

DESERT WASH*

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The Hidden Well

It is said that wherever we go in the desert, we find more than we seek. Far from being a mere haven of peace, the desert offers a site where, drunken in the infinity of naked earth and facing our solitude's spaciousness, we let the Nowhere and the Other surface in us. Steeped in the thoughts of the wind, we wonder time and again which of us, the desert onlooker or the majestic landscape we face, is witnessing the mirage of being an open flow on arid terrain. To quench our thirst, we travel far and physically strain ourselves to the limits, but what we set out to drink often turns out to be not quite the same as the water we learn to know from within our skin, flesh and bone. The emptiness of the desert is a full emptiness: with so much to take in and with our eyes, ears and pores wide open, we are unable to receive all of no-thing-ness.

"What beautifies the desert is that it hides a well somewhere," says *The Little Prince* of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. As visible as the desert is, it remains often unseen. In the bare bones beauty of dry land, where places are dotted with names such as Carcass Canyon, Burning Hills, Badlands, Slaughter Slopes, Hole In The Wall, No Man Mesa, Old Woman Wash, Big Hollow, Lone Peak, and Dirty Devil, one needs time to see, and inner silence to hear. There's a deep sense of between-worldliness in the deserts of the American West, to which our parched bodies are irresistibly and cyclically drawn. A waterless fountain from which anyone can drink if we find our way into it, it promises to quench our endless need for refreshment and renewal. But no matter how often we return to these unbounded landscapes, the secret of their beauty cannot be exhausted. We would never tire of looking at the sight, and the well-buried deep in the heart of the desert remains bottomless.

It is not unusual, for example, that upon the return from a group trip into the stone wilderness, where one has just spent time camping, climbing and hiking, one is left with the poignant feeling of having missed the wild altogether. Even as the desert is omnipresent—in the quality of the air that one breathes or of the light that blinds one's eyesight—the time passed on site could easily turn out to be mere entertainment and sport time. One may have noted the visible sculpture of bones, but one has felt neither the moisture of their marrow, nor the network of water veins running underground, through one's own body. The well one misses in the desert is, in fact, one's own well.

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Meeting the desert with open senses and with wide apertures in our mind may lead to unpredictable paths of knowing. Life does not limit itself to a subject or an object of beauty. In our aspiration for "long life" and for "eternal beauty," that is, for beauty in its both all-too-visible and invisible state, we find ourselves repeatedly humbled by any single "accident of nature" such as an autumn or spring storm that reminds us how little we know about the desert, as it can trigger a two-hour deluge likely to change entirely the practicability of the terrain, or a germination of unexpected wild flower species likely to modify radically the colors of the minimal landscape. Rain can work swift, dramatic alterations on dry land. Within minutes, small streams can swell into rivers and torrents, violently bursting through the silence of canyon country and hurling all in its passage, including the lives of unprepared bystanders and visitors.

A visit to the desert is not quite a visit to an oasis. Humans know very well that the desert is not necessarily friendly to them, so they come looking for something else.

Every partition of the rocks, every fold of the sandstone cliffs, and every fracture of the earth seem rich of the threats it hides. Isolation and water deprivation are the price of this quest of essence in emptiness. The dream for water and the yearning for a return *home*, in the smaller and larger sense of the term, are part of the countless experiences that attract us to the desert. One is drawn by the lure of something one thinks one lacks or has lost in the other desert—which urban life often is in its inhumaneness. As a field of unexplored and unknown possibilities, the desert wilderness reminds us both of our ability as humans to create, and of the dangers involved in every passionately creative act.

We are endowed with the creative power to change sand and rock into an empire, but the empire of men is also internal. For many people, the desert is not only made of sand, rock, and salt flats; it is a country outside of time, far from men's histories; a harsh and at time, brutal country to set foot across, where the idea that men's laws no longer matter still has a tenacious hold in people's imagination and yet remains radically an unfulfilled possibility. For although people usually do not come to the desert seeking material wealth and power, few are those who find their way into it so as to learn the way of rock and sand whose power, when unleashed, leaves human material forces awash in their powerlessness. Thus, in its narrowly humanized connotation, the die-hard image of the desert remains that of a salted barren where nothing grows and where predators of all kinds lurk from their hideouts. Related stories of rapes, thefts, abuses of power and other reckless behaviors seem to grow in abundance in these territories. Women are emphatically warned not to venture in the desert by themselves, and visitors are advised not to stop for strangers or hitchhikers on the road, especially at twilight, the time *entre chien et loup*, when the between-dog-and-wolf state of being reigns.

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One of the most "fertile" symbols in biblical writings, the desert is referred to as being ruled by malefic forces and populated with demons, enemies and others. It is conventionally depicted as a superficial, sterile spread, underneath which reality is to be sought; or else, as a non-differentiated uniformity outside which everything else exists only as illusion, like a *mirage*. Ambiguity lies at the spiritual core of the desert, for it is at once a place of sterility—without God—and a site of fertility—with God and only God. A place for saints and a symbol for the heart where life is interiorized, it also stands for the exterior of being—the physical body and the manifested world through which one moves blindly, seeing not the Divine hidden in the multiplicity of appearances.

The "desert" means different things in different cultures. There are as many kinds of thirst as there are individuals, and no one escapes the intimate solitude of the journey back to dust, to the earth. If, in the Western media today, the desert is largely revived as enemy land or as the very place where the enemy vanishes (as in Afghan, Iraqi, or Syrian territories), for many French adventurers, the desert has mainly been the land of the Blue Men and Women—those born from night dew and clad in deep indigo blue (as with the Tuareg, the Moor or the Bedouin peoples). These desert dwellers are said to have the freedom of space in their look, and while they are continually on the move, searching for and responding to the call of water, water is to be found in their very sky-colored eyes.

The magic of sand and emptiness continues to exert its power in the Sahara. What characterizes freedom here is the sense that life is not bound by visible treasures, but engages, instead, humans in their flesh as they look for their own secret kingdom. And the true secret, say urban dwellers in pilgrimages, seems to reside in that which desert-dwellers are said to carry in their blood, in their viscera, in their depths: the silence of the desert. An immobile and sleepless silence in which ripples of sand appear as motionless crests of waves.

