

Justin Berry *Photographs*

Essex Flowers, New York 4 March – 10 April

For some years, Justin Berry has been shooting landscapes from within videogames. The ten photographs in this exhibition (all but one in black and white) have each been stitched together from 100 or more high-resolution shots taken while playing a first-person-shooter game. Using the game's built-in camera, Berry takes the photographs at moments when his player's weapon is lowered, leaving an unobstructed view of the surrounding environment. The pictures include scenes of human settlement (sometimes ruined) in rural settings, natural vistas (for example a path through trees with majestic mountains ahead) and landscapes seen through simple courtyard buildings in a vaguely oriental style. People are visible in only two of the photographs: one is barely noticeable, while in *Perch* (all works 2016), a figure sitting atop a wall is a focal point in the composition.

Printed in a square format and simply framed, the photographs are of modest size. Berry could easily have presented large images in the high-definition his method affords, but it's not his intention to immerse the viewer in a given scene; his chosen scale instead invites one to contemplate the landscapes as contexts in relation to our own. Their scenes are fairly

still, lacking the more ominous feel of Berry's earlier works, such as *Tail Wind* or *Last Palm* (both 2012, not on show), in which waving palms in heavy jungle evoke a sense of impending drama or threat reminiscent of *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The most visually effective work (and the poster image for the show) is *Cap*, in which a rocky outcrop is seen partially covered by drifts of snow that contrast powerfully with its dark layers. The dense textural detail and striking chiaroscuro between snow and graphite-coloured rock add up to a rewarding image.

It is not part of Berry's design to include any element of trickery or *trompe l'oeil* in the production of these photographs. In a spirit of experimentation, he produces images that tread an undetectable line between submission and suspicion in the eye of the viewer. In these landscapes, he tests photographic conventions, a certain artworld discomfort reserved for virtual reality and digitally generated work, and what can only be described as a human urge to fully understand what is seen. Berry challenges one's suspension of disbelief, which in a videogame is offered willingly but becomes brittle when presented with these frozen scenes IRL ('in real life'). Here one is compelled to figure the scenes out by minutely examining their nonreality.

This tension between belief in the imagery and a rejection of it as unreal is most effectively staged in the contrast between *More or Less*, an enticingly natural alpine scene under dappled light, and *Perch*, which confronts one with an obviously fake figure.

Through the virtual landscapes he shoots in acute detail, Berry explores ill-defined territory between perception, interpretation, expectation and dismissal – in his own words, seeking 'to look at the virtual world with the same kind of steady gaze one applies to the real world'. The photographs are arguably addressed to that most human satisfaction in naming what is, and what isn't, and serve to question the compulsion for such 'knowing' in this day and age.

Humour, too, features in what could be a sardonic reaction to attitudes that take the 'real' seriously while dismissing the virtual (according to the press release, 'in order to get the pictures he wanted, Justin Berry had to kill more than one person'). This ongoing series signals a personal quest upon which he has embarked through the conventions of image-making and interpretation. It questions why landscape photography should be insulated from the glare reserved for everyday reality.

Iona Whittaker



More or Less, 2016,
archival inkjet on Baryta paper, 57 × 57 cm.
Courtesy Essex Flowers, New York