

Chrystel Lebas: The Wait

Culture and nature: The immensity and imagination of the forest

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The Wait, Cockendale Wood West, 2007

During recent years, Chrystel Lebas has explored the forest as a space of the unseen and the mysterious, drawing on childhood memories and visually-concealed histories. The immensity of the forest space and its psychological impact are effectively expressed through her photographs and films in which trees extend as far as the eye can see, surrounding the viewer in an autonomous realm. These are spaces of escape. Lebas has cited Gaston Bachelard who observed, "We do not have to be long in the woods to experience the always rather anxious impression of 'going deeper and deeper' into a limitless world. Soon, if we do not know where we are going, we no longer know where we are."¹ The forest acts as a timeless space in which to leave behind the outside everyday world. Its immensity is that of daydreams and imagination, its grandeur engendering contemplation and awe. In a dreaming state the viewer transcends the natural world and realises his own inner immensity. For Bachelard and for Lebas, the solitude and stillness of the boundless forest provide the space in which to get lost and to find oneself.

The forest frequently appears as a symbolic space in myths, legends and fairytales. It is often a transitional space that characters must enter in order to emerge in a modified state. Bruno Bettelheim, in his discussion of the Grimm tale of the 'Two Brothers', commented on how "The forest, where they go to decide that they want to have a life of their own, symbolises the place in which inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be."² The forest is not only a space of unknown narratives

waiting to unfold but one of challenges in its dark, dangerous, hidden depths, which, when confronted, enable self-reflection and result in positive change.

The psychological tension of the forest space is at its most acute during twilight, when the clarity of daylight gives way to the unseen and the unknown of the night. Just as the forest acts as a transitional space, so twilight is a transitional period, an interval between day and night, of indefinite duration and uncertain events. Lebas defines it as a time of insecurity and vulnerability, when one loses all sense of reality, provoking deep feelings of anxiety or apprehension.³ The senses are confused with a loss of easy vision contrasted by enhanced hearing and sensitivity to touch. Her series title *Between Dog and Wolf* (2004-05) refers to the French phrase 'entre chien et loup' that succinctly evokes the stage when the domestic and familiar transform into the wild.⁴ In one image of hushed, snow-covered, forest floors, animal footprints indicate hidden presences; however, neither animal nor man visibly disturbs the soundlessness of the scene. The footprints remember a brief moment in the past, and the overwhelming quietness of the snowy forest is soon restored. The title *Abyss* (2003-06) is equally suggestive, conjuring up images of terrifying and infernal depths. Rather than focusing on the prolonged height of the forest trees, the photographs of this series represent only the lower sections of the trees, the immense and unfathomable space that the visitor explores and gets lost in, with trees after trees stretched out endlessly. The wide panoramic format of the images seems to contradict the way we might think to represent the dramatic height of the trees. Where we expect verticality,

their depth is horizontal, and yet effectively conveys the sublime domination of man by nature.

As the visitor loses himself in the seemingly infinite forest space, so the viewer becomes lost in the photographic or filmic space. Lebas's panoramic images are printed large at two metres long and enclose the viewer's field of vision. Her film, *Blue Hour* (2006), is presented as an installation, filling the space with the fading light of the forest. Lasting one hour, it operates in real time, absorbing the viewer in its hypnotic slowness. The stillness of the scene, in which all that alters is the light, offers a space for contemplation like that of the place represented. As in films by Tacita Dean, light and sound gradually change; here, birdsong gives way to silence as darkness falls. Of all media, film is the one in which the viewer is best able to lose him/herself, in which conventional time and space are absent. The majority of Lebas's photographs are taken using long exposure times in darkening conditions posing a challenge for the photographic apparatus that is accustomed to light and fractions of seconds. While the forms become increasingly obscured by the growing darkness, the camera slowly uncovers and records the details of the natural world. Rather than use artificial lighting or filters, Lebas's photographs slowly absorb natural light. In the resulting images up to an hour of time is presented all at once. The unnatural duration of the process, far, far slower than that of human perception, creates extraordinary images of strange suspended light that combine nature with artifice in a singular unified space. Instead of flat static images these photographs retain a sense of duration. And in place of darkness, the long exposures enable details to surface with astonishing clarity and depth. Colours are rich and saturated, from vibrant blues to pinkish browns.

Lebas sees her works as referring to the Romantic tradition, citing Casper David Friedrich and notions of the sublime as key influences. With images of escape, wilderness and the grandeur of nature, her practice relates some of the main tenets of Romanticism to photography and raises significant questions about how the contemporary (urban) viewer engages with nature. In her most recent series *The Wait* (2007-08), the tension between man, nature and animal is extended. Forest views are taken from hides, platforms erected in forests to offer hunters high vantage points while waiting for animals, usually deer, to emerge. These hides are concealed, hence the name, disguised to appear as part of the natural environment. Like Lebas, hunters shoot during twilight, the time when animals come out. Thus, from this privileged perspective, both hunter and photographer wait and wait and wait. The images recorded, with exposure times of up to one hour, are from a higher angle than previously, looking towards the middle sections of the trees, with the dark forest floor below and light filtering through from above.