In Japan where there is no real desert, the latter continues largely to retain its mysteries, often equated with the feminine and the erotic. As a testing ground that appears at once utterly inhospitable in its arid primitivism, and beguiling in its ceaseless movement of decomposition—whose results show in sweeping vistas of oddly sculpted forms—the desert strongly appeals to man's quest of truth. The Gobi desert, for example, is further said to evoke fantasy about exotic adventure, a fantasy that once functioned aesthetically as an inspiration to promote the Japanese invasion of China (Hiroshi Yoshioka).

Sand dunes and sea waves are dramatically portrayed as sharing the same liquidity of movement and the same erotic power of destruction, preservation and purification. The secret of sand, as provocatively deployed in Kobo Abe's classic novel *The Woman in the Dunes*, lies in the underground presence of both woman and of water. In this story, man's spiritual pursuit is manifested in his encounter with a woman whose dwelling is erected at the bottom of a deep sand pit. Starting out unwillingly as captives of the sand struggling for their survival, the couple ends up being, each in their own way, lovers *in* and *of* the sand. Human predicament and the nature of the male protagonist's quest for the hidden truth of sand is revealed on both sexual and spiritual planes, in woman skin and flesh, as self and knowledge mingles with sand, sex and water. The man could feel the dampness, he could hear and smell water long before he finally learns to make it rise to visibility. The moment he liberates himself and sets about to leave the desert is also the moment he no longer feels imprisoned within sand walls, having "discovered" the secret of sand, whose power lies in its ability to attract moisture and act as a pump for the vast network of: *subsurface water*. Life buried in the hole has enabled him to see in loneliness "an unsatisfied thirst for illusion," and having found water in the sand, he has found a new self.

Native Americans of ancient called the desert the place of divine revelation. An infinite container for deeper and deeper streams of life, it is where healing, cleansing and transmutation of the earth-self are likely to happen. Experiencing the splendor of the external—a beauty that is always there in view, ready for enjoyment—one may unexpectedly catch a glimpse of an innerscape of extremes, whose bare, raw and wild truths require that we learn to listen afresh to the secret melody of the earthen body. Wind and water wash everything away. Absent in their omnipresence, they leave ground-shifting marks of their passage everywhere in the desert. Not only do they incessantly modify the skin surface of the land, they also restructure and reshape it in their every movement.

The power of erosion can at times be most unsettling: one may return to a favorite spot in the canyons desert only to find that in the gap of a few months, the work of wind and water has carved an enormous, long winding passage there where there used to be a hollow dip on the ground. The dramatic shift reminds us how in the creation of openings, fissures and holes, for example, the earth reveals itself in its continual activities of disintegration, congregation and sedimentation to be primarily not solid mass, but particles in constant process of detachment, or of formation and re-formation. Through the earth's trans-formations, we are able to visualize our own shifts of consciousness. Contemplating the desert's varied life zones and their imperceptible but unceasing re-arrangement of boulders, cliffs, dunes, hills and valleys is witnessing our self and the world from the inside out.

As a number of women writers also have it, desert life has a performatively marked gender. It is often related to women's lives whose waters are carefully preserved as source of creation and hydration of the depths. A feminine symbol widely associated with the mother and the Anima of man, water is also the secret for an ageless skin and an ever-appealing fleshy substance. Living intimately with secretions, blood, sweat, tears and thirst, women are known to be effortless connoisseurs of fluids and bodies of water of all kinds. In many societies of West Africa, for example, the tasks of fetching

and conserving water for the family, as well as that of offering it to the visitor, devolve upon women. “A woman is a river whose flow nobody can stem,” says a Joola proverb, and she who has just given birth is said to “have drunk water.”

Desert life in its intense and condensed form further exemplifies how “small is beautiful.” The secret of living lies in the unseen root of things that hold on to the last drop of rain or in the lonely bright red flower that blooms on rocky soil and never fails to catch desert goers by surprise. For the women who are commonly compelled to hide their well in consideration for their male counterpart, life on the ground may appear sparse and finite, but life underground offers indefinite non-manifested possibilities. Water has radically no form, despite the multiplicities of shapes it takes. It precedes all forms and sustains all creations. In its deep manifestations, it is the secret buried in the very heart of the desert—that world between worlds, so intense both in its emptiness and in its oddly interiorized life forms.

Earthfires, Bodylight, Uncanny Hybrids

In the pulses of the desert heart, everything we happen to cast our eyes upon seem to be imbued with a light that shines through countless forgotten windows to show us our possibilities in inter-being. Once the desert has grown into us, we start drinking insatiably from the glow of a rock. Some places, by their location, shape and materiality, attract and focus invisible energies; they breathe and throb with life. No wonder, desert lovers each have their own “sacred” site, to which they repeatedly return to experience a radical change in their *well-being*.

Greetings

He touched the huge rock, caressed its surface, felt its texture, followed its contour and tapped at different places, listening inquisitively to the sound released. For a few seconds, JPB was nowhere to be found but there, entirely caught in the passage from his fingers to the mass of harden earth. Carried away in some intense, barely audible monologue. “There he goes,” Carolyn sighed, “speaking to them rocks again”(Carolyn Pan).

A few minutes ago, the desert in view may be a mere rocky expanse without mystery. But now the red dirt swirls; a rabbit appears as if from nowhere, hopping and fleeing fast; and suddenly, the rock lives in all vibrancy. Somewhere an unseen life is radiating; something appears, disappears and reappears. Sitting still in a spot surrounded by steep canyons, under a crystalline blue sky as clear as water, one may feel cleansed as if coming out from an air bath, savoring the quiet grandeur of the landscape whose impact deepens and refines the quality of the presence one feels in one’s body. Breathtaking is the vastness of both expanse and silence. As the desert unfolds itself cliff by cliff, in hues of red, orange, ocher, purple and grey, or of sage green and ash white, one finds oneself overwhelmed not just by the majestic beauty but also by the luminous aura of the place.

* Encased texts in *italics* are events I have observed, stories I’ve been told, and statements directly quoted from JPB (Jean-Paul Bourdier) and members of his team of collaborators (also referred to as “models-performers”), whose names or initials are specified accordingly.

