

GALERIE FONSWELTERS

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Press release

Galerie Fons Welters
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Gallery open; Tue-Sat, 1-6pm

Gabriel Lester *The Secret Life of Cities*

In his most recent installation, *The Secret Life of Cities*, Gabriel Lester places us directly into the middle of a reality defined by cinematographic projections of urban green on two opposite walls. The sound - neutral city noises, occasionally drowned out by a sonorous abstract overtone - enhances the visual experience. The urban environment feels omnipresent.

The moving images, dominated by archetypal urban green, share a hidden perspective. In the foreground - almost tangible - screens are formed by leaves, branches, needles and blossom, in a hyper-realistic sharpness. The green functions like a screen. Vegetation like a closed curtain. Sometimes as soft as a veil and translucent in a sensual way; sometimes almost impenetrable, like an all-concealing camouflage cloth.

This image for me immediately evokes associations with the Dutch word 'schaamgroen' (ashamed green), a technical term from the seventies, which urbanists and planners used to typify the green that served in particular to conceal undesirable landscape developments. Think of planted shielding around industrial sites and the low shrubs enclosing dog parks. Despite its tidy dullness this semi-public green, thanks to its concealing ability, proved to form a huge attraction for urban subgroups (think junkies, loitering youth, flashers and tramps), quickly lending ambiguity to the term: green with a touch of menace.

However, this is a mixed metaphor, since in Lester's installation the ominous sense of mystery is combined in a surprising way with sensuality. The sunlit spring blossom and sensually swaying willow branches, the soft fuzz on the feltlike leaves; these are reassuring images.

Moreover - and now we find ourselves in the area where the landscape architect and the filmmaker meet - the key to this work of art can be found not in its ability to disguise but rather reveal; in the way in which our view is directed through holes within the shrubs. This creates a great sense of depth. The fragmented view on the impressionist landscape lying behind - shadowy images of a seemingly random series of cities: Berlin, Dubai, Shanghai, Sharjah, Tokyo and New York, despite their cultural diversity barely giving away their identity - is not a coincidence but a construction; a conscious choice in the spatial framing of the world in which we find ourselves.

In *The Secret Life of Cities*, Lester uses the stylistic device of the side wing effect on multiple levels. First of all, it functions as a lens. An immense concentration exists in the observations. Like a predator who, from a hidden position, waits in ambush for his prey through an opening in the bushes. Our perception is strengthened by this concentration, in which you imagine yourself on your knees in the bushes, almost automatically identifying with the predator.

But besides being an optical instrument, the side wing also works very well as an evocative agent. A figure of speech which, in a David Lynch-like way, makes you especially aware of your surroundings. Immediately, our senses are on edge.

Lester employs this stylistic device with verve and shows himself to be a master in building suspense. Each ominous 'establishing shot' is drowned out by the following, before even having reached its climax. A feeling of estrangement remains, existing somewhere between existential emptiness and the immense comfort that only the majesty of an overwhelming experience of nature can contain in itself.

While looking at the series of sharp photos in the front space, you are seduced into letting go of all concepts and images and subjective feelings. A pure objective study of nature remains, imposing itself on you in all its beauty. I had a similar haunting experience of nature as a child, through a watercolour by Albrecht Dürer (Das Große Rasenstück 1504) in which he, with flawless precision, dissects a piece of grass down to its roots.

[Ernst Van der Hoeven]*

Gabriel Lester (1972) lives and works in Amsterdam and Shanghai. Recently his work has been shown in a.o. Sharjah Biennial (UAE); Documenta 13, Kassel (DL); Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam (NL); Gemeentemuseum (Den Haag) (NL); Centre Pompidou (Paris) (FR); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (US); Performa 09, New York (US); Artists Space (New York (US); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (ZW); Liverpool Biennial, Liverpool (UK); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (NL); Busan Biennial, Busan (ZK); Baltic Triennial, PS1, New York (US); Witte de With, Rotterdam (NL); Rijksakademie, Amsterdam (NL); World Expo, Hannover (DL). Upcoming exhibitions include: Bourgeois Leftovers, De Appel, Amsterdam; 7th Momentum Biennial, Norway.

** Ernst Van der Hoeven studied Art History with a specialism in architecture at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. In 2002 he founded EVDG, studio for the urban landscape. He is co-founder and editor of Club Donny, journal on the personal experience of the urban landscape.*