Whereas *Abyss* suggested loss, *The Wait* connotes control. In Rockingham Forest, Northamptonshire, the hides are placed above pathways that have been cleared of trees, providing views to the north, south, east and west. The panoramic camera documents these four directions. The edges

of the resulting photographs fit together, providing a comprehensive vision for the viewer. The waiting game introduces a narrative dimension to the images; when previously nothing was expected to happen, action is now awaited to disturb the tranquil scene. In fact, our swift forest friends are able to escape capture, at least by the camera, as the lengthy exposure times mean that they are barely registered, at best as ghostly traces. For all its darkness and mystery, the Royal Forest of Rockingham is a medieval hunting forest in which paths were set out to aid the hunter. This is an orderly wilderness, where man's hunting activity is not for survival, but amusement, in a space that facilitates his manmade adventure. As Simon Schama writes, "it is this irreversibly modified world, from the polar caps to the equatorial forests, that is all the nature we have".⁵ Is, then, the modern wild wilderness an illusion, like the photographic image? A cultural construct designed to fulfil man's need for something other than the industrialised world? If it is, modern man may seek escape in the artifice of photographic images of majestic scale and depth.

Lebas's photographs are located in the tensions between culture and nature, beauty and darkness, the manmade landscape and the wild sublime. Whereas in previous series her forests were generalised, the titles of photographs in *The Wait* refer to particular locations. A sense of memory now underlies images which are grounded in the history of specific places, events and narratives.

While the drama of the natural world is played out for man's pleasure, the darkness of death remains imminent. The unseen, unspoken narrative is one of swift sound, blood and another kind of loss. None of this is visible in Lebas's photographs, where the timeless stillness of the forest space transcends the limited temporality of man and his pastimes. The forest plays the role of satisfying "one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our own mortality".⁶

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, p.185; quoted in Chrystel Lebas, *Between Dog and Wolf*, London: Azure Publishing, 2006, inside front cover.

2. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1976, p.93; quoted in Chrystel Lebas, 'Between Dog and Wolf', conference paper delivered at *Landscape and Beauty*, organised by the Research Centre for Land/Water and the Visual Arts, University of Plymouth, June 2008, to be published in *Beauty*, Liz Wells & Simon Standing (eds), University of Plymouth Press, 2009.

3. Chrystel Lebas, in an interview with the author, July 2008.

4. The series *Between Dog and Wolf* (2004-05) together with *The Quest* (2004), *Abyss* (2003-06), and *Blue Hour* (2005-06) are represented in Lebas, *Between Dog and Wolf*. For a comprehensive survey of earlier works see Chrystel Lebas, *L'espace temps / Time in space*, London: Azure Publishing, 2003.