The salty desert bath

She stirred and paused. He stood motionless. Overcome by emotion, he bent down to look into the camera, blinded again and again by a flashflood of tears, drinking in the miraculous sight in front of him, which had taken both painter-photographer and model-performer all day to create. He swallowed his sobs only to hear someone else sobbing nearby. Andrew was behind him looking at the same sight. Tuned to the same rhythm of the desert, moved to tears by the magic of light and by the human form suspended between sky and earth, they were returning to water. With blinded sight, JPB began shooting almost mechanically through the lens of in-sight—and of photo's graph.

Red Desert, Red Butte, Black Ridge, Lower Blue Hills, Mahogany Mountains, White Mesa, Black Mesa, Vermillion Cliffs, Valley of the Gods: watching the desert's ever-shifting faces color up, one effortlessly turns oneself, body of the earth, into a chameleon. From one season, one hour, one minute to the next, the landscape changes—slowly, subtly, or dramatically, with colors barely perceptible at certain times of the day and becoming more and more vivid at others, such as during photography's magic hours of sunrise and sunset. In experiencing the tone, the moods, the texture, the volume, the dynamism, and the hues of the place—in brief, the way the *fires* of the earth light up according to weather, season and the trajectory of the sun—the reptilian part of the brain takes over.

Monkey Me

"As soon as I have expectations, I build a nice prison for myself. And, Fear is a well-staged prison of mine. In fact, I have quite a few lined up and I happily sway from one to the other. Hate to lust to greed to joy and ecstasy, and more, day in day out, as a merry go round. After all, isn't the monkey a totem animal for both monks and painters?"

—JPB

Chameleon Music

"Images are as much about the outside and the inside. Through colors, I enter the eviscerated body, which is a beautiful musical instrument (and this is what I am often oblivious to)... In rediscovering its song, I am endowed with the magical power of rendering and altering its musical qualities. With paint and photography, I can bring to the fore the 'unreal' nature of our human reality.

Painting a body enables me to look candidly at my best defense against the world. Don't the mental images we have of ourselves come with colors that allow us to protect ourselves accordingly, like a chameleon, depending on the circumstances and their environments? Or else, should I say, let's paint with bright, saturated colors, precisely because there's no need for any camouflage when we celebrate the star nature of the body and its resonance with the universe...

I am enwrapped by a large prison in cellophane and guess what I find imprinted on its wall? My thoughts in all fonts, sizes and colors. But mostly in gold, as if they were inscribed for eternity and I had to believe in everyone of them as in absolute truths." —JPB

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To return to the core of one's animal, vegetal, and mineral being is to enter in an intimately *erotic* relationship with other lives, other matters and forces. One is endowed, through the chameleon body, not merely with the skill to imitate nature, but also with the gift of either taking on the hue that hides one best or of blending oneself with one's expressive surrounding, by lighting up to the bright, unseen colors of inner life. Living in a climate of fear, with the threat that the enemy is always after us, we often wish externally to disappear in the ambient milieu so as not to stand out, but internally, disorder, terror, panic and other feelings in the gamut of contrasting emotions have their own way of appearing and coloring us. The function of art is then to open the rock or the body matter to its invisible dimension.

A sip of the desert is a gift of light and darkness. With our innerscape exteriorized and lined in with the surrounding landscape, the other who is our enemy proves to be no other than our self. A tortured, dried up tree trunk strikes the artist's imagination by its bizarrely gnarled formation and caressing it, the latter marvels over the workings of centuries of telluric growths, of sweeping winds and swirling waters. On the opposite spectrum, each small standing tree also opens onto a tough and strangely impressive world of survival. Set wild with admiration for the green of its rounded canopy of branches—a true garden of its own in the desert—the artist returns to the roots of (non) being. The light streaming through the trembling umbrella of scaly foliage makes it appear highly surreal amidst the cool nakedness of sand dunes. Sometimes the tree hangs precariously on top of a sandstone cliff, reminding us of our fellow mortals to whom we are bound in our collective effort to surpass ourselves, whether in staying alive, or in dying. The contact with the skin, flesh and fires of the earth sends our body pulsing onward toward new creations of ourselves.

Tree Body and the Four Colors

"Why this excitement to work with a tree? Deep down I feel its roots spreading from me. Trunk, branches and foliage: such are my torso, limbs and head. I find myself happily competing with it to reach toward the sky while yearning secretly to remain grounded to earth reality. Trees are perfect witnesses; they live longer than we do.

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Colors are light and life. They come to me with the precision of the moment, the way they come to a canvas in its process of manifesting. It's a vibration that puts us in touch with the song of the earth—as in Chinese and Fulani cosmologies, where the four colors correspond to the four moods, seasons and cardinal directions. Colors mark a resonance with the moment and paint pigments are exclamation marks. They render the wonder of being able to say "Oh this...and that!"

"The fire of the earth is directly connected to the base of my spine"

—JPB

Through the lone presence of an exuberant offshoot of life, one's bodyscape is vivified. The white salt, the ocher, grey, and black dust cover all bones, while sand, dirt and clay stick and seep in through every pore until one's body feels like the red clay one walks on. The physical body, in its states of erotic arousal and of intense sensory experience, can transport us elsewhere, onto new flights of imagination and new depths of insight. An overdose of heat or cold, or else a rain that turns the ground into prohibitive mud easily induces one to a vegetative and lizard state of mind: basking under the sun; sleeping or glinting about on the rocks; moving with the speed of a desert

tortoise; spreading, folding and hopping like a frog; or coiling, gliding in curves like a rattlesnake.

Here, where the light pours into our flesh and the heat, like rays from fire, stirs up currents in our blood, the mind forgets but the body remembers: human, animal, vegetal and mineral bodies standing still, walking, jumping, lying, burrowing, branching, crawling, winding, rolling, slithering on rocks, springing from the earth or sinking in the vast expanse of white. There, where there is no place to hide, one is found. The desert? It is what takes birth within, and paints itself on the watcher's skin.

Sea Luster

"Everything comes out from the dark. Our imagination dares to reach out to the future, but to not much avail, for we keep on groping in darkness as every event in our lives reminds us. Years ago, while snorkeling and swimming in Kauai, I became wildly interested in the vast variety and beauty of the fish patterns and colors. I started gathering photographs of the most striking species and showed these to our desert performing teams. Sometimes we would look at them for inspiration. The saturated colors of these fishes seemed to give them a luminescent mobility in the darkness of the ocean's depths, and they struck me as perfect examples of our own lives. Having known that we are made of light, I keep on forgetting how light is most intense in obscurity; mine is born from the vast unknown, and not the other way around."

