

Beauty came to Us in Stone

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Peter Stoffel

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«So we meet again in Arolla,» Stoffel grins, prodding the Schublig sausages that arc and twist over glowing embers at 2,000 meters above sea level. Years after writing about our first meeting here for his exhibition catalogue at Kunstmuseum Solothurn, we stand again at Europe's highest campground. This time Stoffel has just returned from Iceland, and the northern wilderness has left its mark on his artistic vision. The sausages, still made by his own hands, remind me of my previous vegan protestations, now worn smooth by time like river stones. He describes how the northern lights had danced above active volcanoes - nature's own version of his paintings, where fluid energies course through solid forms. «Like that,» he says, gesturing at the sausages curling in the heat, «everything is always in motion, even stone.»

I'm watching him from a precarious camp stool, feeling distinctly out of place - still a city dweller who prefers his nature framed by hotel windows. Around us, the highest campground in Europe stretches like a shelf cut into eternity. Beyond, the Alps rear up with a static majesty that seems tame compared to the liquid fire Stoffel witnessed in Iceland.

As darkness seeps up from the valleys, Stoffel begins to talk. His voice mingles with the hiss of fat dripping onto coals. «In Reykjavik,» he says, turning the meat with careful attention, «I watched the aurora paint the sky while below, magma pushed against the earth's crust. Light above, fire below - and between them, the landscape constantly transforming.» Somewhere in the darkness floats the familiar chime of unseen cattle bells, interwoven with the wind's sighing through the high passes. The Alps may appear immutable and fixed, but Stoffel sees them through eyes recently calibrated to Iceland's raw geology, where creation and destruction perform their eternal dance.

«Look there,» he says suddenly, pointing with his fork toward where the Pigne d'Arolla catches the day's last light. The mountain appears to ripple, its solidity momentarily questionable. «That's what I'm after. Not the mountain as object, but as event. A slow explosion caught in mid-burst.»

The meat is done. We eat in the gathering dark, watched by peaks that have become massive absences against the star-bright sky. Last time, Stoffel spoke of painting as an array of byzantine connections. Now, tempered by northern ice and fire, his words carry new weight. «When you've seen the ground crack open and witnessed light paint itself across the entire sky, you realize everything is fluid. Even these Alps are just temporary formations, frozen moments in an endless flow.» «Like love,» he says, grinning. «Either close enough to swallow or so vast you can't see its edges.»

Night proper arrives with alpine suddenness. The fire dies to embers that mirror the stars, and Stoffel's voice takes on a different timbre. He speaks of painting as cartography of the impossible - mapping territories that exist between states of being. «Like the moment when magma becomes stone, or when the aurora's ethereal light seems to solidify into momentary architecture.» His hands move in the darkness, sketching invisible forms.

«I still want to paint an atlas,» he says, echoing his words from years ago, «layer all images into one thick book and move through it like a worm. Vertical, horizontal, diagonal.» He pauses. «To digest it, you understand? To process it through the body. But now I understand better what that means. Not just layers of images, but layers of time itself - glacial, tectonic, cosmic. A book where every page is alive with transformation.»

The cold is becoming insistent. High above, unseen glaciers shift and groan - a sound like the earth remembering. Stoffel feeds the fire and continues. He describes paintings that operate like geological processes - compression, erosion, folding. Canvases where space itself appears to bend and time becomes visible as texture.

Up here, his words acquire a peculiar resonance. The darkness around us vibrates with possibility - not empty space but raw potential, like the instant before water freezes into ice, when molecules pause to contemplate their future architecture. The night air seems charged with this same suspended energy, as if we're floating in that ancient space where elements first learned to dance.

Morning arrives like a slow tide of light. The peaks materialize from darkness, solid again but somehow altered by our night's conversation. They read now like enormous paintings in progress, their surfaces alive with incident and possibility.

Stoffel is already up, naturally, busy with breakfast and still talking. He wants to see mountains from below. He wants to paint air currents and deep time. He wants to fold space back on itself until it reveals its hidden symmetries.

I pack my gear, watching him gesture at the awakening landscape. Here at altitude, surrounded by stone and sky, his obsessions make a different kind of sense. His paintings aren't representations of mountains - they're investigations into how the world assembles and disassembles itself, moment by moment, particle by particle.

The peaks loom above us, patient as paint drying, permanent as a gesture caught in mid-stroke. Stoffel is still talking as I leave, his words merging with the morning wind, becoming part of the mountain's endless conversation with itself.

Tirdad Zolghadr