

Imaging the Landscape as Feminine: A Series of Nudes by Franz Roh

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Mother Nature, Mother Earth, and Earth Mother: these figures of speech can describe something nurturing and beautiful as well as mysterious and powerful. A series of photographs by Franz Roh, dated 1922-28, depicts the nude female torso superimposed on various landscapes (Figures 1-3). Roh mentions his unpublished series of nudes in a 1951 article on the liberating possibilities of photography:

Especially handsome was, for example, a gentle glowing reclined female nude, photographed large, close-up and placed over a snowy landscape, so that the gentle curves of the female body engage in a peaceful, imaginative game.¹

Although Roh seems to have been mostly concerned with the visual play of forms, his images suggest that there is also a visual game with the viewer and the perception of woman as nature. His series use of modern photographic technique in combination with its subject matter helps characterize the feminine and its metaphorical relationship to the land as intrinsic and sexual, but it is also presented to the viewer as being deceptive and fantastic.

Roh was not alone in his exploration of the feminine, the land, and fantastical portrayal. The fin-de-siècle symbolists and pictorialists sought unity with nature as they depicted the world of fantasy and mythology. Symbolist and pictorialist thought rejected naturalism in representation. Spring, for example, was often depicted as a female. Using the figurative, symbolists particularly played with opposing ideas, so that, for instance, woman and her fertility were linked to both motherhood and death. Ophelia, another favorite figure for the symbolists, was depicted with water, a life-giving element that caused her death. For many symbolists, particularly Franz von Stüick, the female played a complex role as depictions oscillated between sensual and threatening.

The landscape likewise allowed the symbolists and pictorialists to explore the enigmatic realms of a deeper consciousness. Nature was mysterious and the symbolists and

pictorialists looked for personal and spiritual meaning in it. Depicted ambiguously at dusk or dawn, the landscapes were both mystical and melancholic, signifying a desire for a spring paradise, but were also commemorative signs for death.² In exploring a fantastical world the symbolists could work through and reconcile conflicting themes like life and death and fear and passion.

Roh's series plays with these same ideas yet he specifically expresses them through modern photographic aesthetic and technique. This sets Roh apart from his pictorialist predecessors. When the pictorialists depicted the human at peace with nature or mythological tales they used a variety of photographic techniques and often used a brush to produce the desired painterly effect. They favored soft, gum prints which produced a hazy mystical environment. Roh's largely untitled series lacks this softness, yet the photographs still have a mysterious, sometimes even haunting quality. With his superimpositions Roh demonstrates the possibilities modern photography specifically creates.

In 1929 Roh argues for the art status of photography, discussing it in terms of form and expression and stating that the value of photography lies in its ability to produce more than just a copy from nature.³ The exceptional technical quality of his photographs renders the images in a realistic fashion, yet the depictions are of improbable, even impossible situations. The series uses the sandwich technique⁴ which combines multiple photographic representations in one composite print. Each photographic image, based on reality, can be expressively shaped independently or in the act of combination so that it is distanced slightly from the depicted subject matter. Using photography as a means to convey a world that is mysterious, Roh's floating nudes certainly do seem to participate in an "imaginative game."

In 1947 László Moholy-Nagy describes the technique of superimposition in terms of its ability to overcome space and time and record dreamlike content.⁵ Combining disparate images blurs the boundaries of what the seemingly 'objective'

¹ "Herrlich war z.B. ein zartschimmernder liegender Frauenakt, vordergründig groß fotografiert und nun über eine Schneelandschaft gelegt, wobei die zarten Kurven des Frauenkörpers ein friedlich-phantasievolles Spiel eingingen," see Franz Roh, "Über die freieren Möglichkeiten der Fotografie," *Leica Fotografie* 1 (January-February 1951): 5-6.

² See Reynolds, Simon, "The Longing for Arcadia," in Ingrid Ehrhardt and Simon Reynolds, eds., *Kingdom of the Soul: Symbolist Art in Germany, 1870-1920* exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 2000) 53-77.

³ Franz Roh, "Mechanism and Expression: the Essence and Value of Photography," in Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold, *Photo-Eye: 76 Photos of the Period* (New York: Arno Press, 1929 repr. 1973) 15.

⁴ Moholy-Nagy included the idea of sandwich techniques in montage, which he later more fully explained as superimposition; see László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947) 210.