—JPB

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Clear water, viscous water, sandy water. Stagnant, muddy, oozy, slimy or else, cool, slick, icy and frozen. In the desert, the cold, the blue, the barred meet the hot, the red, and the naked. The body's carnal garment swells, distends and melts; it stiffens and frosts, and threatens to shrink, dry up or even petrify in the way of wood and stone. Facing the stillness of the land, one stands still, feeling equally bare. The grace of a body stripped of its clothes, shedding its old skin and mutating from one color to another tells of a narrative larger than our personal story.

Now on the memory page, a Mandé story of creation told by Fadjima Kanté to Youssouf Tata Cissé surfaces: Moon and Sun are born from the same mother, Proper. One day, Moon caught her in her bath. She contemplated her mother tirelessly and exclaimed: "Ah, mother, how beautiful you are!" "Child," said the mother, "every time you appear in public, may everyone stare at you without reservation." Some time after, it was Sun's turn to catch his mother in her bath. He immediately looked away and fled as fast as he could, opening successively seven doors and closing them behind him, before ducking his head under a bed sheet. His mother came to him and said: "Child, every time you appear in public, may anyone who tries to stare at you have his or her eyes filled with tears."

Such is the strength of beauty, and of shame—the beauty and the shame of seeing into our nature and appearing as such *in public*—that on the one hand, it leads to unbounded exaltation, and on the other, it sends the seer bolting through seven openings and closures, and landing in a fragile hiding place for recovery. It is particularly moving to recognize in this Mandé story what, in ancient Asian thought is viewed as a passage through seven veils of illusion in the deepening of our

understanding of the self and the world. Each veil dissolved enables us to absorb a differently unseen layer of the nature of life.

For many of us, it is difficult to see the (naked) body as such. Not only our perceptions are always mediated, they are also conditioned by an indefinite reservoir of images we have stored and continue to increase in our memory. Through the lens of habit and knowledge, the latter continues to filter our sensations and inform our experience. The view of the same unclothed bathing body—a body in the process of *cleaning* and *shedding* itself (of the external grim or riches it has acquired)—can give rise to widely controversial responses concerning what's *proper* and what's not in public display.

Whetting My Appetite

"...frightening, then fascinating and then a peaceful encounter with myself. Being with JPB makes me feel [I am] right there. There's no future, no past. Everything vanishes after appearing suddenly. There's no sorrow, no regret. Just like the desert, where places are distant from every time. And: being naked in the (cold) desert makes you feel really hungry in the morning!"
— S. B.

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The creation of the nude is as old as the existence of art itself. A phenomenon deeply rooted in the European humanist tradition and one that has become nature to European cultures, it provides a link across historical times and across the arts—including painting, sculpture, graphic design and photography. Since only humans can be nude, nudity is what makes us stand apart from nature. The pose of the classical nude, which arrests the gaze and captivates desire, exposes Being, or the fixity of what, in the light of Western philosophies, used to stand as essence and ultimately, as truth: the primary, archetypical, delimited form beyond which one cannot go.

More recently however, a critical distinction has been made between nakedness and nudity, and the nude is analyzed as no more than a way of seeing. Contrary to common opinion that equates the removal of clothing with freedom from civilization, nudity is shown to be already a form of clothing. As John Berger puts it in his BBC series on *Ways of Seeing*, to be on display is "to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise.... She is not naked as she is. She is naked as the spectator sees her."

Cyborg's Eye

"I see beautiful pictures through your camera; but I see Beauty through your eyes."
— L.M. (to JPB)

In Ancient Chinese arts, the nude as essence of being does not seem to have existed. For, here form is transient, reality is a process, and the human body is conceived in its becoming as a site for subtle energy flow. Excelling in mastering the body's internal and external laws, Chinese culture depicts it as inseparable from the land, the sky and the immediate environment. Acupuncture and geomancy go hand in hand, and thus in painting, sea, waves, fog, trees, mountains and rocks share the same internal constancy despite the continual transmutation of their forms.

A rock is relevantly named "root of the clouds" for, as the painter Mi Fu explained, in their emptiness, clouds, which "are the recapitulation of the landscape," conceal in them features of mountains and methods of water. Attentive to moments of

transition, attracted to the twilight state of things, and focused on form as it addresses the formless, East Asian traditional arts had little interest for anatomy per se which, as François Jullien remarks, corresponds to the Greek taste for analysis.

Waiting for the Cows

"Since my brother told me the clouds made the photographs, I am all eye at the camera window, waiting for them as one expects cows to appear in a green grassy field."

—JPB

While in Chinese arts, the only painting of nudity found in manuals of love proved, in their depiction of the naked body, to be neither stylized nor anatomized, but rather schematized (an empty, shapeless bag of bones and water), in Western classical paintings of landscape, the nude isolates and removes man from nature. Rather than embodying it, Jullien affirms, man is enclosed in his consciousness. The background recedes as it only serves as a décor against which the nude invariably stands out. The same applies to photography whose nudes are often either shot against a uniform ground of black or white, or they remain indoors—in the privacy of a studio or in the intimacy of a homely interior. Thus, photography functions in such a context as a kind of peep hole giving access to what is considered to be secret and confidential, and the representation of the nude addresses voyeurism primarily in its privileged, privatized and forbidden form.

Desert Mirages

"My partner and I became experts at Jean-Paul-isms, we could mimic him very well, even when it came to eating: 'If you think about tasting the ice cream, you cannot taste it. If you taste the ice cream, you're not thinking about it'... Perhaps it was the new heat of spring, but...the ice cream we enjoyed at night created for the day, a sensuous perspective where Rosetta hills became raspberry cream puffs and its perforated white rocks turned into cavity-ridden teeth, fallen from the mouths of giants, dry with decay."

—M.P.

