

ELISA SIGHICELLI

LUMINOUS SPACES CECILIA ALEMANI

Metaphysical explorations of suspended places, Elisa Sighicelli's films, videos, and lightbox-mounted photographs seem to occupy a temporal dimension that corresponds to an unspecified spatial ambiguity, as if it were impossible to discern whether these images truly belong to our world or to some other planet. Even when shot in locations that offer traces of cityscapes, her works depict sidereal geographies from as far away as the eye can see.

Sighicelli's new photographs capture reflections of artificial lights and automobile headlights that slash through nocturnal gloom. Their settings are mainly cityscapes in Asia, in the new megalopolises of the East. Yet the artist seems to draw scrutiny away from exoticism or background descriptions. She is unconcerned about chronicling or delineating the urban mutations that have visibly affected the cities of Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong. Instead, her gaze focuses on the most negligible details, on forgotten spaces captured in a transitional state, as if they were huge, inoperable machines. Photos of large, imageless billboards reveal the structure of these decrepit, rusty dinosaurs, like pitiless X-rays of the implements to which advertisements and blindly optimistic dreams are typically entrusted. Sighicelli's photos of these implements show them to be gaunt, vacuous, and mute. The effect resembles that of a backstage visit to a theater or a recently deserted movie set; it is a simultaneously bleak and highly instructive view, with some of the frisson experienced by anyone who figures out the secret of a magic trick. It is as if a fictional machine were disassembled and laid out in all its complex banality.

Yet Sighicelli's work is not limited to an ideological reading as a critique of the production of commercial imagery. Indeed, her photographs are imbued with the same seductive jolt that we have come to expect from commercial photography. The paradox, or challenge, of Sighicelli's work may indeed reside in the attainment of that seductive jolt without resort to subject matter, in the construction of spellbinding images based on abstract, or even prosaic, subjects, and in the subsequent transformation of a non-place into space through the denial of an image by means of imagery.

Light is the real protagonist of Sighicelli's latest works. In her imagery, the same light that artlessly illuminates advertisements bounces off reflective surfaces, radiates, and becomes essential, turning what was a mere utensil into subject matter. It is light as narrative, or writing. Light has always been at the heart of Sighicelli's thinking, through her choice of the lightbox as her preferred vehicle of expression. Unlike other artists who use lightboxes to depict a hyperrealistic wealth of detail—a realism more realistic than reality itself—Sighicelli adds a quasi-artisanal dimension to her creative process, altering industrial technology to make it personal. Instead of printing her images on the customary transparent film, Sighicelli starts with a C-print on matte paper, which she mounts on a Plexiglas structure. Sighicelli prints all her photos by hand, which in an era of digital technology and outsourcing lends a unique authenticity to her works.

Yet the artisanal aspect is not limited to the surface images. Indeed, Sighicelli constructs each lightbox like a unique object. Usually, the neon lights encased inside a lightbox are

fig. 1
Inside the lightbox of a panel from
Untitled (Grid), 2009



distributed evenly, according to a clear, serviceable logic. By contrast, Sighicelli arranges the lights to brighten only certain areas of the image, thus bringing out individual details. Sometimes she also masks certain areas of the picture's reverse side using black paint, in order to orchestrate the movement and diffusion of light and shadow with even greater control.

Anyone who has the opportunity to look inside one of Sighicelli's lightboxes (see fig. 1) finds the work revealed as a bizarre, mysterious device. Glowing tubes, electric wires, and

black symbols like imprints of undeciphered ideograms dotting the back of the photograph form the map of a mysterious city that is impossible to navigate. For each lightbox, the artist toils on two distinct areas: first, the externally visible one, offering the viewer a carefully constructed glimpse of reality, an image both simple and sophisticated; second, the invisible one trapped inside the lightbox, retaining traces of the artist's manual labor that will remain sealed within this enigmatic object.

Sighicelli uses light as a genuine medium, like paint on a palette. Her work suggests that of James Turrell, perhaps even more than Jeff Wall's. The neon light fixed inside the box is fractured and directed to specific points of the image so that it appears with the power of an otherworldly revelation or a minor, everyday epiphany. Not by coincidence, the light acquires an almost sculptural, malleable power. In this latest series of photographs, light materializes on objects that possess a rough physicality, like pylons, street signs, and structures in cast concrete. Light appears to both mitigate these masses and provide them with a tangible presence: the image's two-dimensional surface is demolished by light, which shakes and enlarges its outline.

