

NIGHT LIGHTS

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By Simone Jones

The turning on of lights usually indicates that a space is occupied. This is especially true of lights that are situated in non-urban environments. Lights placed in a landscape signify control over that space. In other words, outdoor lighting generates landscapes that are tamed rather than wild. The images in Thomas Kneubühler's series *Electric Mountains* depict mountain ranges that have been artificially lit to permit night skiing. The artificial light subdues the daunting landscape of the mountains and imbues it with a sense of spectacle that arises from human domination. Photographed from a distance, Kneubühler's mountain ranges seem unreachable, if not entirely unreal. The powerful lights used to illuminate the slopes transform the landscapes into elaborate sets. In truth, the wattage needed to power these types of lights is closely related to the power used to illuminate outdoor film sets. In this context, night skiing approaches the realm of fantasy precisely because it can only exist within a hyper-mediated experience.

What do we feel when we are confronted with these images? Kneubühler's decision to frame the mountains at a distance eliminates any identification with individual skiers. (In fact, the ski hills seem unoccupied). Looking at Kneubühler's images evoke feelings of the sublime; if this had been his aim, his choice of a mountain range as subject matter, is highly appropriate. However, sensations of awe and speechlessness emerge from our understanding that the mountain landscapes have been tamed, rather than from any sense of nature's power over us.

It is not uncommon to feel awe in the face of human domination over nature. Engineering wonders such as the Golden Gate Bridge, the Great Wall of China, and the Hoover Dam inspire feelings of wonderment and admiration. However, that a ski hill was kept open for business at night prompts feelings relating to decadence and even hubris rather than reverence. Nonetheless, Kneubühler's photographs retain a seductiveness that holds our attention, even while their point-of-view keeps us at a distance. Kneubühler's colour photographs, *Electric #3*, *Electric #6*, and *Electric #9* are printed on transparencies, mounted in light boxes lit from behind. This gives them a compellingly eerie glow not unlike the luminance emanating from the artificially lit ski hills themselves.

The installation *Brise Soleil Meets Mt. Hortons* is a collaborative piece that pairs Kneubühler's photograph *Mt. Hortons* with Geoffrey Jones's LED

light panels *Brise Soleil*. This work consists of a 3 metre x 3.6 metre inkjet print that is mounted directly onto the wall of the gallery space. The landscape depicted in the image has the appearance of an empty parking lot at night. Piles of snow resembling those created by bulldozers after a heavy snowfall fill the frame and are lit by two industrial lights. The parking lot lights render the piles of snow visible; the landscape comes into our view with the aid of artificial light. This acknowledgement of light as a producer of images is underscored by the presence of eight light emitting diode (LED) panels, each consisting of an array of red, green, blue, and white LEDs that slowly shift their white point and intensity, arranged in front of the large-scale photograph.

In Kneubühler's installation, the LED panels throw light directly onto the surface of the actual photograph, which creates a doubling effect between the light evident within the photograph and the lights that illuminate the photograph's space in the gallery. Would the LED lights melt the snow pictured in the photograph? This is a naïve and somewhat rhetorical question, but it points to the tension that Kneubühler creates between fact and fiction. The photograph as document—as a precise trace of reality—has always traversed the fine line between reality and fantasy. Kneubühler's installation deliberately plays with our reception of and expectation of the photographic image as something that is natural and waiting to be captured by the camera. In contrast, the landscape that Kneubühler presents us in *Brise Soleil Meets Mt. Hortons* is far from natural; the piles of snow are man-made and the lights illuminating the parking lot serve as a replacement for sunlight. It is clear that this “night shot” could not have been made without artificial lighting.

Kneubühler presents us with an image of a landscape that has been artificially constructed. Yet because this landscape has been photographed, we receive it as something that occurs naturally. Kneubühler's photographic landscape conflates the natural and the man-made into one scene, and the addition of the bank of LED lights within the gallery space negates any promise of a return to a natural order. Instead the viewer is faced with an image of perpetual darkness that is held in stasis by the presence of artificial light.