He is the spectator and She is the model. In the conventional framework of power relationships, the spectator is always presumed to be a man. Women's bodies are made to appeal to his sexuality, and it is primarily for the pleasure of his eye that they are put on display. Although such a relationship may still structure the consciousness of many onlookers, there have always been exceptions that challenge it. It is also common among body art artists and models to play with conventions and to turn them head over heels. Not only female nudes are no longer offered to view in supine, submissive positions, they also hardly appear as mere spectacles of essentialized feminine beauty. Distributed across genders, the ugly, bitchy and nerdy have lost their power to segregate or to shock, while the plastically ideal and the anatomized model form has become just one among the many possibilities opened up.

In actual contexts where Man is being watched upon as the very strange, abnormal and pervert species on earth, the more recent myths that appeal to the youths of our times are, for example, those of the cyborg and the humanoid robot, or of their counter-parts—the singular warriors-without-technology who rely solely on their inner strengths and bodily skills to face the hostilities of the world: the surreptitiously flying ninja, the crouching-tiger and hidden-dragon strugglers, the choreographic Kung-Fu fighters, and other adapted versions of the Asian martial-arts body that allow for new combinations in endless permutations.

Body Interface

In JPB's list of suggestions to his performers, the body at play follows certain rules of thumb; I read among others: "You're a mime; a marionette manipulated by strings. You always move very slowly. You move within geometrical shapes, proceed like an automat. Explore and manifest the contortions of mind. Feel from within what your instincts tell you, and at the same time, be a screen through which the landscape can be seen and felt. Listen to your mind but don't cling to it more than 3.5 seconds. No limits to what you may try; no judging eyes looking at you. Remain creative; one project can become many. If you don't like a project but would do it anyway, go as far as you can in bringing up the negative feelings. If a project does not inspire you, simply don't do it."

Today's young men and women tend to perform their nudity more inclusively: both in its full particularities (whether these are 'proper' to the (male) eye or not) and in its friendly impersonal anonymity. Anti-essentialism can be just as boring as essentialism. The play on gender and its ambivalence can go hand in hand with the fearless assumption of one's physical identity. This requires that risks often be taken in the representation of bodies. Reactive anti-aesthetics are also aesthetics. Rather than working at freeing the women's bodies from their subjection to dominant criteria of beauty by re-appropriating the spectacle of the monstrous, the hideous and the hysteric, as certain feminist contributions richly did, one can also take the risk of presenting that friendly "hybrid" whose uncanny beauty today's youth positively assumes and unashamedly flaunts in public display.

To be bare and wild is to be in a state of possibility. Although unconscious or deliberate complicity with the dominant mentality is always lurking beneath every way of seeing, neither mere negation nor mere affirmation in social and artistic performance seems to appeal to these mutants' chameleon bodies. None of the traditions previously mentioned fully apply to the photographs presented, which are sites of multiple encounters (including those between Eastern and Western cultures), where the luminous human shape stands with and stands out, but not necessarily against or apart from the landscape. Making ingenious use of the potential of framing and of the two dimensional nature of the photographic image, bodies and bodyscapes are caught in the course of their transformation, as some set out to prolong or blend in with the lines, volumes and colors of the landscape.

The star-like, spider-like Da Vinci figure with its connotation of ideal proportions and equations sporadically appears, only to join in the series of photographs that play on gender, number and humanity ambivalences. To stretch across identities all the while being one's own self requires continuous inventions from a wide range of human, simian and cyborg appearances. Chameleon bodies no longer seem to find it more desirable to wait for nightlight to be gazed at and exalted without reservation. Indifferent to a certain loss of mystery and having not much to hide on the surface, they prefer to appear in full daylight, deliberately challenging our senses. For, as *properly* divined, to this day no one can prevent tears from welling up when staring straight at the sun.

To Be Carmine 2 Red

"JPB showed us his first idea. Me in red. In the water among tall teepee salt slats. My arms raised thanking the heavens. Red. B and I loved the color red. It was perfect.... I dipped my fingers in some water, smeared them on the paint cake and started painting my left forearm and hand. When I had finished, I held my red hand against the blue, cloudless sky. It was so surreal. I remember feeling like I was being photoshopped into the world. At

the same time, I felt like I was disappearing from the real life world, at least temporarily. I was seeing the environment differently in my mind and B and JPB were seeing me differently as well.... I was happily painting my face, ignoring what was going on with those two. I was going to paint myself out of existence in the normal world and into my new world. Eventually, B and JPB were painting me with their fingers. It was understandable that they were rushing. The light was disappearing. The light is always disappearing. Only sometimes reappearing....

In the water, facing the mountain in the stillness of the early evening, I barely heard instructions from JPB. I knew the pose. I had my arms raised and took in each breath as if it were a thankful breath because each was. It was a little cool, but I was still thankful to be there. To be naked. To be the beautiful Carmine 2 red. To be photographed. To hear the new sound of the Hasselblad. The click, the buzz and the wind. All bad was drowned out at the time." —Carolyn Pan

The Creative Gesture, The Liquid Image

The physical body is luminous matter. Experienced as weight and density, but also as light, it is altogether surface, substance, movement and trajectory. In the desert, the sunlight bursts out everywhere. Silence, stillness and the freedom of space find their way into our eyes, our laughter, our limbs, our flesh and our skin. The simultaneously internal and external pull towards the world of rich in-betweens has the potential to awaken our deepest desire for recreation. Returned to our own selves as raw material, we find resonances in other bodies, and in our mutually tactile responses, we each feel the need to quench our thirst, digging deep and high into our well while turning its insides out. Bared, we yearn to refashion ourselves, working at altering our old skin, and entering the desert through the liquid state of becoming.

From Blank Canvas to Pure Color

"One of the greatest memories I have of the 'bodyscape' experience is the process of transforming from a blank canvas to pure color—everything from choosing the colors, mixing the pigment, and brushing the paint on bare skin. It was incredible to actually feel the energy of the color on our bodies and to become that color and to look around and see nature's beauty from every direction. It was truly an awakening experience to feel so connected to earth, in such a colorful way."

—S. G

A nude in the desert may be a sculptural object of beauty and eroticism, but a painted nude in the desert is, a flower of wilderness. It is from the skin that we appear, and it is on the skin that our desert shows itself. If the denuded body is a tantalizing disguise, the painted body is a radical fiction; one, however, that can remain at times closer to truth than any bare skin nudity can be. "The most profound is the skin," wrote the poet Paul Valéry. It is no mere coincidence that the Warlpiri people of Australia organize kinship group identifications around skin names, the way certain African and Asian peoples use distinctive body paint patterns to distinguish their group members.