In *Untitled (Sphere)* (2009, plate 3), for example, the artist depicts a circular element that at first glance appears to plunge into the photograph like a dam while also abruptly obstructing a view of a cityscape. A planetarium emerges from the profile of an anonymous city. The skillful use of lighting on the back of the photograph and the masking of certain areas allows the artist to play on the alternation of concave and

convex, turning the photographic surface into a kind of three-dimensional construction. The glowing border around the strange Martian structure finally dissipates its substance; the scale of the object is mammoth, which befits an ambitious work of modern engineering, but it also has the lightness found in drawings by Boullée or engravings by Ledoux. *Untitled (Sphere)* contains both the brutal palpability of a documentary and the intellectual sublimity of utopian architecture—a strange combination of contemporary space debris and neoclassical Apollonian clarity.

Like the other works presented in this exhibition, *Untitled (Sphere)* clearly distinguishes itself from the artist's previous series. Heretofore Sighicelli constructed images by following a fixed grid dominated by lines of horizontal energy, with a lowered perspective created by positioning the camera just above the ground. In this new series of photographs, the artist seems to have rejected classical composition and instead pursued a more complex arrangement based on a kind of outspread scattering. Works like *Horizon Series* (2000, fig. 2) and *Parlour* (2002, fig. 3) are examples of the investigations into the image's linear planes and geometric structure that Sighicelli undertook at the start of the new millennium. During these years, the artist photographed scenes from everyday interiors, exploring hotel rooms and lobbies and sometimes indeterminate places through minor details such as carpeting and curtains. The framing in these images has an almost theatrical perspective: the image climbs up along a steep breakaway plane, following the surface of a floor, bed, or table that occupies half of the photograph. The foreground is often out of focus: the lower part of the image seems to split open into a state of



fig. 2
Horizon Series, 2000
Partially backlit C-print mounted on lightbox, in five parts
Each: 48 1/4 x 48 1/4 x 2 1/4 inches
(123 x 123 x 7 cm)



fig. 3
Parlour, 2002
Partially backlit C-print mounted on lightbox, in five parts
Each: 45 1/4 x 45 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches
(115 x 115 x 4 cm)

uncertainty, into an undefined space that can be read like a plainly theoretical, chromatic musical score. It is an area of suspension, both part of the image and foreign to it, and thus a vital aspect of creating the sense of disorientation and expectancy that distinguishes these works. A feeling of stillness pervades the photographs, in which the human form is never present but is nevertheless always alluded to; these places and objects instantly evoke the absence of *dramatis personae*. The images are carved out cinematically, like endlessly suspended establishing shots for road movies. They are thresholds rather than illusions or narratives: they open gateways to another dimension that is imbued with the light of Flemish painting. No one is given full access to this dimension, nor can any other human image whatsoever enter it. These are microcosms, not mirrors, of our world.

The most recent works, like the series based on advertising billboards in Hong Kong and *Untitled (Grid)* (2009, plate 6), recently shown in the Italian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale, shun orthogonal formulations in favor of opening up to disorienting lines of dynamic flight, as though the artist absorbed the enforced bounty and range of viewpoints in contemporary megalopolises like Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Tokyo, all of which she visited recently. These latest photographs are metropolitan symphonies, where the tradition of the urban sublime—from Dziga Vertov and Walter Ruttmann to Fritz Lang, to name the most obvious examples—is transplanted into a city developing by ever more erratic and volatile cadences.

Untitled (Grid) consists of five lightboxes, each just over four feet square, installed side by side. The photographs depict, in close-up, a framework of bamboo, the primary tool of Asia's building boom—an object that symbolizes the growth of the East and that peculiar combination of futurism and do-it-yourself spirit that seems to typify twenty-first-century urbanism in China. Sighicelli's image of scaffolding—which unfolds as a series of dramatic views—is transformed into a sinuous pentagram that spans the image in a syncopated, fragmented motion. The backlighting of the photographs becomes an integral part of the image, radiating from the streetlamp placed at the center of the shot. The overlap between the fiction of the image and the lightbox's tangible construction gives *Untitled (Grid)* an almost tactile presence, which punctures the space with an explosion of vanishing points.

