

projected upside down. Panning slowly up from the hull of the boat the screen fills first with cloudy shards of crumbled berg floating by in a tar-black sea. Then, as the camera settles on a horizon line somewhere near the bottom of the picture, the light begins to glance off the water creating a pale, shimmering foil across which new bergs appear of now crushing proportions. The quiet waters and the crystalline light spring perfect shadowy doubles from them, while in the distance a landscape of rock and snow forms a slower-moving backdrop, itself also shadowed into the water.

Scrambling for some metaphorical landmarks in all this gorgeous watery abstraction, and looking towards the landmass in the distance, I thought first of melting blocks of ice cream; but then a massive berg would fly by (apparently flying by virtue of the film's inversion) and look everything like the craggy bulk of an Imperial Star Destroyer from the *Star Wars* series. Perhaps that was just my enthusiasm running away with me, but the fact that at times the film resembles animation is, peculiarly, a measure of how fine it is: it reframes the beautiful but unearthly tundra as beautiful and perfect unreality.

If the success of Almond's version of the Antarctic lies in its evasion of the regular tropes, then the flaw of his film of the Arctic, with its image of a man pulling a sledge through the darkness, is its nostalgic redolence of Edwardian toffs struggling against the limits of their earthly estate. In reading the Arctic in this way he is also picking up a different optic from that used at the south pole; the presence of the clock and the monitors relaying electro-magnetic readings only multiply those optics. Almond wants all these perspectives to converge in one experience what would bring the poles closer, but instead he has created a conceptual chart of different abstractions – visual, temporal, physical – and they don't easily gel.

Stephen J Pyne suggested in his excellent book *The Ice* that the Antarctic erases all normal expectations of landscape – that it can hardly be experienced as a landscape at all. Only a culture accustomed to it could possibly possess adequate means of representing it. That Almond should succeed in his own attempts when he evokes the fantastical and produces a negation, and stumble when he evokes a human reality, is as much due to the shortcomings of our own conceptual kit-box as it is of his. ■

**Morgan Falconer** is a freelance journalist.

## ■ Marine Hugonnier

**MW projects** London April 4 to May 31

**Chisenhale Gallery** London April 9 to May 18

Under the Taliban it was against Afghan law to import any of the following: lipstick, chessboards, musical instruments, satellite dishes, cassette tapes, computers, videos, television sets, playing cards and all games. Also

banned were films, filming equipment, and any object bearing the image of a living thing, human or animal. In this light, any film currently made in Afghanistan and filmed by a western, female artist no less, is of note – if only to confirm that some degree of freedom might actually have trickled into the country.

In late summer 2002, French-born London-based artist Marine Hugonnier visited Afghanistan with the aim of creating a film, *Ariana*, exploring the connection between history and landscape. Afghanistan is celebrated for the utter uniqueness and beauty of its geography. Forming a kind of a natural fortress, two thirds of the country is covered by steep mountainous terrain, with the Hindu Kush mountain range – the location for *Ariana* – in its centre, an almost impenetrable barrier between the north and the rest of the country. These forbidding mountains are so inhospitable that, as the artist explains, they have never even been individually named. In one of the photographic elements connected with *Ariana* the artist has shot some of these nameless mountains – bestowing upon them, through photography, the dignity of individuality.

Separating these immense peaks are deep, fertile valleys which, in contrast to the hostile surrounding mountains, were described by a 15th-century poet as a lush earthly paradise, 'a land of emeralds'. Southern Afghanistan is dominated by desert; to the north are the farmlands. Twenty-three years of war, deforestation, floods, avalanches and the drug trade have taken their toll on the paradise that was Afghanistan, devastated further by the more than ten million land mines still undiscovered there.

It is against this backdrop that Hugonnier departs on her journey from Kabul to the Pandjshër Valley, a state within a state which, given its defensively strategic position, resisted invasion by both communism and fundamentalism. The crew's aim is to film the surrounding Hindu Kush mountains from a 360° panoramic point of view, but this soon proves impossible. Observation equals control, as we learned from Michel Foucault, and the local authorities are hardly going to hand such power over to the 34-year-old artist. *Ariana* is punctuated by black-outs and silences suggesting the waiting, the frustration of the filmmakers' experience. Meanwhile the images range from children swimming in clean waters, to crumbling buildings, to the sporadic red flashes of light in mountain night-bombings. When the crew is finally allowed to film the city from the overlooking 'television hill', their discomfort at holding this dominating position leads them to ignore the panoramic sight and turn their lens, briefly, to their accompanying soldier. They quickly abandon filming altogether however, and *Ariana* ends abruptly here.

