

**The Landscapes I–VII (2014) by Elias Wessel – “In the end, though,  
nothing is lost”  
by Jenny Graser**

Black, dark brown, earthy and ochre-colored parallel lines traverse a square image carrier horizontally, as well as, warm red and orange, sun-yellow but also grass green, light- and dark green. In the lower image section a narrow, light blue stripe breaks through the dark brown. This image of 94.5 x 94.5 inches appears as a painting from afar, yet reveals itself as a photograph at closer inspection. It is part of a seven image series, which the artist Elias Wessel created in September 2014 during an artist’s residence in the Russian city of Kursk. “Landscapes I–VII” is the title of the abstract cycle of works, which is instantly remarking its image-source.

The starting point for this series are naturalistic landscape photographs taken by Elias Wessel in the city of Kursk and its surroundings. On the figurative counterpart of “Landscapes VI” wide fields covered with lavender can be seen. The violet-tinged grassed area is enclosed by thick forest vegetation in the distance. Above the treetops is a bright blue sky, traversed by bright veil clouds, which lose themselves in the expanse. “Landscapes III” is based on an aerial photograph taken by Wessel during a helicopter tour, and shows a tree-lined settlement surrounded by adjacent fields. The landscape, which is interspersed with numerous lakes, dissolves in green fields and forests that reach the gray horizon. Earth and sky, green and gray flow into one another. The almost romantic scenery of a sunrise is the source of “Landscapes I”: glistening sunbeams dive the forest, meadows and peaks of houses into a warm light. Opposite is the night view of a Kursk residential area. Illuminated windows here form bright light points in a dreary slab building settlement, which are

swallowed by the darkness of the night. On the horizon, a glow can be seen, which announces the day. This is the origin of “Landscapes VII”, a stripe pattern dominated by nuance-rich brown tones. The viewer looks in vain for a human figure in the landscape and the city photographs. However, sometimes more, sometimes less subliminal, man is always present in the nature modified by his hand. Its presence becomes obvious in the photograph taken from the roof of a skyscraper, which is the starting point of “Landscapes II”: individual houses, surrounded by lush trees, take the foreground of the picture. In the distance you can admire densely built rows of skyscrapers, which in the near future will also shape large parts of the Kursk area. According to Wessel, the town administration of Kursk urges modernization of the suburbs, where the settlements are to be replaced by office buildings and shopping malls. In the course of the modernization, the old houses will be torn down in the next few years and the people living there will be forced to move into skyscrapers located far outside the city borders. During a reception, which took place on the occasion of the artists’ residency in Kursk, the mayor proudly proclaimed this project and urged the artists to create “beautiful memory pictures” of these areas, which were about to be transformed in the near future. From the perspective of the city administration, a positively connoted idea of progress would be realized through urban modernization. In contrast, the art to be created in the context of the artistic residency should serve a nostalgic purpose and not take up the language of the modernization, but rather follow a “documentary” style. In addition to the actual artworks Elias Wessel took atmospheric photographs to document the scenery from where the final artworks emerged. However, they are not necessarily shown together with the abstracted images. These follow a numerical sequence only – Landscapes I–VII – and therefore do not give any information about the underlying motif.

The reference images were alienated in a work process, which was

compiled in several steps. At first, Elias Wessel approached the city of Kursk and its surroundings and photographed individual urban and landscape sections in the sense of documentary photographs. Increases such as mountains and roofs served as starting points for the images always taken from an aerial viewpoint. The motifs, which were initially shot at a standstill, were taken a second time, and the camera was now set in motion. Through a manual swivel, the shots became traversed by strips, which were enhanced within the camera adjustments. The contrast values of the color gradations were intensified which reduced the overall image to lines. Distorted and rhythmic, nature finally appeared in the form of a line-shaped structure. The variety of color nuances that unite in one image now came to light: the photographed picture of the sunrise was translated into a strip formation of earthy browns and reds in the lower third of the image, which are arranged in harmony with each other and are replaced in the image center by light brown and gray stripes. In sharp contrast to this, is the upper third of the picture, in which the yellow of the horizon passes over into a nearly white image part and finally ends in light blue stripes. The translation of the naturalistic into an abstract representation is ultimately based on the destruction of the landscape, which is transformed into a lamellar structure. Furthermore, the spatial illusion, which is suggested on the two-dimensional image carrier by the image composition traversed by vanishing lines and which directs the attention of the viewer to the depths of the landscape view, is being destroyed. Yet, Wessel's Landscapes do not completely deny spatiality. The impression of spatiality in the abstract landscapes is evoked through the element of linear images. The horizontal arrangement of the contrast-rich color strips gives the impression of depth levels, of color surfaces arranged in front and behind.