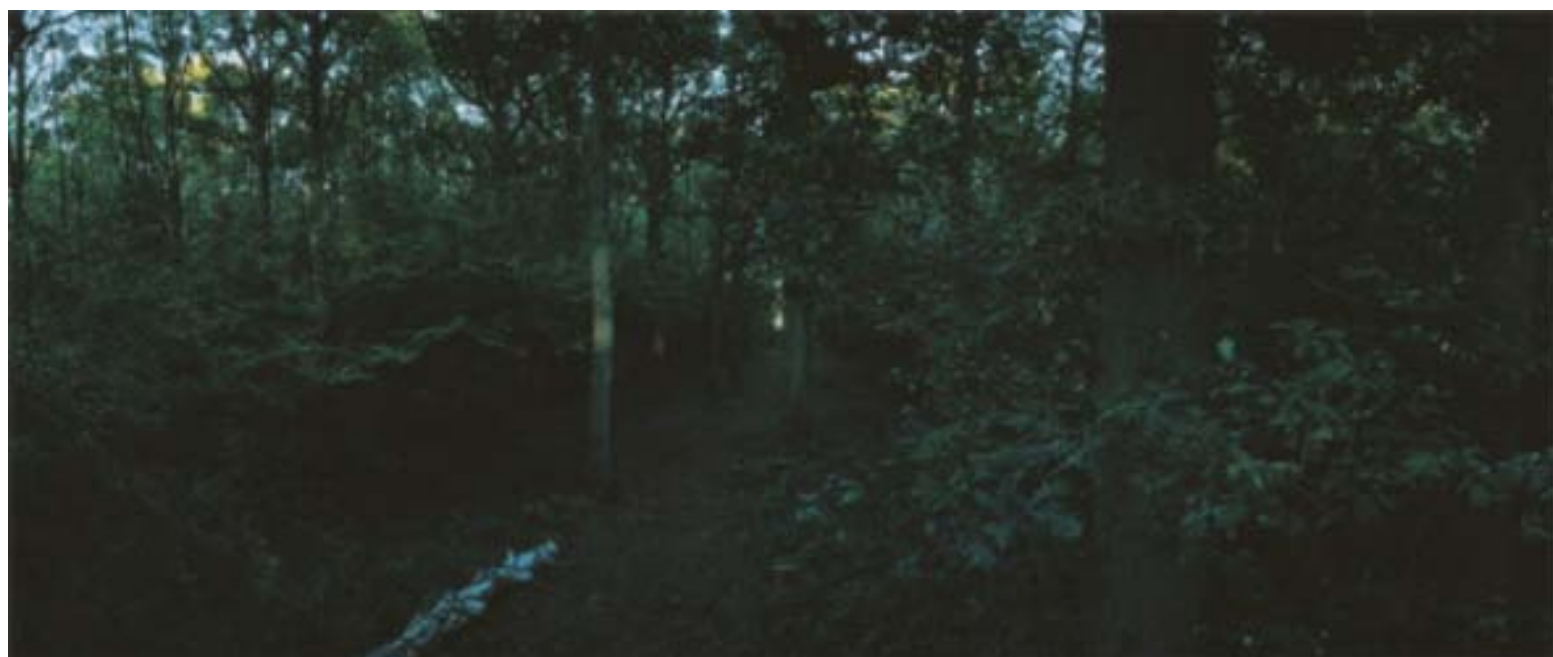
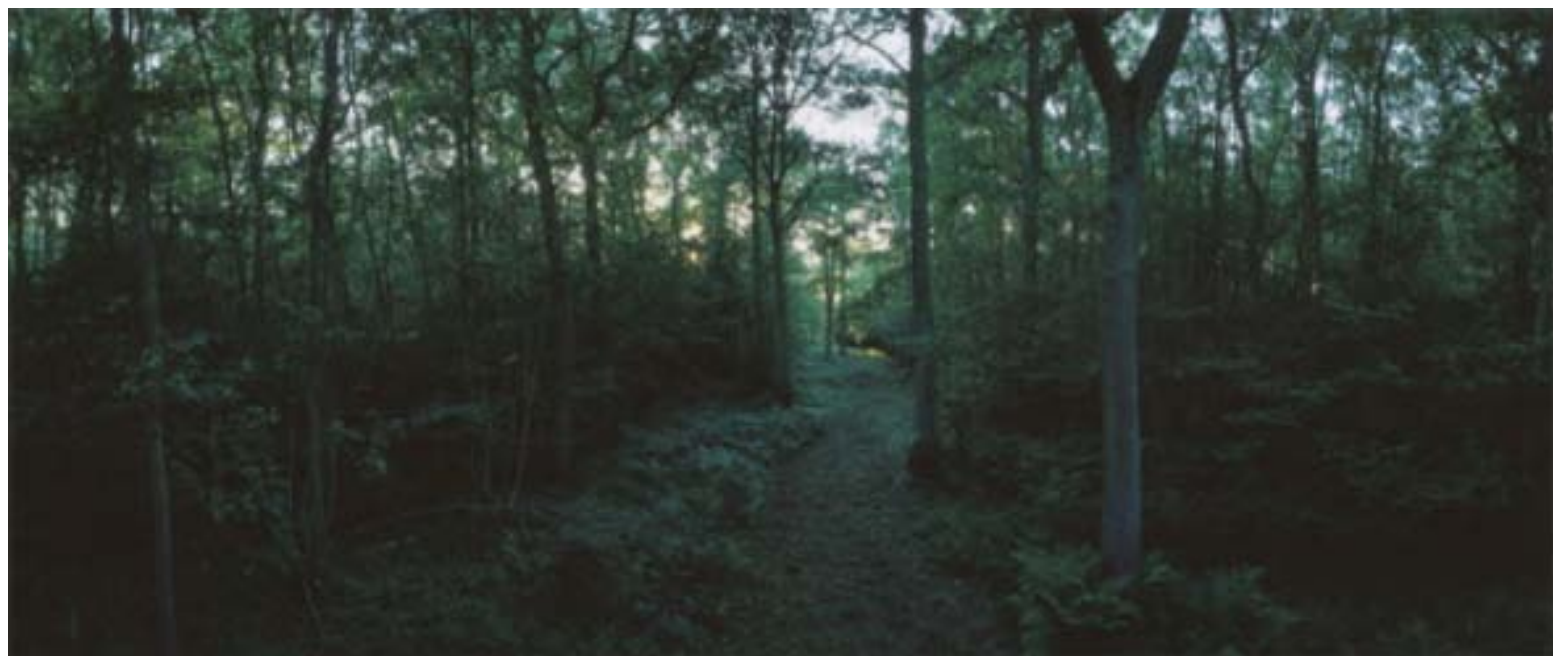
5. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, London: HarperCollins, 1995, p.7.

6. *Ibid.*, p.15.

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The Wait, Cockendale Wood South, 2007



The Wait, Blackthorns West, 2007 (*left top*), The Wait, Blackthorns East, 2007 (*left below*)
The Wait, Blackthorns North, 2007 (*opposite top*), The Wait, Blackthorns South 2007 (*opposite below*)



The Wait, Old Dry Hills West, 2007 (*left top*); The Wait, Old Dry Hills North, 2007 (*left below*)
The Wait, Old Dry Hills East, 2007 (*opposite top*); The Wait, Old Dry Hills South, 2007 (*opposite below*)