Bearing a skin name and learning to identify one's skin siblings is the primary condition for all interactions with these Dreamers of the desert, whose ancestors

traveled in Dreamtime across the length and width of the dry land before trans-forming themselves into stars. In modern societies, the skin issue has become highly charged in its negative connotations, and we are constantly reminded of the paradoxically not-so-skin-deep problem of our times of racial prejudices. As amply exemplified in struggles around the world, what continues to separate us on the color line is this delicate membrane that protects the self from the outer world, determines its visibility and specific appearance while defining both its physical and social identity.

Body painting, like rock painting, is an ancient cultural manifestation that remains widespread in many parts of the world. In our modern society, body painting may appear as a form of mere adornment, largely restricted to tattooing among certain groups and to make up in performing arts such as those of clowns and mimes. We are used to the popularized “painted faces” of Chinese opera, Kabuki theater, Bali dances, or Brazilian carnivals, for example. We are also used to the fierce look of war-painting common among warriors preparing to go into battle. But of widespread practice in many African, Asian, South American and Oceania societies, is people’s use of their skin both as a means of protection and of expression, and as a medium for aesthetics, social and spiritual manifestations.

Naked like divinities, and skin-clad in the splendor of colors. *Colors are the flowers of freedom blooming from within (JPB)*. They mark a person’s external appearance while also bringing out the inner self. Their transfiguring effects on the body are manifold. They put us in contact with nature and with the raw, the untouched and ineffable within us. At the same time, they turn us into non-natural beings and remove us from the constraints of everyday life while opening the way to experiences of the preternatural and the extra-terrestrial. In turning the skin into a canvas for the imagination, on which they exert their artistic talents, practitioners around the world also nurture their spiritual creativity. Through the painted look, a body is transformed into a living sculpture, lit up by its godly colors and awaked to its magical powers of tuning in with the cosmos.

Painting

“To paint is to become a cloud

Cloud brushes make holes in the blue sky

Cloud brushes paint the earth

Life constantly renews itself as so many tiny or large vivid fireworks on the night sky. To paint with saturated, mostly primary colors, is to celebrate these random apparitions and to play with what we are made of: light. To paint is to create a guidebook. Go this way, turn right, follow the river, and on top of the hill, you’ll reach home.

To paint is to forget the verbs and like a baby say: red, arm, rock, toe, sky. To paint is simply to say Yes, Yes, Yes to this infinite dance, to see all colors, all forms as intimately one. It’s a way of looking at ourselves and asking anew the old question: ‘who am I, what are we? ‘Rather than saying ‘I am’, one can say ‘I human,’ ‘I sand,’ ‘I sea,’ ‘I cloud.’ Painting is expanding the limits of our body and dancing to its indefinite potentials.”

—JPB

* * *

Lives on earth thrive on water. In painting, Chinese artists of ancient learnt first and foremost to give life to the horizontal line. A living entity, the line is referred to as a creature of nature, fully endorsed in its constitution with a skeleton, flesh and vital energy. Not only each line is unique in its multiplicity of appearances, it also stands

fundamentally as that from which thousand of characters take shape. Every artist is required to undergo an indefinite period of practicing the art of gathering and rendering “bones,” (the material appearances of the indestructible force of life) until they are ready to feel the undercurrents and to flesh them out.

To draw a line, one would have to see “with one’s heart,” and reproduce the line in its bone, marrow and flesh altogether. Every external envelope has its internal movement, and every manifestation is experienced as being at once definite in its materiality and indefinite in its fluidity. A person is often referred to as “a skin bag of bones and water,” and the challenge in painting, sculpting and photographing lies precisely in the rendering of the water element that gives the flesh its fleshiness.

Body Canvas and The Red Thread

“To paint a body is most challenging. Not only the support is soft and bends under the slightest pressure, but it is also pushing away or pulling in the brush (and the hand or the fingers) as its contours are always changing. Any work on the line, if it were to remain consistent, seems at first impossible, for one needs to adapt these to continuously changing parameters, which for anyone trained to paint and draw on a canvas or a flat, solid board is scarcely imaginable.... To paint is to continue the line; one that goes in all directions at the same time and spreads like an infinite thread of blood.” —JPB

When a work lies at the intersection of several arts, questions regarding its nature never fail to arise. Is it photography or painting? And with this, is it body art, land art, sculpture, performance, design, gymnastics, dance or acrobatics? The work of preparation for each photographic “project” presented involves more than one art and is largely collaborative: feeling the landscape; following its lines, volumes and textures; scouting and selecting the specific location; exploring the colors and designs; setting up, spreading out, sculpting, working with the lay of the land; and finally, painting the bodies are some of the team efforts that contribute to the realization of the project as it is framed on celluloid. Here, rather than being a mere recording of an encounter between event and photographer, the photograph is an event of its own: a long-prepared and waited-for event—yet full of unexpected moments—that is less a reflection of what is already a reflection of reality (the painted surface), than a still manifestation of an encounter between desert light, body light and camera eye.

Painting a body is a sensual experience for both painter and painted subject. The team develops a tactile conversation among themselves. Far from being a neutral canvas, each body has its own skin texture and dynamics, and how it interacts with the painter’s impulses depends largely on the state of its energy flow. The soft and uneven terrains of the torsos and limbs respond intimately to the contact of the artist’s fingers, palm or brush, at the same time as they lively act upon the paint work. Curvy, bumpy, angular, pliant, and resistant, they invite the painter to follow the lines of the body, with attention to the muscular movements and to the characteristics of its salient features. To spend all one’s energy in the labor of art, to struggle physically with the earth’s elements is also a way of earning the desert. The harsher the conditions are, the more intense the experience of its hidden wealth.

Body Skin, House Skin

“The body as dwelling is as malleable as a pottery. Air, earth water, light: the four elements of the universe, the house, the body, paint. It is as if the vernacular architecture of the world’s remote societies, which I’ve so keenly studied and got inspiration from, is now made available at my own scale—the intimate scale

that relates dwellings to dwellers, and results from an independent practice of building not intended for exchange on the market. People decorate their house facades and interiors the way they decorate their own skin, spending long hours, days or even months cutting into its surface, painting it and changing its nature like sculptors. The body is a most intimate house. To touch it with light is to affirm its obscure nooks and corners.

