

SHIFTING LANDSCAPES: THE NATURE OF RISK

MARYAM MUMLADZE

20.10.2023 - 30.11.2023, Archipel, Sion

Maryam Mumladze

Born in 1996 in Tbilisi, Georgia, Maryam Mumladze is a professional artist based in her native country, deeply passionate about storytelling, photography and the intersection of social issues, art, technology and digital culture. With a Bachelor's degree in Social Sciences from the University of Tbilisi and a Master's degree in Media Arts from Austria, Denmark and Poland, Maryam Mumladze brings to her work a unique perspective based on an interdisciplinary approach. Her willingness to link different fields has given life to artistic projects that provoke reflection and engagement through visual media. As a freelance photographer, Maryam Mumladze has produced a number of photographic reports covering a wide range of genres, from documentary to fashion and conceptual photography.

Training

2022 - Visual storytelling workshop with John Stanmeyer

2021 - Master in Media Arts Culture, Danube University Krems, Aalborg University, University of Lodz

2018 - Bachelor in Social Sciences, Free University of Tbilisi

Exhibitions

2023 - Shifting landscapes: the nature of risk, Archipel, Sion

2023 - Kolga Tbilisi Photo Festival, "One Shot" category, Tbilisi

2019 - Ars Electronica, New Media Art festival, Linz

3 August 2023: a deadly geological disaster strikes Georgia

On 3 August 2023, three days after Maryam Mumladze (*1996) arrived in Switzerland for her residency as part of the SMARt programme, a huge torrential lava flow hit the tourist resort of Shovi in Georgia, the artist's native land. The tragedy occurred after several days of torrential rain in the Racha Valley, a mountainous region in the north-west of the country at the confluence of two rivers, famous for its vast forests and mineral water springs. Around thirty people were killed and the region was declared a disaster zone. Homes, roads and bridges were destroyed and communications interrupted by the immense torrents of mud several metres high, sweeping away everything in their path.

From a geological and hydrological point of view, this disaster was caused by a 500,000 cubic metre mass of rock that collapsed near the Buba glacier, in the gorges of the Bubistsqali river. This led to the fragmentation of the glacier and the release of subglacial waters. As the water gushes down, it creates destructive waves of water, sediment, rocks, boulders, trees and gravel travelling at very high speed: a veritable "torrential lava".

Just a few days after the incident, the Georgian government was widely criticised by the population, both for the rescue measures put in place and for its management and anticipation of natural hazards in high-risk areas such as Shovi. This event, which inevitably left its mark on the Georgian photographer who had just arrived in Valais, prompted her to work on the issue of environmental risks and how to deal with them, particularly in the current context of global warming. The result was Shifting landscapes: the nature of risk.

Using art to raise awareness of natural risk management

Symbolising the confrontation between the power of nature and the place of human beings within it, the torrential lava affecting Shovi is at the heart of the artistic impetus behind Maryam Mumladze's project. With a Bachelor's degree in social sciences from the University of Tbilisi, her home town, and a Master's degree in media arts from Austria, Denmark and Poland, the artist is passionate about interdisciplinary approaches, particularly combining art and social issues. Her aim is to encourage reflection and commitment through visual media. In this way, photography - and art more generally - becomes a means of raising public awareness of topical issues. The management of natural risks is one example, in this series produced during her three-month residency at the Villa Ruffieux in Sierre, from August to October 2023.

Shifting landscapes: the nature of risk invites viewers to consider the significant contrast between man-made infrastructures and the indomitable forces of nature, powerful and persistent. Indeed, in the era of the Anthropocene and global warming, hazard management is taking a different turn. From a hydrological point of view, with the increase in extreme rainfall, the latter is changing and will continue to change, with the potential to become more frequent, more intense, in unprecedented locations. Paradoxically, the impact of mankind can be seen in the reduction in risk, thanks in particular to the protective measures that have been put in place - against flooding in the Valais, for example - since the 1950s. A balance therefore needs to be constantly struck between changes in natural hazards and their management, by means of systems developed by specialists, whether in terms of land-use planning, organisation, biological measures or protective constructions.

Maryam Mumladze's photographs show, in an aesthetic way, the duality that is omnipresent in the Valais region between the force of nature and the human efforts made to tame it. The apparent dangers and risk zones typical of the canton are evoked by the presence of buildings and human elements in landscape shots that suggest both the sublime and the abstract. When the human imprint is not directly visible in the form of glacier tarpaulins, rockfall nets, avalanche barriers, wooden racks or dykes, it is the photographer herself who intervenes in the image, capturing it with an infrared filter that gives it a dreamlike artistic quality. The reddish hue of the work is an undeniable reminder of the heat and global warming, but also of the notion of danger associated with them.

Physical involvement and documentary purpose

In addition to her shots of landscapes and infrastructures, Maryam Mumladze also opts for a more documentary aspect to her artistic project. Going out into the field, following the scientists, engineers, workers, professionals and even artists who work tirelessly to manage natural hazards in order to protect or raise awareness among local populations, the artist chose to pay tribute to them by taking an interest in their work and documenting it. For two months, she contacted specialists in Switzerland - and also in Georgia - to understand risk management in these two countries. She followed them all over the canton (and even beyond), between the Col de la Forclaz, Martigny-Croix, Vollèges, Chamoson, the Vallon de Réchy, the Illgraben, Loèche, the Rhône glacier and Randa, to capture not only their work, but also the environment in which we live.

Her shots on glaciers, near torrents and in landslide zones, and the Georgian photographer's physical involvement in these high-risk territories, can also be seen as ways for her to overcome the events that have affected her country, as a kind of artistic therapy.

Although produced in Switzerland, the artistic project Shifting landscapes: the nature of risk transcends national borders. The series is intended to have an impact in Georgia in particular, a country where advanced surveillance and preventive measures relating to natural hazards - particularly landslides and debris flows - are still in their infancy. In this way, the documentary part of the project, devoted to specialists and their understanding of natural threats, can be understood as an example to follow for Georgian governmental organisations, NGOs and, more broadly, civil society.

Finally, through this artistic and documentary project, Maryam Mumladze pushes us towards current questions, bringing us to a necessary awareness in an era of global warming and the emergence of new natural hazards. Art and science come together in photographs that are as aesthetic and poetic as they are objective, presenting both the beauty and power of nature in the landscapes she captures, and the work of experts, essential to managing this power and the threats it creates.

Maéva Besse, 2023