⁵ Moholy-Nagy 210.

lens can document, creating an illusion based upon a certain degree of everyday familiarity. The dreamlike content of Roh's images consists of fragmented female nudes and landscapes. More than just background or an environment in which the dream occurs, these landscapes are integrally linked to the nude bodies. The photographic technique allows the female nude and the land to appear as connected. Imaginative possibilities such as this made the sandwich technique particularly attractive to Maurice Tabard and other surrealists, who used the seamless method precisely because it holds onto the reality effect⁶ of photography, while also creating an irrational and dreamlike space.⁷

The surrealists celebrated chance occurrences and the unpredictable find.⁸ Roh's belief in the illuminating possibilities of photography shares the same basic idea of finding. In 1929 Roh wrote that photography can create new visual effects to bring out not only the beautiful, but also the exciting and cruel in the world.⁹ Rosalind Krauss explains that for the surrealists photography is reality transformed into a sign, a coded trace, and not a mere interpretation of reality.¹⁰ This is useful for elucidating Roh's series because it describes the experience of the contorted reality being found in signs.¹¹ The photographic version of reality in Roh's series also seems to represent this 'coded trace' as it plays with presence and absence. The connection between Roh's own experimental work and the surrealist movement must be read carefully despite significant visual and conceptual similarities due to the fact that Roh's work is more surrealistic than it is surrealist.¹²

Franz Roh was not a surrealist and the surrealists did not write about his work, but he was certainly aware of them and concurrent avant-garde movements. Roh corresponded frequently with Max Ernst, an active member of the French surrealist circle, and he later praised the surrealist and expressionist painters for conveying imaginative situations, asking why this should not also be done with photography.¹³ Of course many of the surrealists, Man Ray and Hans Bellmer as just two examples, were indeed avidly using photography, but regardless of whether or not this was known to Roh, the creative possibilities photography offered prompted Roh to experiment (albeit privately) during the 1920s.

In Roh's imagery, extremely large in proportion to the landscape the body grows out of the landscape. It extends across from the middle ground to the foreground, almost covering the entire image. The position of the body varies throughout the series: it appears horizontally against the background of a forest, falls head first from the sky, or extends upward, arms outstretched, echoing the growth of the tree branches. Formal elements such as framing, composition, and transparency create this surrealistic document. The combination printing emphasizes the white flesh of the body, as both modeled and translucent. The body appears present, yet also as if it is in the process of materializing or is about to vanish. The images seem to play with time metaphorically by playing with transparency. Perhaps indefinitely caught in a constant conflict between presence and absence the depiction is mystifying, simultaneously accessible and restricted from view. It appears dreamlike.

Roh does not fully portray the protruding limbs; but instead frames tightly around the torso, creating a fragmented body that does not represent a specific individual. Berger points out that in photography the nude is often photographed so that it is generalized and made an unspecific object of desire, thus creating a fantasy.¹⁴ The cutoff thigh in one image especially emphasizes the nudes in Roh's photographs as de-individualized and fragmented. This can be interpreted as a form of neo-classicism, relying on ideal types, but more likely it seems to echo a form of surrealism, which takes the fragment and interprets it as signifying a lack of subjectivity.

Surrealist nudes are often viewed as conveying the angst of male desire and power, either as erotic object or as threat.¹⁵ As in surrealist photographs by Man Ray, the depictions of fragmented bodies represent sites of desire and even more vulnerable objects of a fetishistic gaze. The nudes in Roh's series have their arms raised, with their hands placed behind the head, suggesting that the figure is daydreaming or sleeping. This self-referential action points to the dreamlike appearance of the entire image but it also suggests that the dreaming nude is not aware of any gaze. The representations (some undoubtedly more than others) suggest that the nude is being spied upon by the viewer. In an inattentive state, the undis-

⁶ Photographic reality is a term loaded with potential falsehoods. In the context of this paper I am referring to the fact that a camera records reality in some fashion, whether manipulated or not.

⁷ Rosalind Krauss, "Photography in the Service of Surrealism," in Krauss, Rosalind, Jane Livingston, and Dawn Ades, *L'Amour fou: Photography and Surrealism* exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran, 1985), 24.

⁸ For more on surrealism and the find, see J.H. Matthews, *Languages of Surrealism* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1986) 162-171.

⁹ Roh (1929) 16-17.

¹⁰ Krauss 31-35.

¹¹ Krauss 24.

