
Dynamic Landscape

Olga Chagaoutdinova, Scarlett Hooft Graafland, Viviane Sassen,
Dayanita Singh

... *eyesight modestly anticipates the admired capacity of the artist to produce works that interpret experience.*

—Rudolf Arnheim

A dynamic landscape is a constant field of forces—a visual image formed by the senses; a representation of what is perceived. It is shaped by our beliefs and desires, transformed by everyday experiences and the continuous interplay between humanity, nature, and culture. The focus of this exhibition invites us to consider how we recognize and interpret meaning within our surroundings, and the myriad of influences that impacts the way we see. Through the photographs of four international artists—Olga Chagaoutdinova, Scarlett Hooft Graafland, Viviane Sassen, and Dayanita Singh—*Dynamic Landscape* looks at the confluence of physical and psychological factors that informs our perception of the world we inhabit. From sun-scorched Africa to Canada's frozen North, the illuminated streets of India to Russia's modest interiors—these narratives explore shifting relationships between figure and ground.

Images captured in Senegal, Kenya, and Tanzania by Viviane Sassen suggest tensions between tradition and progress, poverty and wealth, tragedy and beauty. Rather than make definitive statements, they reveal contradictions and raise questions, inspiring contemplation. As a young child, Sassen lived in a Kenyan village where her father, a doctor, ran a clinic for terminally ill patients. As an artist and fashion photographer living in Holland, she first returned to Africa in 2002. Since then, Sassen has developed highly stylized compositions, infused with memories of her youth—the intensity of the people, the emptiness of the shantytowns, and the radiance of the landscape. In *Parasomnia* (2010), Sassen's vision of Africa is intimate and personal, but also distant and universal.

Sassen avoids the clichéd image of Africa that circulates within mainstream media. Instead, she portrays a sense of place through bold graphic images with simple yet suggestive props. Her approach is intuitive and vibrant—a result of carefully observing the behaviour and appearance of the people she encounters. While some images capture spontaneous gestures, more often scenes are thoughtfully staged, or evolve into collaborations with her models. Extensive research, sketches, and documentation using a Polaroid camera are essential elements of her practice. Sassen's photographs maintain an aura of mystery: dramatic figures are exposed in high contrast with the ground, ominous shadows are formed by harsh sunlight, and saturated colours take on symbolic meaning. She

captures archetypal images of confidence and doubt, perseverance and mortality, compassion and desire. Similar to her subjects' identities, which are obscured by the shadows, the artist's political, ethical, and emotional stance is veiled. While this imagery is seductive, it is fraught with an underlying turmoil, as if induced by a fitful sleep that evokes an illusory world of spirits.

Scarlett Hooft Graafland's practice is informed by an ongoing concern for the environment and the damaging effects of human interference. Since her youth she has been drawn towards places with ancient civilizations and extreme climates, from the mountainous terrain of Nepal to the salt deserts of Bolivia. Based in the Netherlands and originally trained as a sculptor, Hooft Graafland's photographs are the result of impermanent, site-specific installations created within vast landscapes. She approaches her subject through a broad range of perspectives: like an explorer, she embarks on challenging expeditions; like an anthropologist, she studies social customs and beliefs; and like an environmentalist, she examines nature's vulnerabilities and dilemmas.

For the series *You Winter, let's get divorced* (2008), Hooft Graafland spent four months living in Igloodik, a remote Inuit village in Nunavut, Canada. While this community maintains its traditions, elements of modern living are made visible through the artist's process. Working with residents, she combines folklore with contemporary metaphor, contrasting the grandeur of a desolate natural landscape with incongruous elements of the everyday. In *Lemonade Igloo*, the artist produced big blocks of frozen lemonade and asked local men to construct an igloo. This image alludes to cultural divides within the community, where a younger generation who typically watch television and drink soda pop, coexist with elders committed to the preservation of tradition.

A far simpler gesture makes a great impact in *Plea*, when a pair of yellow rubber gloves is playfully posed within the snow. Their meaning is left ambiguous—perhaps they beg for warmth, plead for a reprieve from domesticity, or pray for a future unthreatened by climate change. Framed by an icy blue land and sky, this otherworldly environment is simple yet powerful, humorous yet serious, magical yet very real.

