

Roi Kuper

To those who are supposed to be with us

My first meeting with Roi Kuper in his studio in Tel Aviv was on a warm February afternoon, a weather condition and time of day not conducive, in my opinion, to the consumption of strong alcohol. However, in retrospect my refusal of Kuper's offer of a glass of whisky may have been a mistake. It is quite possible that at that moment I failed some kind of test. This anecdote suggests personal reasons why Kuper's latest set of photographs are of whisky distilleries in Scotland, yet it can tell us little of the complex web of associations these images bring with them. The twelve photographs depict distilleries in different locations. Five are shown on the coast of the Island of Islay from different viewpoints: from inland, along the coastline, and from the sea. The other seven distilleries are located in the region of Speyside and are pictured as architectural punctuations in the landscape, sandwiched between land and sky, or enclosed by a variegated topography of moors, woods and hills.

This latter group of photographs invoke earlier images of the factory in the landscape. Joseph Wright of Derby's painting of Richard Arkwright's cotton mills at Matlock and Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg's painting of Coalbrookdale, both from the late eighteenth century, show these sites of early industrial production at night, using light effects to suggest the unleashing of 'satanic' forces and the despoliation of nature by modernity. This representation of the factory as an anti-picturesque blot

on the landscape was continued by Camille Pissarro's pictures of the Chalon et Cie factory at Pontoise on the river Oise produced in 1873. In these pictures the factory stands at a meeting point between town and country. Here the factory chimney belching smoke becomes a motif of modern alienation, something perhaps echoed in Kuper's photographs of the distilleries at Knockdhu and Dailuaine. However, his approach to photographing the Speyside distilleries differs from this tradition of representing the factory in the landscape as a disturbing new presence. Instead Kuper's photographs seem to involve a kind of nostalgia for these isolated sites of human activity. Rather than representing the point where the natural is about to be engulfed by the man-made, these photographs picture a seemingly benign moment in the development of the modern world, a moment when the natural and the artificial existed side-by-side. This is particularly evident in the image of the distillery at Speyburn that is pictured nestling within a forest like a fairytale castle. This approach also distinguishes Kuper's work from Bernd and Hilla Becher's typological project aimed at recording the disappearing structures of past industry. Kuper's intentions are much more romantic, as is his way of making photographs. In his photographs the distillery becomes picturesque. This is characteristic of other examples of his work. Photographs in the 'War Situation' series depict the white tents of the army base set up for the 'Disengagement' from Gaza as an innocuous horizontal stripe. In contrast to such picturesque incorporations of architecture into the landscape, the photographs of distilleries on Islay show them as more forlorn and

sentinel like structures, looking out to sea or isolated at its edge.

The history of the Scotch whisky industry is one marked by boom, decline, mergers, and aggressive takeovers. This history is also defined by a shift in the latter part of the twentieth century from a production driven to a market driven approach involving an emphasis upon whisky brand building.

This often entailed a romantic emphasis upon the authenticity of the product, upon local water sources and traditional production methods handed down through generations. The romantic aura of the whisky brand thus created supported its market value as a luxury commodity. Kuper's photographs with their suggestion of the romance of place seem to allude to such promotional practices, but this is not his intention. He is not interested in the industry or the market, or in the mystifications of advertising. Rather he is concerned with what his images can become as metaphor, in how specific physical landscapes can become landscapes of the mind through photography.

It is this concern with metaphor that defines the three parts of Kuper's 'To Eat of the Leviathan Flesh' trilogy that began with 'Atlantis', continued with 'The White Cliffs of Dover', and is completed by the current pictures. Photographs of particular locations - the sea from the Portuguese coast, Dover from the sea, and distilleries in Speyside and Islay - are meant to carry local myths, but also encapsulate wider meanings about human experience. 'The White Cliffs of Dover' pictures allude to the desire

of one of the characters in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Iron in the Soul* to fly over the white cliffs at dawn in his escape from a France overrun by the German army in 1940. The photographs also bring into play the British mythology of wartime fortitude created around the image of the cliffs. Through linkage to these cultural references the white cliffs become a matter of aspiration, but in Kuper's series they also elude us at a visual level, disappearing into light, and through this perhaps becoming symbolic of human desire in general.

The distillery pictures do something else. As observed, they reference but also depart from a particular history of landscape imagery. They are also intentionally reminiscent of the colors of Constable paintings and the pictorial Englishness of so-called 'Constable Country'. Here would be an irony if Kuper's photographs were truly about the locations they depict: the Scottish Highlands seen through the landscape tradition of the English south. But this is not really important. Instead it is the intermixing of mythic allusions to create something new in the photographic image that is significant. The isolated human structure in the landscape conjures up associations alongside the mythic Englishness of the photographic color to combine with the cultural meanings of whisky and the practice of toasting. Not the Gaelic toast of 'slainte mhath' (good health), but a more generic toast to those who have departed from this life, as suggested by the title of the series 'To those who are supposed to be with us'. It is here that the forlorn and melancholic feeling of the Islay pictures might be more clearly identified. It is a feeling of loss for those who have passed on.

These people have been removed from us, the living, the viewers, their departure made manifest through the strange otherness of the photographs themselves. The stillness of these scenes, especially where the distilleries are pictured in the distance, separates the viewer - still mixed up in the flux of life - from them. The living can toast the dead, but they cannot be them. Nor can they join them, though they might long for them. In this sense, like the other two sets of photographs in the trilogy, the distillery photographs are about something that cannot be attained - the search for Atlantis, the aspiration for the mythic national belonging of the white cliffs, the desire to be with the dead again. In the process of moving through life the living do not find complete fulfilment or resolution. They do not get to eat of the Leviathan flesh as the Talmudic story of the final banquet for the righteous after the redemption predicts. There is no redemption and here the photographs allude to conditions local to Kuper's situation as a photographer in Israel - to the elusiveness of peace and justice, and to dangerous messianic visions. But they also have the potential to suggest meanings that have a much broader relevance than this.

Simon Faulkner, Manchester, April 2008