



Ambulance chasing through the streets of Kampala with Peter Garmusch.

I'm a real fan of *Steely Dan* and as big a fan of their LP cover designs. "Aja" for instance has that disassociated mysterious connection to the content of the album that somehow becomes plausible only after listening to what is now the entire CD.

So why deliberately choose an example of Flemish¹ painting to kick start this particular article on the photography by Peter Garmusch? Who went to the capital city of Uganda and took some audacious portraits of bicycle merchants and car-wrecks no one walks away from, some of which would cost the same as his digital camera that is before they themselves were rendered road-kill on the streets of Kampala.

Well it might be a stretch but as a child I've always found the back grounds of these paintings to be almost as intriguing as the fore grounds' fundamental axis of content that ends up flattening out everything else behind it in what always seems to be rolling hills with serpentine trees hovering over secret twisting paths leading to mysterious dwellings.

In presenting the following two suites of photographs contrasts and alliances are bountiful and leave open a vast array of interpretations...

Bicycle merchants and their colossal pay load.

The scrim Mr. Garmusch erects splices the picture plane into a shallow depth of field and places a veil over an insolvent environment. The back drop stages and propels the subject matter (men with bikes and a towering cache of merchandise) to the fore-front with and aura of majestic servitude. The light bestows an almost monolithic yet contradictory air of sovereignty. The translucency of the fabric applies a texture that registers the forms behind it and is reminiscent of the surface of a canvas romanticizing the circumstances lurking in the rear.

As in many of the portrait paintings from the 16th century, there linger ample clues to what could be happening behind the "curtain" that would normally distract me if for no other reason, the human feat of loading items on a single bike whose collective weight easily out measures the sum not only of the means of transport accessible to do the job but the person who bears the labor of being the engine for the task.

It's a formatting issue but none the less it's as if (later in art history), one of Manets' gilded field hands while in rapture of their toil, wandered errantly onto a fashion photographers' photo scrim. But here some of the subjects appear suspect as if caught evading the scope of the camera lens. The attempt to

1

Gerard David. *A Rest During the Flight to Egypt*. c. 1510. Oil on wood. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

camouflage one self, even if initiated by Peter Garmusch to exploit the sculptural quality of his subjects, reveals the pathos of the moment in striking and almost hallucinatory vividness.

These are earnest road merchants for sure and on the flip side of life they could be foragers of the highway that come along to collect the spoils of devastation out of self preservationist impulses. As if waiting for an accident to happen because they know that stretch of road to be perilous. From an impoverished society, an indelicate inheritance of cargo and service occurs. From four wheels to two, the pay load is simply transferred from horse power to man power and a more labor intensive incarnation adopts the task of bringing the product to market.

Ship wrecks on the side of the road.

In the other suite of photographs Mr. Garmusch offers portraits of car-wrecks that make suspicious alliances with the cyclists. The translucent dark scrim is replaced by an opaque gold reflective fabric that would otherwise upstage its principle subject, a collection of totaled automobiles and service vehicles stashed in a shallow land fill perhaps or found simply at the place of impact. The cloth emanates a radiant glow from behind these ship wrecks like a halo harboring amongst the remains in a grave yard of rusted steel. The light crackling and glistening from its shimmering and bellowing surface mimic with sadistic humor the brutal gashes, dents and dark cavities of what was once smooth metal armor with a tough industrial paint veneer. With unrepentant satire these visual dichotomies poke at the horrendous and abrupt impact one correlates with these images of poetic lamentation and cannot imagine less at the expense of human consequence.

I can see it, in the distance above the sloping hillside, underneath the branches of trees and wondrous foliage that strategically frame the top portion of the picture plane that beacon my gaze to search beyond this “central alter of worship”. On one side of the twisting road you have the weight bearers with there bicycles ready the load up the spoils of a fatal car crash nestled just below the horizon line and on the other side you have a photographer from Europe who followed the residents he suspects knows where the action is and with his pay load of instant studio props he awaits and perches himself in a optimum position, ready to set up at the moment of impact and acquisition.

Alexander Viscio

www.garmusch.com