

Surface of Last Scattering

A cloud seen from above looks to have a surface strong enough to walk on even though we know there is nothing more to it than water vapour. The sun too presents as a solid sphere despite the fact that it is nothing more than a gaseous ball without a hard boundary between it and the space beyond. What appears to be from a distance an impenetrable boundary becomes proximally the fog that we enter unhindered; the dense mist that on yielding comes to surround us with solid walls that are just as illusory. These are the surfaces of last scattering.

Today we associate “the surface of last scattering” with the beginning of the universe. For as we look deeper into space and further back in time we reach what appears to be the visible edge of the universe: the surface of last scattering of the light that emerged from the infant universe. Read outside this scientific context, the surface of last scattering evokes images of an ending rather than a beginning. We can imagine such a surface as the sacred site at which the remnants of what has died are dispersed. The surface of last scattering becomes then a temporal boundary – an end to an era that although appearing final soon gives way seamlessly to a time beyond.

The fractured fresco surfaces in Tomasetti’s paintings, and the images of mountains that rise and fall out of and into that surface together echo both the specious spatial boundary between places, and the false temporal boundary between events and memories. This body of work deals with the paradox of perception: that although we must trust what our eyes deliver to us as certainty about the solidity of a surface or the pre-eminence of a single viewpoint, our lived experience of the world leaves us nonetheless sceptical about the absolute grounding that our vision promises. This conflict between certainty and doubt is well captured in the images of *Snowline* in which the mere viewing of a mountain range must give way to a necessarily fragmentary experience of it. Each panel in the sequence fits the next, yet not entirely. Uneasy echoes are produced by the juxtaposition of images collected over a period of time spent in one location. The shifting direction of the sun, the different times of the day, and the obliterating veils of fog or rain, give this work, like perception itself, the aspect of a puzzle.

The installation of cast plaster tablets too sustains the theme of fracturing and instability, but instead with reference to the disintegration of the divine in a secular age. While the arches have been carefully spaced to invoke an experience of contemplative stillness, the grid-like regularity of the installation reveals nevertheless the threat of a kind of pernicious regulation characteristic of our technological age. The arches lead us to return to those cathedrals of mountains depicted elsewhere in Tomasetti’s work anew, and let us find for ourselves the fugitive experience of the awesome and sacred that is historically found in being with nature.

Tomasetti’s work invites us to question the spatial and temporal fixtures of our relationship to the natural world. Her depictions of these surfaces of last scattering remind us that what appears to be solid ground – whether physical, temporal or metaphysical – may not be so.

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