In the past Hugonnier has worked with ideas that are noticeably representative of topical notions occupying contemporary art at present. In *Flowers*, 1996-2000, the artist handpainted real flowers, enhancing their natural colour. In this simple operation the artist drew attention to the artificiality of nature, as well as to the history of

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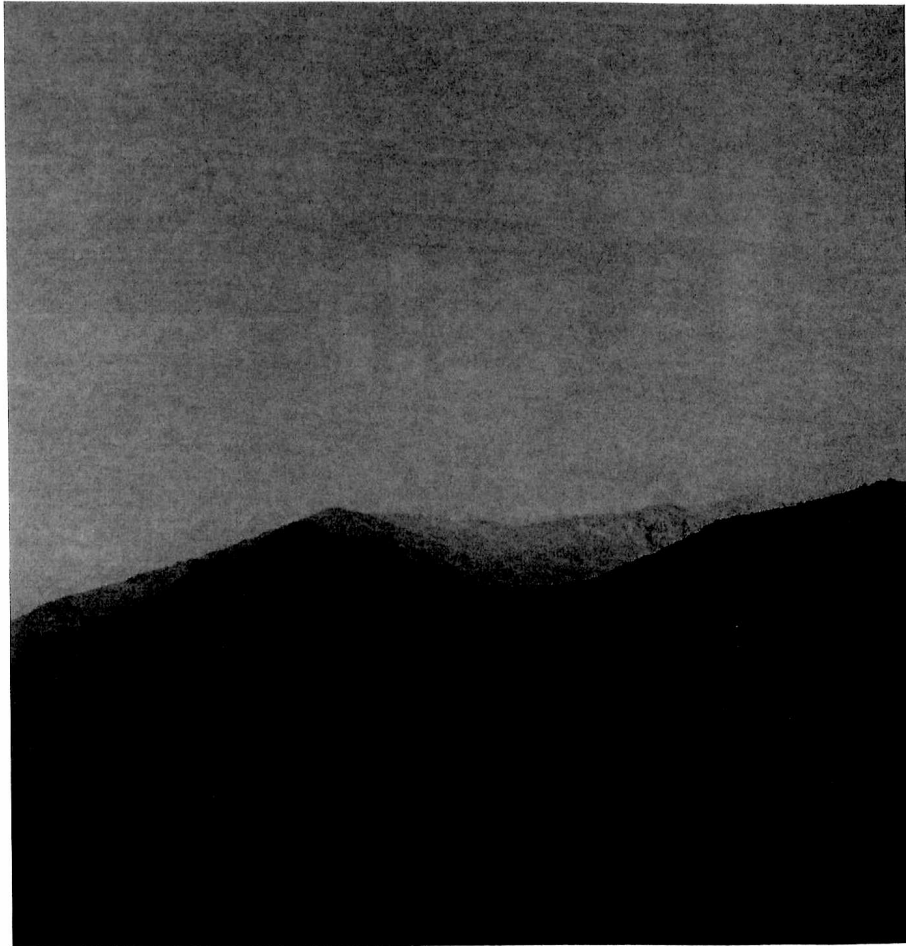
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Marine Hugonnier  
*Ariana* 2003  
 film still



painting and its relationship, in the still life genre, to the painted object. In *Anna Husonova 26.06.01*, 2001, the artist filmed in Vienna an elderly Holocaust survivor who had been a musician in a concentration camp orchestra; thus *Anna Husonova* explores notions of memory, trauma and alternative imageries of 20th-century history.

It's hard to get excited about Hugonnier's work, if only because of the paralysing self-consciousness of it all. *Ariana* is tiredly reminiscent of the art dominating last year's Documenta – the moving image in documentary style; travels to a distant and historically ravaged site; a scant, suggestive voiceover, etc. The plethora of such artists' films seems considerably to lower the benchmark set by Johan Grimontprez's fabulous *dial H.I.S.T.O.R.Y* at the previous Documenta in 1997. Grimontprez's documentary was compelling in ways that Hugonnier and similar artists apparently are not even attempting to match. In hindsight, Grimontprez's intention with his film – to present a sensitive historical moment (the 70s hijacking crisis) through a memorable, carefully edited, crafted and researched, wholly watchable film – seems to belong, despite its stylistic sophistication, to a far more innocent age than the current generation of joyless, arthouse-style filmmakers.

The imagery of the ideologies that washed over Afghanistan – such as the monumental diving boards rising above an empty swimming pool in a barren desert landscape – are actually quite powerful. The imagery of this generation of filmmakers is considerably, if deliberately, less imposing. ■

**Gilda Williams** is a writer and commissioning editor for contemporary art at Phaidon Press.

## ■ Simon Callery

Dover Castle April 1 to August 1

'Segsbury Project' comes out of Simon Callery's prolonged encounters with archaeological excavations in the Iron Age Segsbury Camp in Berkshire and Alfred's Castle in Wiltshire. While it is hard not to overestimate the influence of architectural and institutional context here, it is equally difficult to ascertain exactly what sort of relationships are in play. Dover Castle, which functions as a museum with an emphasis on military history, looks down on to the sea and harbour hundreds of feet

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