Since 2005, Sighicelli has created films and videos in which a similar shift from a relatively ordered structure to a more openly dynamic one can be seen. The artist's brief, non-narrative interludes are suffused with her fascination for light and the architecture of the gaze seen in a new spatial dimension. *Nocturne (Left Bank)* (2006, fig. 4), for instance, is a kind of short travelogue about the Chao Phraya River, which runs through Bangkok. The nocturnal shots flow like a diorama, a tracking shot made up of horizontal images, in which the water's surface occupies half the frame. The shop signs and streetlights are mirrored in the river, whose banks seem to sway gently. Like all of Sighicelli's films and videos, *Nocturne (Left Bank)* seems to be constructed according to a hypnotic cadence, as if the moving image sought to capture the same feeling of suspension evoked by

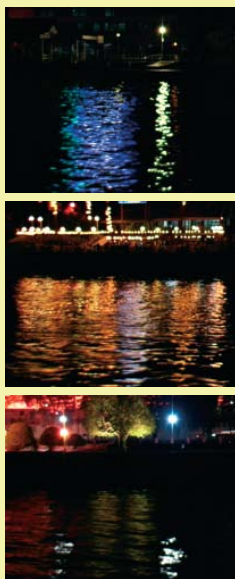


fig. 4.
Nocturne (Left Bank), 2006
Video projection
32:23 loop, color, silent

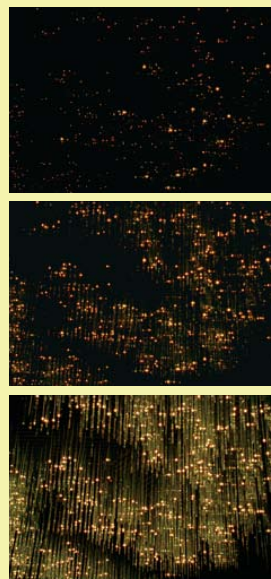


fig. 5.
Baudelaire, 2005
Video projection
Shot in 16 mm film, transferred to DVD
00:35 loop, color, sound

the artist's photographs. Just as Sighicelli's lightboxes draw on certain stylistic elements of filmic language, which the artist bends in new directions, so her videos and films employ photographic techniques to create a sort of hybrid in which painting, cinema, and photography combine in a supremely original way.

This experimentation is even clearer in *Baudelaire* (2005, fig. 5). Shot in 16 mm film, *Baudelaire* depicts the lights at Turin's Teatro Regio, a wonderful example of interior decoration designed by the noted architect Carlo Mollino. *Baudelaire* is quite literally an explosion of light, as well as being degree zero cinema. It is a spectacle of lights and shapes, a ballet of luminous light sources. The allusions to theater and dance recur in *Non-Stop Exotic Cabaret* (2007), in which Sighicelli filmed the sinuous undulations of a body swimming in a pool, while in *Phi Building* (2006, plate 10), the artist continued her research on Hong Kong architecture by filming the LED lights illuminating a building facade in the Chinese metropolis. All of these works are based on an almost manic scrutiny, in which details extracted from their everyday dimension are repeated indefinitely. Throughout this prolonged observation, the artist transforms what is concrete into abstraction. To use a cinematic term, one might say that Sighicelli works to create a new form of fade-out in which the image does not vanish into a black screen, but instead into light.

The fade-out is an integral theme in one of Sighicelli's most recent video works, *Untitled (The Party Is Over)* (2009, plate 11), also shown at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Here, as

if making a film that mysteriously advances backwards, the artist shot some Chinese fireworks and edited the images in reverse. The result is alienating, but also somehow sad, as if the explosive climax has capsized into an implosion through an asphyxiation of imagery that changes euphoria into dysphoria. Yet Sighicelli does not pause at an emotional interpretation: the film loop runs indefinitely so that the beginning is jumbled up with the end, and the fade-out thus becomes a cameo role.

Sighicelli's works are enveloped in a profound silence. It is as if the artist wanted to halt the flow of time and immortalize it forever, suspended within a moment. Her preferred mediums of photography, film, and video are not employed as usual, to record reality in a documentary style, but to open doors to parallel, invisible dimensions. Combining worldly and ethereal elements, Sighicelli's works disclose themselves to viewers as still lifes or sacred apparitions from an enigmatic world. Reality as portrayed by Sighicelli is simply a picture of our world seen in a different light, a point that demonstrates both the simplicity and depth of her work.

PLATES