7E Interview with Digital Artist Mark Dorf

We talked to digital media artist Mark Dorf, a Brooklyn NY based photographer/sculptor. Dorf explores the relationships between the natural and digital worlds. His series //_PATH uses early 3D scanning technology to create geometric forms within the plane of a landscape. We discuss his process in //_Path and his earlier works. Check out our interview:

7E: Where are the various locations that were photographed? Specifically //_Path, Axiom & Simulation, Environmental Occupation,and Host. Also, do you hire a photographer or are you working solo?

MD: //_PATH was shot in a plethora of different places: predominantly in the Redwoods of Northern California, but also in the Rockies of Colorado as well as a few images in Upstate New York. Axiom & Simulation was shot in both upstate New York and Iceland. Environmental Occupations was all shot on the coast of South Carolina and the northern coast of Georgia. Host was shot again on the coast of South Carolina, the northern coast of Georgia and additionally in the Rockies of Colorado and the Gulf Coast of Texas. As for shooting the images themselves, I work solo – all of my imagery and compositions are shot and made by me – nothing is outsourced or bought.

7E: What is the list of computer applications used? Also are all topographic triangulations projected in a 3d program? Are any hand drafted?

MD: I use quite a cocktail of computer applications including:

Photoshop, Illustrator, After Effects, Processing, Blender, Cinema 4D, Google Sketchup and RGBD Toolkit

As for the topographic meshes that you see – in the series Axiom & Simulation, I had yet to teach myself anything about 3D rendering so those were all hand drafted. With that in mind though, some were freehand and others I would actually set markers out in the landscape in an exact grid form, photograph them for reference, then remove the markers and photograph the scene again. Later I would then overlay the two images and more or less "connect the dots" in order to get an accurate representation of the topographic information in the landscape.


The 3D meshes that you see in //_PATH are actually created using primitive 3D scanning technology using an Infrared Sensor/transmitter and using RGBD to process the information. The meshes in these images are scans of elements, such as plants, rocks, and piles of dirt, that were found in the landscape that they are collaged on top. Here I was interested in examining language: I see the landscape as the most ancient of languages. At one point it could be considered almost binary in that a life for sees one element, realizes that it is good for them and will help sustain life, and see another and know that it will hurt them. In contrast here I have included a contemporary technological eye that examines and quantifies surroundings in a highly organized manner. The scans become highly abstracted due to the fact that they are all un-manipulated raw data – a

pure version of the technological eye that was used to create the scans. Typically a 3D scan is much more than just one single scan – usually it is 4+ scans composited together with finishing techniques to render a fully realized model. Here it is but the subject as seen by the technology itself.

7E: What is your process in creating a single image? Do you start with a natural environment first and formulate a synthetic art form within that composition?

MD: My processes has of course changed over the years after tackling many different subject matters and means of creating imagery. In my earlier works, like Environmental Occupations and Axiom & Simulation, I would actually draw out each composition by hand on paper before taking a single image. I knew exactly what I was looking for before I ever left the studio. Not only would I draw all of the elements that are to be created in the scene but also the landscape itself that I was looking for. If there was a compositional element that I needed that was not present in the landscape that I was in, I would move on and not even take the photo. It was a real labor of love, but one that I think results in something that is far more satisfying – why settle when you can find exactly what you want. The idea is not to create fictitious landscapes and illusion – the actual visual un-manipulated description of the landscape is very important to me.
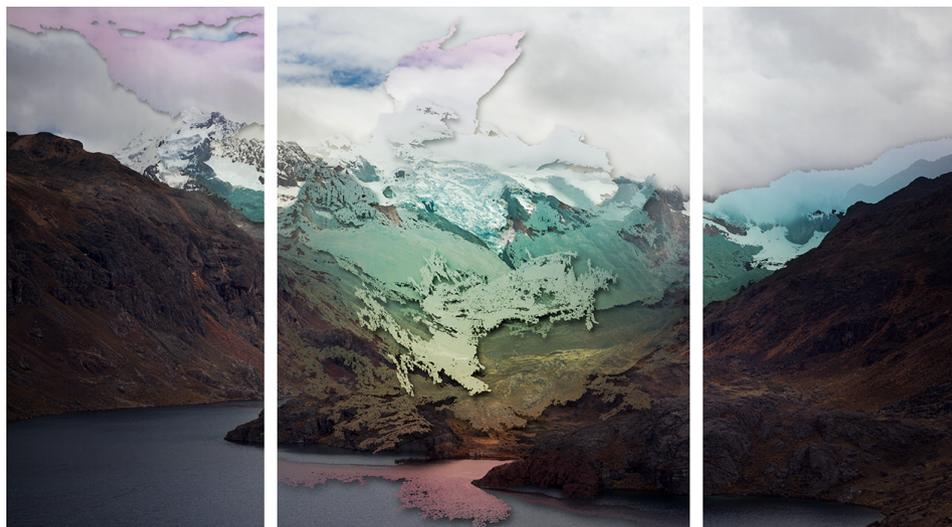
As for later works like //_PATH – In those images, I knew what I wanted to place in the scene and the techniques that I wanted to include in the series, such as 3D composites, 3D scans and other visual geometric and digital techniques, but when shooting I did not know which one would fall in what scene. I was however aware after a few tests that I wanted central compositions and a certain quality of light – so I was searching for those compositional and photographic elements when shooting.

Emergence was different for many reasons. This was the first project that I really dove into the world of science. All of this series was made in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado while I was an artist in residence at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (a field research lab in a remote region of the Rockies). While there I was working side by side with ecologists and biologists in the field every single day living the life of the scientist and field researcher. Their process of data collection and analysis is what really influenced that work – for the most part it is exactly that: an exploration of data collection, analysis, and transformation. In light of that, I treated my photographs like my "collected data". I would go out and do my "field research" (my photographing and exploring) and return to my studio and "analyze" the information (the photographs) that I had collected. The composited elements are all derivative of different means of data visualization or data transformation. Again I had an idea of the different processing techniques that I wanted to use, but when shooting it was not apparent to me, nor important to me as this was merely my "collected data", which would go where– that process was very much based after the images were taken and re-examined.

7E: Where did your interest of nature and geography stem from? And is it a spiritual journey to find these landscapes in what seems very desolate areas.

MD: My interest in nature has been a life-long interest. Ever since I was little, I was always the kid that wanted to be outside playing and climbing trees – not watching TV and playing video games (though I was totally fascinated by computers). I liked to explore and go on adventures – this has stuck with me my entire life. The landscape is where I find my mind is the most clear and at ease.

As for my interest in geography and science in my creative process, I think that influence has come quite a lot form my family. My grandfather and grandmother were both photographers in the 40's in New York City (the photographic and perhaps the technology element of my process), my aunt and uncle are both marine biologists and my father works in medicine (the science element of my process), and now I tend to mix all of the above into a single conversation. There is without a doubt a meditative and spiritual quality to my travels – like I said, the landscape is the place that I feel most at ease. I don't mean this in a "we should return to the earth" kind of way, but rather I enjoy the solitude and perceived lack of human presence (this is of course a misconception of the landscape but a perception nonetheless). I enjoy traveling to the places where fewer feet have tread. I thoroughly enjoy the escape.