¹² Sabine Młodzianowski, for example, erroneously suggests that Max Ernst's 1921 "La Puberté proche...ou Les Pléiades" in particular could be the inspiration for Roh's series because the work places the photograph of a headless nude in a created dreamlike setting, "Franz Roh: Fotografie zwischen Theorie und Praxis," in *Franz Roh: Foto-Auge* exh. cat. (Hamburg: Deichtorhallen, 2002): 6.

¹³ Roh (1951) 6.

¹⁴ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin, 1977) 60.

¹⁵ See Hal Foster, "Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as Fetish, as Shattered Object, as Phallus," in Jennifer Mundy, ed. *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* exh. cat. (London: Tate Publishing, 2001).

turbed fragment paradoxically could seem to become the object of the gaze. At the same time though, the transparency of the image along with the fragmented body question the voyeuristic gaze. The oneiric depiction does not allow the viewer to comprehend the dreamlike representation or fully grasp the slumbering figure. Visual trickery plays on the gaze as the female nudes appear vulnerable and transparent, yet also assertive and solid. The nudes linger as they are only seemingly connected to reality but attached to the landscape.

The portrayal of body hair in Roh's series also underscores the complexity of the bodies as objects. Berger points out that pubic hair is associated with passion for the woman and lack of hair on the represented female body allows for the male viewer exclusively to have such sexual passion and power.¹⁶ As the private becomes public and is exposed it is no longer reserved for the fantasy of the male gaze. The female nude represented with hair thus possesses a power linked with sexual passion. Roh's images complicate Berger's clear-cut argument because only slightly visible in some of the photographs, tree branches or dark soil mostly replace and define the hair (Figure 2). Alluding to a sexuality and power that is inherently rooted in nature, the images assert a femininity that if one agrees with Berger could be potentially threatening. The simile—the body is like the soil and can bear fruit—seems a rather obvious one, yet the way in which Roh presents this idea suggests that it is not so simple. Not only are the bodies fragmented and transparent but their sexuality and source of sexual passion is intimately connected to nature. As such the body engages fantastic visual forms, while it also represents a visual game for the viewer.

Several of the images in the series have been given the title *Daphne* (Figure 1), after the nymph, who in her efforts to escape the love-stricken Apollo is turned into a laurel tree. Despite this transformation Apollo still embraced the tree. The half-present, half-absent nude in Roh's series reinforces the same idea. Nature as woman (Daphne as tree) is something that man desires but cannot fully possess, for she appears in a transformative process or state. Referring to man's desire and failed pursuit of the feminine, the deceiving game in the series becomes especially poignant. Roh's *Daphne* is presented at precisely the moment in which the desired female becomes the unattainable tree.

Daphne appears in winter, the harsh and cold season in which very little grows. The series as a whole never depicts the nudes against fruitful spring or summer landscapes. The female nude seen in combination with the land in this case cannot refer to the fruitfulness of nature or the nurturing elements of Mother Earth. The cold whiteness of the flesh con-

trasts strongly with the dark and barren trees. In some of the images the bodies appear to be hibernating, frozen (Figure 3). Winter, though, can also conjure up a beautiful snow-covered wonderland. The duality of winter reinforces the complexity established with the half-transparent and half-fragmented body. Like the body, the winter landscape is attractive yet cold.

Other photographers contemporaneous to Roh have explored the relationship of the female body to the environment and have done so through superimposition. Heinz Hajek-Halke most notably stands out with his 1932 work *Malicious Gossip* [*Die üble Nachrede*] which depicts three dark-clothed bourgeois men in top-hats standing on a street that appears as a nude female torso.¹⁷ The men stand just above her right breast and peer down on her body. The photographic series *Ci-Contre II* by the Bauhaus student Moï Ver (Moshé Raviv-Vorobeichic) also contains an image of a reclining nude superimposed on a latticed fence.¹⁸ While these few examples are interesting to consider, even more so is the later work of Harry Callahan. His photographs explore representations of the feminine and nature. *Eleanor* (1949) shows a head just above the water as if she were Ophelia. Callahan also produced a large series titled *Aix-en-Provence* (Figures 4 and 5), which is quite similar to Roh's. This series plays with the idea of a feminine landscape in a manner that demonstrates how similar subject matter can be transformed: the photographic technique is integral to the appearance and effect of the resulting image.

