



John Stathatos: *The Book of Lost Cities: Arkiotis Duratrans* (text & lightbox)

John Stathatos

Wigmore Fine Art, London

The pictures in *The Book of Lost Cities* are of desert landscapes handsomely disposed under clear skies, in the style of Ernst Haas, Dan Budnik and other contributors to Time-Life's fine series of the 1970s on The World's Wild Places. The texts, of around 400 words each, have been placed to the left of the pictures, and they read like scholarly surveys from a bygone age - the 1920s and beyond. The triptychs are completed to the right by maps, of the kind given in broadsheet reports on border crises. Each triptych relates to a city half lost in the mists of time: Azzanathkona to Tigranocerta. Stathatos's sources are - he claims - publications from long-established universities and travellers' accounts. In actuality the pictures are of ruins and mountain scenery taken years ago in Afghanistan before the Soviet involvement.

Joan Fontcuberta, the Barcelona photographer, remarks that "Stathatos's erudition is infused with delirium". He and Yves Abrioux also refer to Borgesian labyrinths - as in Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius. Stathatos, it must be admitted, does go over the top, but only a little, and only from time to time. He doesn't ask you to admire his powers of invention, but rather to wonder about his sources. You would allow that there was a Cappadocian king called Ariobarzanes, and that he was at odds with the kingdom of Pontus. Maybe too there was a Mythridentes who did strap "a small, sharp knife under his penis, with which, by and by, he cut his unfortunate nephew's throat" - both examples from the sad story of Tigranocerta. What sort of knife, though, and what sort of penis?

The narratives are engrossing, all 3 to 4,000 words of them. Are they or aren't they true? Putting that aside, what sort of narratives are they? You might make a plan, given time, of cities wiped out by invasion, or of references to food, clothing, scripts, kings, animals, rivers, rituals. Few women crop up, for example, apart from the goddess Atargatis and the women of Azzanathkona "abominable for shaving their heads and for wearing red". Maybe, though, "ancient history" was always characterised by maleness: kings and cruelty. Perhaps writing *The Book of Lost Cities* gave Stathatos an opportunity to indulge a taste for heroic narration. On the other hand his texts may simply be an accurate reflection of the materials on which he draws. The suspicion that they are inventions does, however, suggest the accounts could be otherwise with a different style and different emphases. Stathatos, that is to say, has a manner of representing which is stern and brisk, which displays the evidence and retires from the scene.

The point of the work seems to be forensic, touching on the reality of those kings and the likelihood of certain rituals: forty-nine stranglers, in one instance (Daedala), lurking behind fifty doors. Stathatos', or the work's, tactic seems to be to return us to a wary self-consciousness regarding explanations and the pleasures of reading. *The Book of Lost Cities* is a modernist work - and liberal too. It assumes that you come to the business with a mind to make up, and that much of the attraction lies in the act of discernment - checking, if only briefly, on the likelihood of Ariobarzanes and the great Sea of Grass (Li-Jien). Does, for instance, the text ring true at all points, or is the occasional falseness in the phrasing or in the detailing there purely as a stylistic nuance? His skill is to be able to hold the edge between pure antiquarianism and our syncretic present. Concerning Arkiotis, for example, he refers to coins and seals stamped with a riotous confusion of symbols, "the Ptolemaic eagle, a burning palm, a boar's head, a winged thunderbolt", details with more than a whiff of army surplus.

Reading in *The Book of Lost Cities* you become self-aware, in the best modernist style of Eliot and Pound, and aware too of continuities. Stathatos's histories, with their impulsive kings, doomed enterprises and natural catastrophes, read like disguised extracts from the news in the nineties. Stathatos's post-modernism lies in his willingness to countenance catastrophe or disappearance so complete that nothing more than rumours and a few motifs survive - a winged thunderbolt or two and a carving which may have been seen decades ago, and which is now lost. One of the possibilities he entertains is of history itself - the writing, and the collecting - as subject to contingency. You don't just lose the city, but at some point you run the risk of losing even the scanty evidence that it ever existed. He imagines, that is, some future state in which the past has become very remote indeed, in which the earth has reverted to dead planethood, like the Mars investigated by Sojourner. The photographs - and this is a "photographic" exhibition - feature dried riverbeds and ash-grey dunes, under implacable interplanetary skies. In one instance the sun goes down, but the overall look of the series is bleak and still, as if change itself had come to an end. History with all its wrangling and vanity has taken place and exhausted itself in the process, leaving its relics to geological time, of the kind marked by strata on the rock-faces which appear in so many of his photographs.

His diagnosis is both post-modern and post-liberal. There could be an ending and a reversion to desiccated stillness. It would be due, the pictures suggest along with their texts, to cultures besotted by the idea of conquest and the promise of gold.