

## Real and Imaginary

In his unfinished *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519) urges painters to:

Look at walls splashed with a number of stains or stones of various mixed colors. If you have to invent some scene, you can see there resemblances to a number of landscapes, adorned in various ways with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, great plains, valleys and hills in various ways. Also you can see various battles, and lively postures of figures, strange expressions on faces, costumes and an infinite number of things, which you can reduce to good integrated form. This happens on such walls and varicolored stones, [which act] like the sound of bells, in whose pealing you can find every name and word that you can imagine.

It's not surprising that this passage came to mind when I first looked at Ljubodrag Andric's large-format color photographs of walls, which he took in Beijing, Miami, Arezzo, Berlin, and San Francisco. I am, to cite Leonardo's words, looking at "walls splashed with a number of stains or stones of various mixed colors." However, instead of seeing "resemblances to a number of landscapes," I was reminded of postwar abstract painting done in a reductive vein. But that was just the beginning of what turned out to be a complex and even contradictory series of responses. Andric's photographs

start an internal argument, and the oppositions they call forth in me are what I find myself focusing on — the conflicting registers of feeling and thinking.

The world I find in these images is empty: there are no humans visible anywhere, and every inch of the photograph is tightly orchestrated. In each work, the frontal view of a textured wall, which could have been built recently or hundreds of years ago, spans the entire width of the photograph, with a narrow strip of concrete or macadam in front and often a glimpse of an undramatic, often monochrome sky above. Even when clouds are visible, the sky is calm and seemingly remote. As I examine the photographs, I notice that if there are doors in the wall, they are always shut, and if there are windows, they are always dark, boarded over, bricked up, or broken. I also realize how sensitive Andric is to tonality and slight shifts in color, and to the way these states are embodied in the textures of the bricks or concrete.

I feel as if I have been invited to meditate upon a length of wall as much as examine it. The carefully calibrated horizontal divisions spanning the photograph underscore a geometric vision, which is further emphasized by the grid of bricks and the rhythmic repetition of architectural elements (cladding, doorways, windows, and drains). When there are asymmetrical elements, they inflect but do not undermine the overall balance. What comes across is a sense of order and stillness — a suspension of time — but the stains and cracks in the wall, the effects of time and weather, forestall the image from entering the domain of timelessness. Instead, Andric slows time down to a standstill, granting us a heightened awareness of its passing. At the same time, the photographs, by emphasizing formal relationships and withholding context, free the architecture from its circumstances and historical time. This is one of their more disturbing features. I don't know where I am, or

what is happening beyond the frame, or on the other side of the wall. I feel as if I am lost.

Even though the title Andric assigns each photograph is usually the name of a city (Beijing, Venice, or San Francisco), indicating where he took it, he doesn't provide a firm idea of the wall's location or purpose. It seems both familiar – it is just a wall – and off-putting because its function and history are obscure. I see stains, tonal shifts, flaking paint, the color and texture of the bricks, stones and boards – the details are extraordinary, to the extent that I feel as if I have never really looked at a wall or gate so carefully before, never scrutinized architecture in the same way. Again, I am reminded of abstract art, but with a twist.

Take *China 20* (2013), which is a photograph of two unadorned, rusted steel gates with dark thick smears dancing across the surface. The closed gates occupy most of the photograph, and their resemblance to a

postwar abstract painting is uncanny, but that is only part of the story. I have no idea how the dark smears got there, though they seem as if they were made by hand. But why were they done? It's also impossible to tell for sure what material the thick, almost calligraphic trails are made of, further adding to the mystery.

I also notice that each gate is composed of two steel plates, which have been welded together with a visible seam. Their obdurate materiality brings to mind the sheet metal sculptures of Richard Serra, but as if a vandal had defaced them. If minimalism and monochromatic abstraction aspired to pure states of color, Andric's walls underscore the impossibility of that goal in a world marked by time. As I further think about the color and texture, it dawns on me that I can't tell exactly how tall the gate is, though I intuitively sense that I would not be able to see over it. This is what I feel is central to Andric's photographs: they provoke

myriad questions that I can't answer. Each question seems to maintain its own orbit.

What am I to make of the windows that have been bricked up? Or a door that is halfway up a wall and opens onto the air? What about the relationship between the wall's surface, invariably marked with distinctive features, and the overall structure that nearly fills the photograph and becomes its own imposing, anonymous presence? There is beauty in these surfaces, their color and texture, but they are not pristine. There are cracks in the façade. A rough surface is adjacent to a smooth one. There are innumerable stains, and areas where paint has been applied, and where it is peeling. All of these details underscore time's indifference, as well as convey the beauty of the ordinary. The associations with abstract painting can be comforting, but I feel there is far more to these works than that narrow condition of aesthetic appreciation.

Don't the textured surfaces and absence of people also hint at ruins, evoking an old and perhaps abandoned city? Don't the high walls and imposing, uninhabited structures suggest power and virility, while the stains and cracks signal decline? What about the doors that open onto the air or staircases that lead somewhere I cannot see? I find these photographs both comforting and frustrating, an unlikely combination that demands further consideration.

Along with Leonardo, Andric's images of walls bring to mind another Italian artist, Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720 – 1778), and his etchings of Rome as well as his "Imaginary Prisons." However, whereas the atmosphere of Piranesi's prisons is dark and moody, Andric's photographs are full of natural light. Piranesi's etchings are vertically oriented, done in a portrait format, while the orientation of Andric's photographs is always horizontal. The wall, street, and sky, like broad stripes, underscore that horizontality; it is as if they

stretch beyond the photograph's physical edges forever. We know that Piranesi's prisons are imaginary, but we don't know whether Andric intends to infuse his walls with associations of incarceration, repression and punishment. Are they reminders of the persistent totalitarianism that still plagues our world? Or are they expressions of a highly refined aesthetic sensibility? Or are they both?

This is what I find so astonishing and challenging about Andric's photographs: they persuade me to think in two opposite directions. The fact that I cannot make the responses they arouse fit smoothly together is part of their meaning. Andric's sensitivity to the nuances of color, light and texture is unrivaled. I find myself poring over every inch of an ordinary wall, registering the play of similarity and difference, the divergent shifts in tone and the inconsistencies of surface, from smooth to uneven to rugged. I see the quiet effects of time. He seems dually motivated by an austere geometric vision



and an awareness of time passing, an awareness that is acutely attentive to the ambient light, the color and texture of the wall, the grit of the street, and the lucid, immaterial sky. But his geometry doesn't lead to purity. While the photographs are deeply attached to the everyday world and the things in it, Andric challenges us to see as well as reimagine these things, with the recognition that each informs the other. In Andric's photographs, the reality of seeing is inseparable from thinking and imagination. We might not be inspired to invent a scene taking place in front of or behind the surface of these walls, but I would say that Andric invites us to do something more unexpected: to speculate on the world in which his structures exist, and what our place in this world might be.