The development of the abstract landscapes is connected by Elias Wessel to a concept of analytical geometry. The way of life, considered as a line

connected by two dots, according to Wessel, always remains of invisible nature. From his perspective, the abstraction process that his documentary landscape underwent, reflected the idea that a line is marked by the position and connection of two dots. Wessel, reflecting on his own travels, transfers this theoretical idea to the two partner cities of Kursk and Speyer, each of which marks a point within his life path. The artist himself, moving between the two locations, forms a dot like a line depicting the traveling individual wandering through the Russian landscape, gathering numerous impressions. But is the path of life of an artist actually invisible? Does a picture-building effect not ultimately reside within the artist? The “Landscapes I–VII” reveal the image-generating potential of individual experiences, such as the artists residency in Kursk, which are decisive in the life cycle of Elias Wessel, and reveal the way of life, even if only selectively, at least visually perceptible. The landscapes suggest a straightforward structure and stringency, which life often lacks due to the influences of deviations and cross-currents. As Elias Wessel stresses, however, in contrast to space, in time there is always a linear path taking place. From the perspective of the artist, his continuous artistic development is represented in the stringent linearity of his landscapes. In addition, the linear structure represents the spatial connection between the two partner cities of Kursk and Speyer. Both cities, according to Wessel, have had a comparable impression on him. Thus, taking the total size of their respective countries into account, Kursk, with its approx. 415,000 citizens, appears as placid as Speyer with its 50,000 inhabitants in Germany. Here and there the citizens know each other and the city centers are decorated with churches, representative buildings and monuments. According to Wessel, the feeling of life in the city is characterized by the people living there. His current place of residence – Elias Wessel left his former place of study in Offenbach am Main in 2008 and moved to New York City; for his independent photography projects he has traveled to Syria, Egypt, Greece, China, Korea, Taiwan and Russia – is

representing an extreme contrast to Speyer and Kursk. The American megacity has an extremely high population density, is fast-paced, hectic, noisy, dirty and primarily characterized by modern architecture. Within the naturalistic language of the documenting photographs of the suburbs and city areas of Kursk, on the one hand, and in the abstract language of the final landscapes, on the other, the contrasts that characterize the vitality of provincial and metropolitan environments find their visual correspondence. The contrast between naturalistic and abstract artistic forms of expression represents at the same time the artistic development of Elias Wessel. The question of why he chose an abstract representation for depicting the surroundings of Kursk, reminds him of a text which describes the historical development of Palestinian painting since 1948. It documents that painters who had stayed or worked in their homeland or in their neighborhood had developed a uniform language. The artists, however, who had moved away from their homeland, took a more abstract language. Reflecting on his own life situation, Wessel observes precisely that artistic progress on himself. In New York his thoughts were directed into new paths and new interests were formed. During his artistic residency in Russia, he decided intuitively to create abstract works, since this universal visual language allowed his impressions and observations to be formulated. "Otherwise I would not have lived up to my observations," says Wessel. That abstract photography was invented in New York in 1916<sup>i</sup> is directly inspired by the thesis that the metropolis or the experience of strangeness transforms the modes of perception and forms the basis for abstract image generation. In addition to biographical markings which have influenced the aesthetic perception of Elias Wessel, the landscapes also capture the visual impressions that the artist has had in Kursk, including the straight lamellar structures that show the facades of the old houses in the suburbs of the Russian city. A line-shaped pattern also adorned the mayor's necktie, when the latter received the artist and did not fail to mention the 42 cameras installed in and around Kursk during

his speech. At the same time, the guests were warned about the speeding up. In the Landscapes of Elias Wessel a subjective perception of time can be found as well as a visual perception and artistic processing of the country and people of the Russian city Kursk. Wessel therefore takes the series of works as a kind of diary of the artists' residency.