Like Roh's nudes, the nude body in Callahan's series is also both present and absent, fading and emerging from the land. This can be described as dreamlike, yet not necessarily surrealistic. Although Callahan knew and admired the work of the surrealists in his earlier years, with regard to this series he was not consciously pursuing a surrealistic feeling.¹⁹ James Alinder suggests that Callahan's first concern was the landscape and its intimacy.²⁰ Indeed in Callahan's images the appearance of the female body is faint against a better-defined landscape. His superimpositions are marked by their visible, although ethereal clarity. Callahan's series has a flatness that makes the images decidedly simple and straightforward. The nude torsos are always centered, parallel to the landscape. The clarity and frontality suggests stability and a kind of objectivity. The quieting effect of the images posits a relationship of woman to land that is intrinsic, peaceful, natural, and feminine.

Rather than threatening, the nudes presented against vernal landscapes refer to the female role as a nurturer. Sherman Paul explains that Callahan's photography was a means of awareness and represented his contact with the environment.²¹ Callahan similarly portrays the nudes as in tune with the natu-

¹⁶ Berger 55.

¹⁷ Hajek-Halke's use of the sandwich technique is a result of his early and short-lived collaboration with Berlin photographer Yva (Else Neuländer-Simon).

¹⁸ In 1931 Moï Ver corresponded with Franz Roh, who was the editor of the short-lived *Fototek* series, in hopes of publishing his series.

¹⁹ Harry Callahan as quoted in Jain Kelly, ed. *Nude: Theory* (New York: Lustrum Press, 1979) 32.

²⁰ James Alinder, "Harry and Eleanor," in Anne Kennedy and Nicholas Callaway, eds. *Eleanor* exh. cat. (New York: Callaway Editions, 1984).

²¹ Sherman Paul, *Harry Callahan* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1967) 6.

ral surrounding of Aix-en-Provence. The sedentary bodies embody the landscape of southern France known for its historic traditions and bucolic beauty. With an abundance of flowers and grass, the landscapes are warm, a stark contrast to the cold and barren wintery snowscapes in Roh's images; the nurturing pastoral vision presented by Callahan is more easily equated with a fertile femininity.

The series certainly does not play with the male gaze in the same manner that Roh's does. The detailed fragments are direct despite their semi-appearance. Although we know that Callahan used his wife Eleanor in his images, he does not distinctly portray her face in this series of superimpositions. With this approach Callahan objectifies the female body by portraying fragments of it.²² The series portrays the rear and back of a seated figure, the lower torso and thighs, or the full torso as separate objects. This would seem to make them objects of the gaze, yet they do not seem to be erotic objects for visual pleasure. The nudes are not idealized, body hair is shown, and this candidness seems to make them powerful. The frontal portrayal of the torsos, furthermore, emphasizes the curving feminine lines of the body. They are not dangerously seductive because the female is emphasized in terms of a purely functional role as nurturer. The woman is presented as transparent and fragmented but against the flowering land so that the feminine is not threatening. In Callahan's images woman appears as natural Mother Earth, ubiquitous and continually present.

The Aix-en-Provence series does surmount realistically defined space and time but the dreamlike ambiguity of Roh's images does not seem present in Callahan's. Nudes which are transformed into focused transparency, are similarly dreamlike but not necessarily estranging. Callahan's nudes do not have a haunting, cold presence because the crisp aesthetic seems almost documentary.

The photographic series of both Roh and Callahan effectively use photography to examine the female body and its traditional association with landscape. Both series use superimposition to combine the land seamlessly with the body, connecting the feminine and the natural. As depictions of the rational and irrational and the natural and estranged, both series complicate the portrayal of the nude fragment as object. Not completely objectified by the gaze, the fragmented nude is both present and absent as part of the landscape. These critically provocative images demonstrate impressions of mystery, beauty, and power associated with Mother Nature.

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²² Many of Callahan's images of Eleanor show her entire body but they are not superimpositions. Another series of superimpositions of Eleanor where her entire body is shown as a silhouette certainly relates to the feminine landscape but is beyond the scope of this paper.



Figure 1. Franz Roh (1890-1965), *Untitled (Frauenakt in der Parklandschaft; Daphne II / Nude in Park landscape)*, c. 1922-28, vintage gelatin silver print, sandwich, 19.4 x 11.4 cm. © R. Hampe, Munich/ Courtesy Kicken Berlin.