— JPB

In its creative process, the photographic event can draw much of its criteria from Chinese pictorial art, not so much in the precision of its brush-ink techniques, as in the core impact of its calligraphy—referred to as a living organism. The painted line, which represents both form and volume, is spoken of, for example, as affirming life or as “lacking muscles and tension,” and its “unctuousness” as “lacking music.” The line has its “mood” and “taste”; its bone-structure is commented upon as being too strong or too weak, or else, limp and spineless; its skin coloration comes in a range of tonalities whose effects are: gradual, wash, soaked, broken, splattered and superimposed; its flesh may look sick, excessive, or alive; and its movement is described as the unfurling of “a crashing wave” or the tumbling of a stone, “ready to split and burst open.” The medium is explored in its variances of dryness and wetness, its concentrated and diluted states, its thickness and fineness. Ultimately, the line should not “lack water,” and what keeps it alive is the ability to manifest: the sap in a stem, the marrow in the bone, the blood, the milk, and the moisture in the flesh.

One may replace “the painted line” in the above paragraph by the photographic event and translate the creative process and its impact on the onlooker accordingly, in equivalent terms. Indeed, the photograph has its mood, sap, sound, rhythms, laughter, silliness, humor, and for one of its model-participants, it can even bear a fresh licking-good candy-and ice-cream look. Rather than speaking of the intercourse of brush (that gives substance and form) and ink (that captures color and light), which is considered to be at the root of all theories of Chinese painting, one can invoke the sexual union in photography, of lens and light. (*Light* refers to the overall process of visibility and *lens* designates both the instrument and its effects, involving distance, depth and framing.) It is through the interplay of camera lenses and light that the thousand and one rays of the universe are captured and given form.

A project takes time to grow into visibility. And since the light shifts with the time of the day, even when the project is ready in its materialization, the photographer has to wait for the right light to expose it on film with the corresponding camera aperture. The movements of the daylight may be slow and sometimes expected as far as photography’s glamorous hours are concerned, but the living presence of each moment remains wildly unpredictable. The skin of the miles-long mountains may appear dull when the sun disappears behind grey clouds, but they sparkle and radiate with colors of ever-changing hues when the sun returns, especially right after a sprinkle of rain. Most photographs were taken when the sun is in its transitional states, rising in the mist, setting in a dying glow, or in the course of going in and coming out from a cloud.

With a sunbath, the charm of the carnal presence is brought to relief by the flaming colors painted and the fluidity of the bodily contours. Like the humid mud of dried riverbeds—the trace of a gift from the sky-and-earth intercourse—the human bodies shine wet in their paint and sweat, as their exposed skin drinks in the light, imprinting the sky and mountains on location. To paraphrase the Little Prince, what beautifies these photographs of bare-bones landscape are the traces of that very last *drop of water* in the desert: the singular human form in its pulsing, fleshy and colorful light. Again, what one comes to visualize and to set into visibility in the desert is one’s own hidden well—the flesh and marrow that hold the bone structure alive, or else, the spark of life in its watery course.

The One Color

"Our projects are manifestations of air and earth coming together in the process of all creations. So the body is mostly seen against the horizon line (rendering more visible our being accidental to the vast universe). The primary color of our palette, the one that constantly hovers over every decision we take in selecting colors and inventing designs, is the color of the sky. Each photograph should contain both earth and sky. Despite the recurring temptation in close-ups to focus on the ground, who could resist the lure of the vast azure?" —JPB

* * *

In the art of working with nature's writing, the photographer creates a melodious contrast between the painted nudes and the empty landscape of extremes. The co-presence gives the scene an uncanny character. One contemplates awestricken the bone sculpture, for example, of the canyons desert being enlivened by the few touches of luminescent bodies. In the confrontation and the coming together of the dry and the moist, the hard and the liquid, one recognizes the relationship of mountain and water as animated by emptiness, which Chinese arts considered to be a synecdoche for the very conditions of nature. As the painter Shih-T'ao put it:

"'Scattered,' 'dense,' 'deep,' and 'far' express the spacing of mountains and rivers. The vertical and the horizontal, concealment and disclosure, are the rhythms of mountains and rivers.... Water and sky, meeting and parting suggest the connectedness of mountains and rivers. Squatting, leaping, facing towards and turning away are the movements of mountains and rivers."

Ultimately, the play between heaven and earth turns out to be not a movement of two, but rather a ternary relationship of heaven-man-earth. For, the eye that receives and intercepts desert's writing is the same eye through which the desert sees the artist-photographer. Through the latter's creative power, the task of art is then to activate the relationship between the spiritual and the sensual, and to open the dry desert landscape to its liquid dimension.

Facing Toward The Hills

"Body and earth are one. If the body is seen from the back, the front becomes an open field, a place that cannot yet be identified (identity is usually affirmed from the front), a place of possibility.

The body often turns its back to the camera. It is not offered to the onlooker as an object of desire. It's just there."
—JPB

For Confucius, "the man of heart is charmed by the mountain; the man of spirits delights in water." In exploring light and lens, the work of photography can manifest the life forces—the élan, the dynamism, the inner strength or the spiritual spark—that generate the image. One of the characteristics that mark the experience in canyons land, are its vertiginous points of ascent and descent. Bodies of light, but also bodies of flesh, the photographed bright creatures of rocks, sand, and wind appear eerily on the edge of a cliff, taking their flight midway in the air, squatting and leaping in the blue, as if they were born from the sky. They are also seen sinking halfway beneath the earth surface, barely emerging with one foot or one hand above, sprouting from a cavity of the rocky soil, crawling out of a bentonite-hill crevasse, coiling in a niche of the canyon wall,

rolling, piling up or spreading themselves on a boulder, thus visibly wallowing in the pleasure of being *grounded*.

But more adequately, perhaps, the bodies (not abstracted, not anatomized but *schematized* through the way they are painted) are caught in their amphibian life: between identities, between living states; between the aerial and the tellurian, heaven and earth, or void and water. This is most striking, when for example, the blue of mutual reflections blends in sky and lake, leaving the viewer at a loss as to which side is the upper side of the photograph. Emphasis is given to the ephemeral, accidental, incomplete and nonsensical—in other words, to aspects that escape human calculations and rationalizations. Further, the play on scale and gravity in the choreography of movements and poses features the lived body powerfully as both: light and density.

