images inevitably maintain a National Geographic flavor, this uncannily recognizable image is displaced by a sense of absence. This has nothing to do with the anticipatory quality in Edward Hopper's paintings, or the hackneyed pastiche of the Hitchcockian film still. Rather, the colored works resonate with a cavernous emptiness, as if something is lost, lacking, implicit or hidden.

This sense of loss can easily be explained by a traditional reading of the condition of the outside observer, or by theories about the inherent loss in every photograph. These ways of viewing the work may be useful, except that the above-noted conflicts and the way surveillance has altered how people see, are seen, and see themselves seen, has radically shaken the foundation of photography as we know it. The fertile rawness that Western eyes once ascribed to the Middle East is all but lost now, and what remains is a political landscape of suspicion.

The rich emerald green tint of certain works in *Lost Stories* and nearly all of *New World Order* can be understood on several levels. The first is as a signifier of fantasy. The mosque that looms above the desert in *Lost Stories* resembles an Islamic Emerald City from *The Wizard of Oz*, but this citadel is impenetrable. The camera angle is low—in the foreground one sees the crest of a dune. Another image depicts an array of ruins. It is a nostalgic photograph, with the green hue lending an air of inscrutability and surreal power. These images appear to taunt the viewer with their dream-like quality. As such, the artist knowingly perpetuates the image of the exotic located at the frontier of human experience and civilization.

The green here is also the green of night vision, the medium of military assault and reconnaissance. It is not obvious to the average viewer without military training or a diet of action movies. Taken metaphorically, it is the vision of what is normally obscured, as if George has trespassed into the dark night of the Other. The emerald hues thus bring us closer to the status of voyeurs—on either side of the fence. If the East was where the 19th-century traveler once went to recover his lost innocence, then today the reverse is true. This jewel-like green is also a green of chemical spoliation. It is the color of corrupted fantasy.

But in a final irony that George employs with full force, green is also the color that affords the highest resolution. It is curious that it should be used in pictures that are about the way both sides' vision has become increasingly myopic, even opaque. Do the dark, almost silhouetted figures in *New World Order* stare at us, or do they parody us, staring?

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