In addition to Wessel's biographical background, the Landscape series also reflects the artist's admiration for Kasimir Malewitsch (1878–1935). It is an homage to the artist who lived in Kursk from 1896 to 1904 and the Suprematism he founded. Suprematism in the sense of Malewitsch marks the primacy of pure feeling before the objective nature:

“All internal processes take shape as concepts, only then do the disputes begin with the surrounding circumstances, only then do they become matter, but not in the sense of indivisible particles of matter. The excitation is like liquid metal in the blast furnace, it boils in a pure state of mind, and only the thought, enclosed in the skull, as a form of representation, cools it down and realizes it into objects. Objects are cold thoughts. The thought springs from the excitement and leaves the body the cooled mechanism that forms the worlds in the universe, which cool down and become objects in both nature and human life.”<sup>ii</sup>

Further states Malewitsch in his essay Suprematism – The Unconscious World or the Liberated Nothing published in 1922: “Everything that works leads to a real arousal. [...] We have to understand ‘reality’ as our inner excitements caused by external phenomena.”<sup>iii</sup> “We live only in the reality of effects, or more correctly, in the reality of the stimuli produced by effect, their meaning can not be analyzed.”<sup>iv</sup> Besides Kasimir Malewitsch, Elias Wessel names Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) as the second art-theoretic influence for the landscapes. Picasso argues that an artist starts out from something real in order to be able to dissolve the traces of reality. Thus Picasso writes in 1935:

“In the old days pictures went forward toward completion by stages.

Every day brought something new. A picture used to be a sum of additions. In my case a picture is a sum of destructions. I do a picture – then I destroy it. In the end, though, nothing is lost: the red I took away from one place turns up somewhere else.”<sup>v</sup>

While from the point of view of Malewitsch any excitement in man is caused by external influences, Picasso accepts this effect within his art. His works radiate emotions. Accordingly, he states: “I want to get to the stage where nobody can tell how a picture of mine is done. What's the point of that? Simply that I want nothing but emotion to be given off by it.”<sup>vi</sup> As Elias Wessel relates, the landscapes combine the points of view of Kasimir Malewitsch and Pablo Picasso. Both real and external influences as well as emotions form the resources of his work series: ideas and emotions triggered by the confrontation with an initially unknown landscape at Wessel were transformed into an abstract visual language.

Elias Wessel’s series of works withdrew the realistic portrayal of nature desired by the city administration and polarized because of this, an effect that Wessel had consciously sought to provoke. Finally, his works integrated harmoniously into the group exhibition of scholarship holders presented at the end of the artist’s residency. Colors, moods and atmospheres of the abstract photographs harmonized with the naturalistic paintings, which were linked to the tradition of moody landscapes and romantic landscapes. His handling of the Landscape photographs was of a picturesque nature, reports Wessel. Thus, the observation of the American photographer Paul Strand (1890–1976), who saw a longing for painting expressed in the manual interventions of the early abstract photography of the 1910s, is fulfilled in the Landscapes.<sup>vii</sup> In Wessels’ “light drawings”<sup>viii</sup> not everything is lost. The horizon line that provides orientation and support to the human being may not be palpable at first sight, but the horizon is perceptible. A last remainder of the original image remains stuck despite the destructive image-forming process: “In the end, though,

nothing is lost”<sup>ix</sup>.

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- i See: Kellein, Thomas: “Die Erfindung abstrakter Fotografie 1916 in New York”, in: Kellein, Thomas; Lampe, Angela (Eds.): Abstrakte Fotografie, Ostfildern-Ruit 2000, pp. 33–55
- ii Malewitsch, Kasimir: Suprematismus – Die gegenstandslose Welt, Translated by Hans von Riesen. Cologne 1962, p. 196
- iii *ibid.*, p. 202
- iv *ibid.*, p. 203
- v “Statement by Picasso: 1935”, in: Barr, Alfred H.: Picasso. Fifty Years of his Art, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1974, p. 272
- vi *ibid.*
- vii See: Kellein 2000, p. 41
- viii Hütt, Wolfgang: Landschaftsfotografie. Ein Beitrag zu ihrer Geschichte und ihrer Theorie, Halle 1963, p. 35
- ix “Statement by Picasso: 1935”, in: Barr 1974, p. 272