

# GLADSTONE

Kito Nedo, "Parallax View," Artforum, September 1, 2024

## ARTFORUM

CLOSE-UP

### PARALLAX VIEW

Cyprien Gaillard's *Retinal Rivalry*, 2024

By Kito Nedo



Cyprien Gaillard, *Retinal Rivalry*, 2024, two-channel 4K 3D projection, color, sound, 29 minutes 3 seconds.

**THE BAYERISCHER HOF**, the palatial five-star resort that hosts the annual Munich Security Conference, has long enjoyed a reputation as one of Europe's finest hotels. The small plaza across the street is also home to a nineteenth-century monument to Renaissance composer Orlando di Lasso. But Google Maps now lists the location as a "Michael Jackson memorial." That's because, since the King of Pop's 2009 death, fans have been stubbornly plastering photos on the statue's pedestal and lighting candles at its base. Jackson's devotees often spent days waiting in the little park just to catch a glimpse of him whenever he stopped in Munich. Now and then, the singer would throw autographed pillows and bedsheets, reading I LOVE YOU, from his hotel windows for fans to

snatch up from the sidewalk. Of course, this site of veneration seems strange nowadays, given the allegations of abuse that have surrounded Jackson for some time.

Perhaps it's an interest in the perils of monumentality and the cult of fandom that account for the site's appearance in Cyprien Gaillard's 3D video installation *Retinal Rivalry*, 2024, which debuted recently at the Fondation Beyeler's "Summer Show." Gaillard's 4K camera slowly scans the monument in close-up, taking in the laminated Jackson posters taped to the granite with adhesive foil: Jackson as a young child, as a member of the Jackson 5, or with Freddie Mercury. The shots are strikingly rich: The foil glistens with hyperrealist crispness, and the perfectly legible labels on two small empty bottles reveal that they contained wine from Abruzzo. Gaillard has no need for an establishing shot; the monument is shown only as a detail, as a kind of landscape in miniature, without visitors. A whirring sound recurs, as if something is being chopped up by the blades of a propeller.



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*Retinal Rivalry* is a tour of Germany in a little under half an hour. Culturally significant public spaces and landscapes, such as hiking grounds in Saxony or the Theresienwiese, the hundred-acre open area where Munich's Oktoberfest takes place each year, are shown from unusual perspectives, in engrossing detail, and mostly devoid of people. When we do see a person, it's only from behind, at a great distance, or, in one scene, sleeping off last night's intoxication under a tree. It's as if Gaillard wanted to depict monumental places as objectively as possible, so as to highlight their absurdity, unintentional comedy, and present uncanniness. This naturalism recalls Stendhal's nineteenth-century description of a novel as "a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects the azure skies, at another the puddles at your feet." Gaillard's cool, naturalistic gaze is a deliberate device, one that quotes both documentary and Romantic aesthetics.

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Yet these landscapes and memorials are spatially exaggerated through the 3D footage, with its tendency to overemphasize foregrounds. Because *Retinal Rivalry* is a consideration of art and monuments in physical space, the use of high-tech recording and 3D projection technology, with their illusion of spatiality, links content with form. The artist shot the film in sites where history, culture, and the present are visible in layers, like exposed rock strata. A very dry sense of humor prevails. What else could possibly be said about landmarks that, by definition, have already been seen a thousand times? Apparently, a lot. Consider the remnants of a city wall, filmed first-person-shooter style, embedded in the concrete of a parking garage beneath the square outside Cologne Cathedral. Or an endlessly long, graffiti-covered wall in Berlin's Mauerpark, along which the camera is pulled, delivering a rush of color.



Or the Burger King branch in Nuremberg that has operated since 2006 in a landmarked substation that was built in the 1930s after designs by the Nazi architect Albert Speer; you can still see the dark shadows of the Nazi imperial eagle on its facade. Gaillard filmed the building from an almost absurdly low perspective, close to the ground, the way a small animal might see it. Here, the unsteady camera does not provide a neutral view of the structure, nor does it lend itself to a clear reading. Instead, Gaillard's camera casts an ambiguous gaze onto a layered and bizarre place. Other sequences feature views from Saxon Switzerland, a national park in eastern Germany and well-developed tourist destination that inspired Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), the best-known painter of German Romanticism, who roamed its hills and valleys and captured its beauties in sketches and paintings like *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, ca. 1817. The Nazis later seized on his pictures of forests and ruins shrouded in mist, and of sunrises and sunsets, lionizing Friedrich as the prototypical “Nordic-Germanic” artist. Friedrich's sublime landscapes are marked by a romantically underpinned emptiness that, still today, invites divergent readings.

“I wanted my images to have an echo to them, like a Dub version of cinema,” Gaillard is quoted in the exhibition booklet. Omission seems to be a defining stylistic device of the film—but here it's less about emptiness than about depth. In this way, the film extends Gaillard's probing examinations of advanced digital-image technologies. In contrast to *Nightlife* (2015), his first 3D film, which had a running time of just under fifteen minutes, *Retinal Rivalry* feels more cryptic and aesthetically radical in its montage of scenes and sounds and the resulting atmospheres. It is a distinctive collage that plays with cinematic narratives such as the essay-documentary.



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Whereas *Nightlife* harnessed a looped sample from Alton Ellis's rocksteady classic "Black Man's World" (1969) as a unifying acoustic accompaniment for the footage of trees swaying in the night wind, *Retinal Rivalry*'s soundtrack is roving: Sundanese music from a UNESCO archive in Paris plays alongside organ sounds of Johann Sebastian Bach from a public sound sculpture in Weimar; a human voice is warped by metallic distortion; there are snippets from the soundtrack for Werner Herzog's film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) by the Krautrock band Popol Vuh, and various field recordings. The immersive scenes and sceneries bear the imprint of sometimes devastating damage: They are scarred and depleted by tourism, totalitarian ideology, or just bad city planning (such as the underground parking garage in postwar Cologne that embodied the once popular and now outdated idea of a car-friendly city). But here they are, and here they will remain. "Certain perspectives can doubtless be communicated by art alone, for limitations on our respective viewpoints have become so common nowadays, that people no longer have the sense of perspective necessary to see beyond them," the late sociologist Lucius Burckhardt wrote. Gaillard's new film succeeds in broadening this historical aperture beyond the lacunae of the present.