

ADAM SZYMCZYK: A SEA-CHANGE

Full fathom five thy father lies;
 Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
 Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

Shakespeare, Ariel's Song, *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene II

In 1962, Prince Karim Aga Khan IV set up an international consortium, Costa Smeralda, with the aim of buying a large part of the then wild Northern coastline of Sardinia and transforming it into a jetsetters' Mecca, strewn with yacht harbours, luxurious villas, hotels and boutiques, which were built in the Mediterranean style by some fashionable architects of the time. The white hull of a yacht, washed ashore on the beach at Portobello near the holiday village Vignola di Mare, is a bitter reminder of the Prince's fully accomplished project. The boat's name *Voile Liberté*, "liberty sail", is still readable in red letters painted on the side. The once brave boat has been quietly rotting in the sand for many years now, while the surrounding area has gone through more or less dramatic changes. Since 2000, the wreck has been the subject of Hildegard Spielhofer's photographic investigation.

The Costa Smeralda project is reported to have influenced the life of Sardinians in the North of the island. The creation of a summer paradise for the rich few was followed by a tourist boom resulting in changes in the traditional way of life for the local population, from farming to tourism. Post-modernity moved in, a rational organisation of luxurious leisure wearing a mask of eclectic vernacular style, borrowing and blending together generic forms and architectural motifs from old houses and public buildings around the Mediterranean. A set of strict rules, requiring great attention to detail, defined the size, colour and character of the buildings, the type of signage and access roads, as well as many other visual and material parameters of the new-old Costa Smeralda. At the same time, the technologically advanced infrastructure of the newly built houses and public spaces had to remain hidden, in order not to disturb the "natural" outlook and "local" feeling of the artificially created setting. Over the years, the re-designed stretch of Costa Smeralda has become the perfect image of itself – or of what the Mediterranean coast should be – in order to make us, the visitors, believe and "come unto these yellow sands".

A shipwreck on the seashore, represented by an artist in the early 21st century is charged with a multiplicity of references. At first sight, it is tempting to see the theme as part of the classic repertoire of the picturesque; the second thought is that it is almost irretrievably clichéd. One could start with Shelley's last journey in the Bay of Livorno on his ketch *Ariel* in 1822. The poet's disfigured body was discovered by fishermen on the coast near Via Reggio, identified by a volume of John Keats' poems found in one of his coat pockets, and then cremated on the same beach, in presence of Byron and Keats. This dark apocryphal story, full of atrocities and saturated with symbolism, typifies the pattern of many later narratives, in which an intense poetic life is interrupted, if not logically concluded, by a sudden and often deadly turn of fate, embodied in the elemental violence of the sea. The shipwreck serves as a monument to adventurous individual existence, to be contemplated in awe and silence. A procession of great shipwrecks in early 19th century Romantic painting, from W.M. Turner to C.D. Friedrich, immediately comes to mind, followed by some early black and white photography of ships crushed in the ice-fields of the Arctic sea or colliding with rocks on the English coast. The Romantic register of catastrophic incidents brings us, scene after scene, closer to our own age. The iconic figure here is Bas Jan Ader and his ill-finished Atlantic crossing as part of the *In Search of the Miraculous* series (1973-75). Itself a variation on many

staged, strange and final disappearances in the sea, the crossing has become a theme played upon in many superb works, including Tacita Dean's *Teignmouth Electron* (2000) – a filmic portrayal of Donald Crowhurst's shipwreck, a meditation on his one-man attempt to circumnavigate the globe, which ended in self-mystification, madness and death.

Shakespeare's idea of sea-change was first introduced in *Hamlet* – the deep spiritual transformation of the soul-sick Hamlet takes place as a result of his sojourn with pirates who captured him, finally returning the prince home. Yet in the famous stanza of Ariel's song in *The Tempest*, quoted above, the transformation caused by the sea takes on a more concrete dimension. Ariel is singing his song to bring Ferdinand to Prospero. In the song, the body of Ferdinand's drowned father undergoes a profound, mystical change, as if in an alchemical process: resting in the sea, it becomes the sea itself, rich and strange.

No such romantic stories are known of the *Voile Liberté* – it has no particular history. It appears in its immediacy as a defunct industrially produced structure, a found object existing as pure presence without qualities. Still it deserves a look, precisely because it is abandoned, meaningless, out of context. For Hildegard Spielhofer, the boat and its site have become worthy of many visits. Lost in breathtaking coastal scenery, the boat was further isolated through the artist's interpretation of its shape using analogue manipulation of light during the long exposure. The white hull remained motionless, although it was animated in sequences of close-ups and general views, lit by moonlight or handheld torchlight, white or with colour filters. The boat's transformation into a series of images could not be completed on-site; it needed another journey to close the circle. The artist removed part of the wreck and transported it into the gallery space. There it lies, the perfect image of itself, among the fabricated images. It is rich and strange again.

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