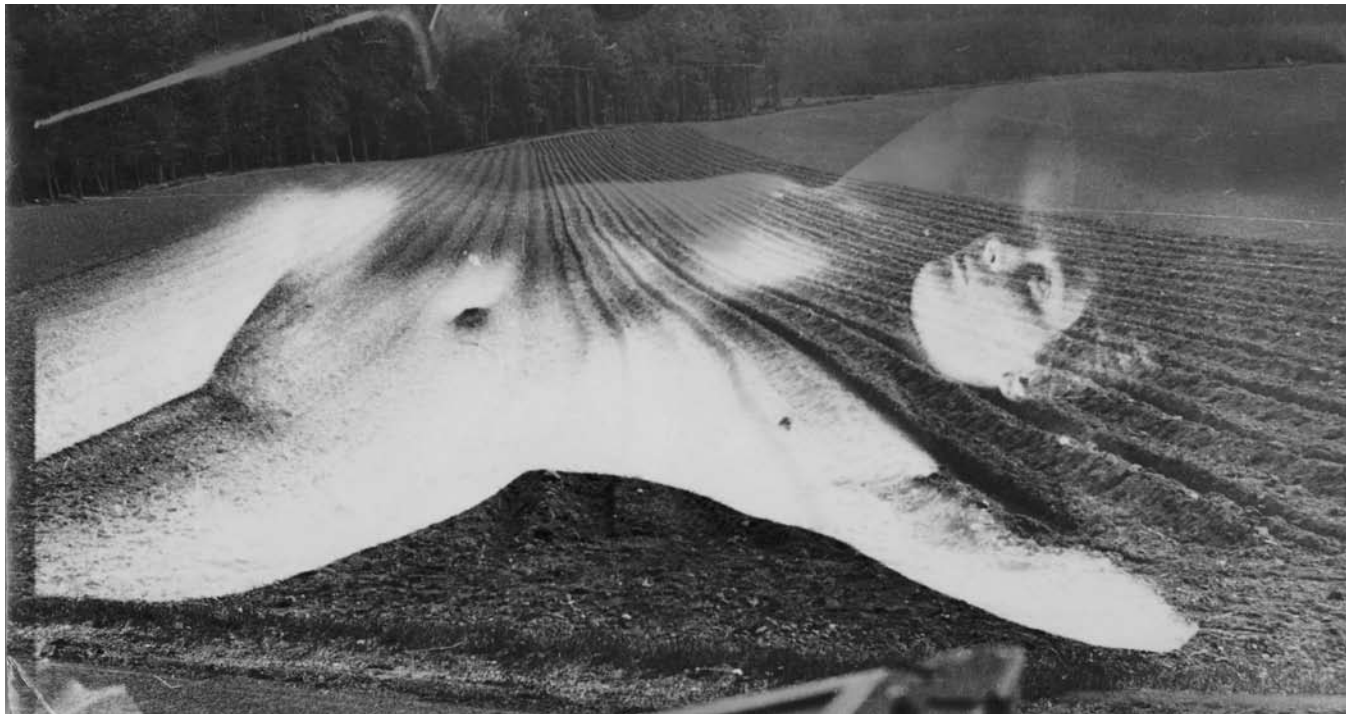


Figure 2. Franz Roh (1890-1965), *Herbstbäuerin / Farmer's wife in the fall*, c. 1922-28, vintage gelatin silver print, sandwich, 12.4 x 22.7 cm., © R. Hampe, Munich/ Courtesy Kicken Berlin.



Figure 3. Franz Roh (1890-1965), *Untitled (Akt im winterlichen Garten/Nude in wintergarden)*, c. 1922-28, vintage gelatin silver print, sandwich, 16.1 x 23 cm, © R. Hampe, Munich/Courtesy Kicken Berlin.



Figure 4. Harry Callahan, American, (1912-1999), *Eleanor, Aix-en-Provence*, 1958, gelatin silver print, 11.9 x 9.6 cm (4 11/16 x 3 3/4 in.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Susan and Peter MacGill, © The Estate of Harry Callahan, courtesy of Pace MacGill.



Figure 5. Harry Callahan, American, (1912-1999), *Eleanor, Aix-en-Provence*, 1958, gelatin silver print, 9.9 x 9.6 cm (3 7/8 x 3 3/4 in.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of Mrs. Ann Solomon, © The Estate of Harry Callahan, courtesy of Pace MacGill.