To escape gravity is also to acknowledge its vital role in our human vision and physical world. Throwing oneself into space could then be seen simultaneously as a downward rise and an upward fall since while in the void, there's no up and down, high and low, and what is ultimately affirmed in our "flight" is our terrestrial condition as beings of gravity. Losing it, we find it in our core living. Through the dexterity of photographic timing and framing, the bodies appears suspended, at once uplifted and grounded, even as they walk upside down and take to the void, jumping, swirling, dancing high, flying and falling, free.

Mushroom Life

"In the beginning all the projects were about the mushroom conditions of being. How could we materialize our being fed by darkness and humidity, our springing out of the ground for a short time-limit before melting again into the earth." —JPB

Every step taken in the desert is a step taken under watch. One goes there in search of "peace" and finds oneself tuning in with the mutability of the earth. One by one the desert takes away the beliefs one has of oneself. For, everything moves in the desert. Nothing is ever the same. To watch the light travel across the cliff; or to witness a lake shifting its location minute by minute with the wind's movement across the infinite surface of the salt and clay, one has to dig oneself into a place and become a desert. Otherwise, in the desert, nothing moves. Sky power dominates. One walks into the silence of death and sees waves of mountains, rocks and sand with no movement. For, every excursion into the desert is an excursion into the self. One enters the desert when one is a desert. In the glimpse one gets of one's own canyons terrain, one notes how the passage of wind, water and fire have so corroded the canyon landscape as to give its appearances a look, at once utterly peaceful and perilous, of *mobile* eternity.

The Still Image

"All photographs are about keeping still while moving.

I am interested in the cutting-sword-like quality of photography because it captures both the vitality of the instant and its illusive quality (the instant has already disappeared and the photo is always past). Its nature is similar to the one found in the camera mirror mechanism and in our own life process: a rapidly revolving mirror whose reflective side says: 'Here it is' and whose opaque side says: 'Here it is not.'

The magic of photography lies in its ability not to prolong the moment for further consumption, but to dilate the instant to the point of no instant. It's as if we were dispersed on an imaginary super-thin sphere in constant flux with darkness forming one of

its side and light forming the other. In the light, the moment we live; in the dark, the same moment already gone.

No scale, no space, no time: this is the photographic moment.
—JPB

Photography is said to begin and end with appearances. But in the desert, nothing is as fixed as it appears. Identities shift with light and time minute by minute. What we come to watch on the surface is not necessarily what we come to know, unknowingly. The landscape of bare bones as well as of constant mirages has taught us much about our illusions. In this zone of solitude and freedom, material form shows itself to be clearly only one dimension of reality. Paradoxically photography, whose dominant function is to record the 'real', can be one of the ideal media to enable one to dream while standing firm on the ground.

Images of bodies at once diffused and concentrated show their presences as unique and yet as changeable as the colors of the desert and the reflections of sky and water. While remaining recognizable, erotically female or male despite the recurring play on gender ambivalence, the photographed body exceeds its physical limits. It exposes itself to an indefinite number of onlooker at the same time as it retains its inaccessibility. Its power lies in this paradox of the one and the many, of the undivided and the shared body, and while its vibrant physicality draws us intimately to it and to our own, it doesn't unveil, confide or express any psychological interiority. It is there as form in emptiness—a response to nature's writing.

Who's Looking?

"Staying with a photograph, one may feel the energy of the photographer's eye. That energy often tends to 'grasp' the object. What interests me, rather, is an energy that comes forward from the landscape or from the bodies, one that remains dispersed in the flatness of the image and leaves us wondering: 'Who's looking?'"

—JPB

Every visible form has an invisible face of its own. It is the longing for the buried well that gives the desert its haunting free-for-all beauty. Literally and figuratively, we only see depth through the flat surface of the image. Photography as a means of experiencing multiplicity and scrutinizing an event's appearance invites us to still our mind and enter its time. Like the desert, which is a work of time in infinite space, photography is full of surprises. The most striking images are those that have benefited from the effects of waiting. They invite us to reach deep within for a shining moment in time. But this moment has little to do with that rare, best or photogenic moment dear to photographers.

"Time is a river without banks." The line may be attributed across times and cultures to the painter Marc Chagall or to the sage Lao Tzu. In the realm of time-based art, the photograph's secret can be said to be that of showing without merely showing, or of being a well pointing to a well. The photo as a fragment of infinity powerfully partakes in the creative gesture of the invisible. On one side of the coin tossed, it shows 'displayed' and on the side, 'buried.' Not because it hides anything from the onlooker, but as wisely said, because "the more it shows, the less you know." What photography can offer is not so much this unique, most significant moment of seeing so sought after by members of the profession, but the *living* presence of *non-seeing*—the very instant when what is seen is seen with no 'model,' no 'onlooker,' no 'photographer.'

"Each experience of beauty," as François Cheng remarks, "so brief in time while transcending time, restores anew to us the freshness of the world's morning." The desert

in which we seek freedom is ourselves seeking—getting lost, losing ground, taking flight, then hitting and regaining ground, putting back on our old garments, returning to the city, and going out in the busy streets to meet the everyday. Once we've found the well, there's no-body left to drink it. There's no seeker, no drinker, no finder, just: well. More well, and the ever-renewing possibility of deep water. This is the art of seeing what Zen master Ikkyu Sojun ("Crazy Cloud") saw as: "Ripples appear/On the un-accumulated water/Of the un-dug well."

The Gift to Writing

For the last nine years that JPB and I have frequented the deserts of the American West, we have never really had rain during our summer stays, especially during the month of August. This year (2006), however, while writing this text on site, we have been supplied with a gentle desert wash everyday during the second week of August. A short sprinkle of heavy and well-spaced drops falls with large, hearty pat on our parched mind to provide us with our daily ration of refreshment. As if such a gift of the desert was not enough, the most spectacular apparition of full double rainbows regularly follows it. The local people tell us with disbelief that they haven't had that much rain during this time of the season for the last five years.

* Written as Introduction to Jean-Paul Bourdier, *Bodyscapes*. San Rafael, CA: Earth Aware, 2007