

art

Iliana Ortega: The Pursuit of Infinite Dreams

Jonathan Goodman

Iliana Ortega was born in Mexico City, but she studied at Yale, receiving her MFA degree in painting from that institution in 2011. Since then, she has lived on the Lower East Side in New York City, where she has a studio at El Clemente, a former public school now become a local art center. Her current work centers on black-and-white photographs of seascapes and small towns occurring in places well known and not so well known--eastern Long Island and Iceland are among the sites of her images. Ortega also creates more technically complex images, in which photos are embellished and changed by pencil, paint, etc. Her imagery tends toward a deep romanticism, in which the play of light on darkened water and waves suggests a visionary reading of nature, one that looks to an apocalyptic scenario that overwhelms the artist's audience with its drama and high visual contrast. Romanticism, generally speaking, does not fly high in the American art world; we are given to politics and social issues much more than infinite dreams. So it makes sense that Ortega comes from another culture, one in which an archaic, romantically weighted vision makes itself felt in her own work--even if that works shows no signs of particularity as Mexican culture or a Mexican artifact of time.

It is a truism that current art avoids cultural and geographical determination; work tends to be centered around the individual, with an emphasis on overt particulars that communicate difference. Ortega's art does not communicate such concerns at all; her body of photographs in particular present an understanding and vision of nature in which human influence and impulse are not referred to. The otherworldly vision of her concerns reflects a utopian preoccupation with nature as a dynamic force of extraordinary power, seconded by the light Ortega captures playing off the surface of the water. It is extremely difficult, indeed close to impossible, to render landscape in all its expansive beauty today; when the great American modernist pictures of nature were taken in the first half of the last century (we remember that Ortega has committed herself to a life and career in New York, rather than returning to Mexico), nature had not been damaged to the extent that it has. In consequence of such history, it is clear that Ortega's deliberate beauty stands apart from the social orientation of much of what we say today. In particular, photos of the sea and the sunset must work very hard to distinguish themselves from the kitsch that has overtaken so much of today's popular art addressed to the same theme. In rendering these marvelous images of water, Ortega must be congratulated for her willingness to work within a well-examined field. The truth is that the images possess a remarkable gravity that transcends the weight of earlier art and contemporary scenarios that simply repeat what is seen. Ortega finds a true delight in revisiting scenes we might easily see as exhausted by historical precedents.

Sometimes, though, the image genre referred to in contemporary art is strong enough to sustain repetition that at first equals and then transforms earlier work. Certainly, a seascape is an image we have seen before, but that does not mean its imagistic potential is entirely exhausted. Today, across the art fields generally, we return to visions based primarily on modernism and its formal innovations. But the trope of waves or a flat plane of water extending to the horizon is not only a major theme in photography of the last century; it is also a focus of painting in European romantic art, particularly in the 19th century.. This means that the contemporary artist attempting the sea as a subject must be certain that his or her version of a body of water stands out as an *independent* reading of the theme. Certainly, we can't change the image of water itself too much, but we can perceive it in a way that is new or that builds in new ways on what has already been given. Ortega's gift is such that her work does consciously travel along formal lines that have been developed for some time--Who could do otherwise? But, at the same time, her sense of composition and tonal contrasts are accomplished enough to be read as contemporary art rather than a mere re-doing of the past. Certainly, it is hard to determine what makes something feel new; work done on current computer technology clearly asserts its innovation by virtue of the machines that are used. But it is more difficult to put one photo beside another, of the same prospect but fifty or more years apart, and argue that one is actually new while the other is not.

Ortega's photos do not actively or consciously address this problem; she simply makes the work that she makes, and hopes for a supportive reading of what she does. The problem does not lie with the excellence of the photograph, but rather with the subject matter, which for many people might be hopelessly outdated. How can one update a seascape? It is by now an empty truism that everything has been done in art--for a young artist like Ortega, the issues of creativity, the need to make something new, remain the same as they have for earlier artists. To the artist's credit, she has re-invigorated her ideas with a dramatic sense of structure, one that emphasizes the play of light along the surface of the water. Certainly, this has been done before. But Ortega's gift is to render the water quite nearly alive, in dramatic fashion. This is not to emphasize water alone--in the suite of images taken in Iceland, for example, we see local housing, shops on streets, and other manmade structures. Additionally, Ortega is interested in images of nature other than water: tracks of snow, close-ups of wheat stalks, low-lying hills seen from a distance. The point is that, both as artist and viewer, we are treading on well-worn paths. It is up to Ortega to justify a new vision of the already known--this is the task facing all artists today. To her credit, she makes her vision work.

To look at a few images closely: *Montauk #2* (2014) is a beautiful study, in black and white, of the sea off of eastern Long Island. The image is composed of dark- and light-colored bands, with an area of broken forms, in contrast with the black sea, in the middle of the compositional field. The feeling of the picture is dark, even apocalyptic, being dramatic in both its overall presence and in the particulars that keep the overall display alive. It is a picture of nature alone; most of

Ortega's pictures exclude people. Its high drama, though, remains memorable long after the viewer has looked at the image. *Big Sur--Summer Light* (2016) is a grand view of water that looks very much like a rippling carpet, with a large rock or two sticking up on the bottom right. Above the horizon, on the top tenth of the image horizontally, there are clouds with sharp angles reminiscent of a painting by Clyfford Still. Light from the sky pools on the water in the upper left of the composition; it is an image that overpowers the expectations of the viewer--most of us do not realize just how grand the Big Sur can be. In both cases, the imagery overwhelms its audience without losing its battle with massive but inchoate form. Ortega never loses sight of the American vision, which is grand, sometimes bordering on the grandiose--but she is always on the right sight of the line.