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Informed by an interest in globalization after the fall of communism, Olga Chagaoutdinova examines personal and cultural identity through the politics of “home.” Born in Russia more than two decades before perestroika, the artist relocated to Canada in 2000, however her background remains pivotal to her artistic practice. Chagaoutdinova returned to Russia several years later, and began photographing domestic interiors as an outsider who understood its history from within. These familiar spaces reflect shifts between old and new, communism and capitalism. In 2007 she travelled to Cuba, drawn by its shared political history with the Soviet Union. A venerable holiday retreat for Russians, Cuba has recently become a popular destination for Canadians seeking reprieve from the winter and an oversaturated lifestyle.

Chagaoutdinova’s series *Domestic Landscapes* (2004–2009) investigates how places are bound together, their cultures grafted onto each other. Her photographs position domesticity as a microcosm of society, where utopian dreams and unattainable fantasies are shaped and given meaning by a changing socio-political climate. There is a kitsch exoticism at play in many of the Russian interiors—palm trees, beach scenes, and ocean views provide an idyllic backdrop for ordinary life. In her Cuban interiors, plants are used in an attempt to brighten an otherwise bleak atmosphere. This body of work blurs the distinction between inside and outside worlds.

In two video works, one filmed in Canada and the other in Cuba, Chagaoutdinova steps outside the confines of domesticity to confront nature’s menacing power. In *Stone-Ache* (2009), the artist repetitiously rolls down a limestone hill, as though caught in the cycle of a nightmare. In *Storm-Ache* (2009), she boldly endures the ocean’s waves as they break her resolve. Themes of pain and suffering are evident throughout the artist’s practice, alluding to her heritage and the forceful expressions of tragedy in Russian art and literature. While Chagaoutdinova’s images of domestic interiors expose external influences, her videos depict an internal world.

Dayanita Singh’s photographs reflect a broad range of inspirations that extends across music, literature, and cinema. In the late 1980s, Singh began her career as a photojournalist documenting social injustice in India. By the early 90s, she was focusing on black-and-white portraits, disclosing more intimate stories and personal observations of her surroundings. The book format is significant to her practice as an ongoing means for experimenting with narrative sequencing—treating imagery as visual poetry.

In 2007, Singh began exploring colour photography and developed an evocative approach to landscape, which exists somewhere between consciousness and reverie. The series *Dream Villas* (2007–2010) transforms the nocturnal city into a surreal world, where the familiar is concealed by the unknown. Using long exposures and daylight film after sunset, Singh reveals a mysterious

atmosphere filled with lush artificial hues. Exploiting the properties of film, her images are moments that the camera captures but the eyes cannot see.

Emphasizing shadows and darkness in contrast with streaming pools of light, Singh instills mundane settings with a threatening yet dreamlike air. Moonlight gives way to the unnatural radiance of the city—overtaken by the glow of fluorescent tubes and the glare of street lamps, illuminated interiors, and spotlight gardens—which materializes in Singh’s prints as vivid contrasts and subtle gradations of colour. Unsettling forms emerge and a lingering presence is implied within empty spaces. When figures occasionally appear, they are engulfed in a powerful cinematic atmosphere. Resisting easy explanations, Singh’s carefully composed photographs are imbued with multiple meanings and associations, and like a dream they are open to interpretation.

Dynamic Landscape portrays forces of nature that have shaped and formed humankind, from the colour of the earth and the temperature of the air to the torrent of the sea and the darkness of the night. Influenced by environmental, social, historical, and political issues, these four artists reimagine the figure in the landscape and the impact of its presence on the ground. While each of these works emerge from the reality of the everyday, none of them can be considered documentary. The desire to objectively observe the surrounding world is eclipsed by a scenic agenda and deeply personal artistic motivations. Replete with magical realism, these photographs depict the spirit of each place—a dreamlike realm that exists beyond the ordinary. The artists challenge our perception of reality and make visible that which typically remains unseen. Through the convergence of external and internal processes, “we perceive the world as ordered, clear-cut, and meaningful.”¹

Bonnie Rubenstein
Exhibition curator

¹ Rudolf Arnheim. *Art and Visual Perception, A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974, first published 1954.