

BETWEEN THE ARTIST, THE SUBJECT, AND THEIR SKY

SKY GOODDEN



1

Last August, when the first solar eclipse in a century eventuated in a sun-dogged sky, my mother cut a hole in an empty cereal box and traipsed across the lawn. “I went to great trouble to see the eclipse, which you can’t see, of course, but only peer at obliquely,” she told me. With a hole knifed in the box, she screwed up her eyes. But being met with disappointing results, her attention drifted back to the world, over the blonde dog on the lawn and the ground beneath her toes. Suddenly, she realized that the eclipse was happening all around her, in manifold crescent-moon shadows, prised through the leaves of the trees, and dotting every surface. Where the sun was, a darkness loomed that she couldn’t look to; but here was its effect, refracted across her feet. The photographic lens and its subject had been complicated.

My first affecting experience with Nadia Belerique’s work was similarly upending. It occurred from beneath a glass table. This was at the 2016 Biennale de Montréal, where the transparent shelves and traced surfaces I’d come to associate with her practice had stretched into towering forms. I stood beneath these looming sculptures, with their hued wine-bottle bottoms and dropped necklaces branching out above me, and felt like a child beneath a deserted dining-room table after the party had come to an end.

1, 2 Nadia Belerique, *Bed Island (Don't Sleep)*, 2016, installation details, La Biennale de Montréal. Photo: Guy L'Heureux

In Belerique’s large-scale image for Capture Photography Festival, the viewer is similarly positioned on their back and made to submit to the act—and pleasures—of looking. Again, Belerique places us beneath a glass table marked by spare detritus (another wine bottle, an elegant vine, some sunlit shapes and geometric traces). The sky stretches out above so that you can almost feel the tickle of grass shooting up around your ears. We are daydreaming, we are hiding out, we are lost at the garden party, allowed to roll beneath the waves of the event.

The distinguishing element here—and a first, in Belerique’s practice—is the presence of the human form. A limb stretches out across the glass surface, its weight and length dark and smudged like an object radiating its own shadow. In a continuance of an important art historical tradition, Belerique embeds the artist’s hand in her image, the referent one of activity over evidence (there’s movement suggested in the profile of her stretched fingers). Placed among these essential objects and talismanic traces (both recurring profiles in her work), Belerique’s animated self-reference has the effect of marking the distance between the artist and her viewer. The extended arm not only reaches across the surface of the image (and so, the lens), but, in a sense, also symbolically extends toward us, across the gap that, you could argue, is unbridgeable.

Imaging the space that distances viewer and artist also admits the symbiosis between them. Art is borne out in this distance. Belerique often boils her subjects down to the level of symbols. Her images are pocked with primary colours, forms, and essential silhouettes, and in this qualifying effort, I’m made to think of a line by novelist Harold Brodkey: “Dissolve the skin and the name.” But between these fundamental forms, an ambiguity slides in Belerique’s quiet schemas. Because she’s underlining the act of looking (again, we’re positioned on our backs, staring out), the complicated aspects of the gaze and objecthood become stressed, too. “Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism,” writes art historian James Elkins, scoring the slippages and effects of the act of looking in *The Object Stares Back*. “All seeing is heated. . . . And so looking has force: it tears, it is sharp, it is an acid. In the end it corrodes the object and observer until they are lost in the field of vision. I once was solid, and now I am dissolved: that is the voice of seeing.”

A “field of vision” is a good way to regard Belerique’s image, then, one in which the exchange between artist and observer is both highlighted and puzzled. Because, while accenting the work of seeing, Belerique inverts the customary position of the artist and the viewer. Here, the artist’s hand sits *on* the glass table, and us beneath it. So if that surface can be perceived to stand in for the camera’s lens, Belerique has placed herself as the subject, and we, in charge of the shutter.

“Seeing, which comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them, is not a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli,” writes John Berger, a storied art writer, in his iconic



2

text *Ways of Seeing*. “We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach—though not necessarily within arm’s reach. We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.”

In a review of Belerique’s 2016 exhibition *Bed Island*, published by *esse*, Alex Bowron writes, “Instead of filling a space, the work creates one.” In scaling up for Capture’s Dal Grauer Substation site, and in being limited to an image—over, say, a sculpture or installation—Belerique takes this spatial complex to its two-dimensional conclusion: she creates a space between the lens and the ether, between the artist and the viewer, and upends our expectation for who sits on either end. Above us is form and object; above that, the sky. But where is our subject? Like that refracting, crescent-moon eclipse, it’s all around us. 🌀