Binary Drawing No. 1 (2018) is beautiful, strange image of two white organic shapes, one lozenge-like and the other spherical, occurring in the right half of a gridded, dark background. A transparent, amoeba-like image connects the two forms. The work began as a photograph, but was embellished on by the artist with pencil and crayon. As a result, it occupies the wonderful ground existing between genres, in which the particularity of the photographic image is enhanced by the action of the hand. Much good recent art today has been advanced by its existence half in one medium and half in another, and this piece by Ortega illustrates the complexity of a shared language. *Loading Houses* (2018), another drawing/photograph, consists of two irregular, semi-triangular shapes hanging in what looks like open space in the upper register of the field. In both works, the contrast between dark and light would warrant extended study alone. Ortega is a visual Manichaeon, someone who works with sharp contrasts between darkness and light. The differences may not indicate a graphic world of good and evil, but they do imply the consequences of difference, at least in a visual if not a moral sense.

In fact, the presence of extreme tonal values is central to Ortega's esthetic. The sharp differences between darkness and light animate and dramatize Ortega's point of view, which moves in the direction of a fragile balance between degrees of illumination or their lack. Knowing Ortega from conversation, I find it impossible to ascribe her outlook to a religious point of view, and I would give my interpretation a stretch if I ascribed religious feeling to the works on hand. Yet spirituality does exist in these images, which is the place closest to conventional piety contemporary artists have available to them. But, even so, it is more than difficult to acknowledge the point of view, which for most is slightly awkward as a trope, as an article of faith to believe in. Given that we are moving more and more in the direction of technologically created art, it makes sense that ethereal matters--such as the sea and the sky--will matter less and less. But the need for some sort of transcendence persists, as the sense of satisfaction generated by Ortega's photographs demonstrates.

Atman (2018) is a word meaning the basic spiritual principle of the universe. Ortega chooses here to develop an extremely dense series of white marking that covers the ground of the work.

A gold diamond shape sits in the upper middle of the image, with a gray rectangle beneath it, a bit to the right. Two thinnish strips connect the rectangle to the background; they each have a gold section that deepens the image we find. It is fair to say that Ortega's point of view is regularly cosmic, although where such a large reading of energy originated in her art, and in her thinking, is hard to say. "Cosmic" is a difficult word--it suggests, in a rather loose and unorganized fashion, the presence of powerful energies far beyond our cognizance. Yet Ortega's art does in fact point to such a system. It make her work large in general, and moving in its sense of an arrangement outside our knowing. The color C print entitled *Vertical Land* (2016) shows four horizontal images--starting from the top down, they are the sky, a ridge of dark-green trees and foliage, the ocean, and a rising plinth of land, almost completely green, that juts into the water above it. Unusual in its employment of color, the photograph suggests grandeur through form and different hues rather than limited tones of black and white. Again and again, we find that Ortega suggests much more than what we see, in pictures and drawings that merge with a nature that is larger than the culture we come from.

What does this mean? Is Ortega a mystic with deep roots in nature? Or is she more accurately an artist attempting a language of originality and depth. Most artists don't set out consciously to do what they do; instead, the creative process leads them into places art writers are supposed to critique and explain. Writers may or may not get the reading right in regard to work like this, which is so allied with the magnificence of the land and sea as to establish an expressiveness of its very own--nearly without artistic intervention. In other words, one doesn't have to do much to pick up on nature's elevated beauty. Still, the imagery must be chosen, and in more than a few cases, Ortega looks to alterations of the photographic image to enhance the imagistic strength of what we see. In other words, she *improves* upon nature, even if only by choosing a particular visual outlook that is particularly striking to her audience. In both art and life, we are always improving the landscape in the hope that our changes will result in a higher experience. This may or man not happen, but it is something that is tried over and over again.

Ortega offers us a view of nature that remains epically large, at a time when the landscape is being eaten away by development. It is her attempt to keep the external world alive. But whether this can be done successfully is another matter. The creation of good art and the preservation of the external world are two separate things, although one hopes there is the possibility of a bridge or a tie joining the two. It may be that Ortega's work is as strong as it is because she allows the sea its otherness as nature rather than demanding it become part of her own imagination. Doing so would result in images of remarkable grace and autonomy; it would also, supposedly, do away with the artist's hand. This almost never happens absolutely--even the Chinese "improved" on the classical scholar's rocks they supposedly exhibited in untouched condition. Really, what Ortega has been doing in the images discussed is finding a way for the land and the sea to be recorded as art--without losing their independent, non-cultural quality. This is why the images are so beautiful; they are allowed to breathe on their own. Most of us today look at the external

world as something to be managed, but this opinion profoundly damages nature, being a form of casual contempt. The truth is that its elevations can be made permanent by artistic documentation and intervention. Ortega is one of a truly small group of people who seek the reality of and try to maintain a distance from what they record and make, even as they accept their role as cultural interpreters. They are given to embellishing, and sometimes transforming, what exists in the outside world, but they never forget the august divergence of nature.

Jonathan Goodman