

# MACHU PICCHU

*Timothy Webster*

There's currently 75,000 odd photographs of Machu Picchu on photo sharing website Flickr. It's slightly more than the Leaning Tower of Pisa and slightly less than the Empire State Building. The Acropolis and Pompeii only manage a comparatively dismal 35,000 and 45,000 images respectively. By any measure, Machu Picchu has become, first and foremost, a place where tourists go to take photographs. But their images are more than just holiday souvenirs. This is one those places where the mass participatory act of photography threatens to overtake the spectacle of the site itself.

Shot from the same elevated location chosen by millions of tourists, Timothy Webster's new video installation participates in the astonishing outpouring of images that the Incan site inspires. The work records the slow environmental shifts of the landscape high in the Andes through a layered cluster of postcard-shaped vignettes. Just as the amateur photographers agree that no matter how many megapixels they wield, that the "photo doesn't really do it justice", Webster responds with an evocatively personal vision of the landscape that denies the possibility of a singular faithful image. It is a reaction that reflects the way that photographic reproduction diminishes the authenticity, and ultimately, historical testimony of the site. Just like the cathedral that "leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art" described in Walter Benjamin's famous essay, the mass mediation of Machu Picchu unavoidably shatters the aura of the real thing.

At the heart of the desires of those who photograph Machu Picchu is a need to prove that they were really there, and to take its representation home with them. The historical relation between travel photography and colonialism was never clearer than in the pages of the National Geographic - with its disturbing juxtaposition of the natural world with exotic peoples that continues to taint its pages. When Yale University lecturer Hiram Bingham III (himself the son of a Christian missionary) proclaimed in 1911 that he had 'rediscovered' the 'lost city of the Incas', it isn't surprising that his expeditions were funded in part by the National Geographic Society. Bingham neglected to give credit to the local guides who had led him to the site (they get glossed over as mere 'local rumour'), let alone acknowledge the other Western adventurers who had already visited and written about the site. Romantic explorers with compasses might have been replaced by tourists toting Lonely Planet, but the long trek to the site still results in a transcendent, and for many, deeply personal revelation. It is as if they are each discovering the site for the first time.

So, at the same time as expressing his distance from the mass representation of the site, Webster unavoidably revels in its motives. Like Caspar David Friedrich's Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, Webster surveys Machu Picchu with a sense of elevated remove. The transcendent greatness of nature that unfolds seems beyond all estimation or imitation, out of reach for mere mortals. In Machu Picchu, the site is quite literally emerging and disappearing from the mists of time, as Webster describes it "lifting to reveal vignettes of people and ancient ruin before closing in again and leaving only a persistent memory." Civilisation is not only crumbling, it seems to be vanishing before our eyes, unavoidably reminding us of the impermanence of human endeavour, and ultimately, of our own mortality.

But while the metaphysical resonance of Machu Picchu unavoidably tints Webster's very beautiful video, his formal interventions into the omnipotent vision of the tourist's camera suggests its more complex and contested history. Machu Picchu was never 'lost', it was simply that Western photographers were late in photographing it; nor is it 'timeless' - it's a granite ruin, abandoned sometime in the fifteenth century. The hoard of pottery and human remains that Bingham took back to the Peabody Museum at Yale has since been the subject of repatriation demands from the Peruvian government. Concerns over the number of visitors to the site were overshadowed recently when the production crew shooting a beer commercial damaged a sundial. There is nothing like mass consumption to dismantle the sublime.

Through a site loaded with history and memory, Webster's Machu Picchu suggests the multiplicity of our time. Like David Hockney's photo-montage collages, which reconstructed panoramic scenes from up to 150 layered snapshots, the complex layering of the work reconstructs the site in a way that seems to be disintegrating. The subtle shifting planes almost seem to mimic our own inattention, as well as approximating the dual perspective of human vision itself. Unstable and fragmented, the world of the work still remains coherent, creating a highly personal representation of one of the world's most over-represented locations.

Alex Taylor