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The empty and the vast.

I am describing the desert from the translation of extracts of the latest book by English architecture critic and theorist Reyner Banham (1922-1988) *Scenes in America Deserta*, published in 1982 (MIT press). In this text, unpublished in French, Banham tells his explorations of the Mojave desert during his trips between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. In the beautiful descriptions of landscape he is moved by the precariousness of human settlements in these hostile environments, and pays homage, after a lifetime of work to study modern architecture in the era of the machine, to the beauty of an arid nature. It is an eminently literary and very personal work, so a real experience of the desert seems to me necessary to access it fully. My work this summer at the Montello Foundation Studio has consisted in the writing of a journal in which I transcribe my experience of the desert by comparing it with that reported by Reyner Banham in his book.

I began this work of writing by following Banham in two different ways, physically, by exploring the places where he was, and theoretically, by reading his texts.

The result is a kind of investigation where my reflections on his texts mingle with the descriptions of the places I cross. This work is the logbook of a research in progress, and aims to restore my progressive understanding of the work of Banham. A first extract was published in the French magazine *Paysageur*. It relates the discovery of the deserts of the Mojave by Banham in 1968 as described in the first chapter of his book. to the story of my crossing of Nevada from West to East, and my arrival in Montello on July 14, 2018.



Extract 1:

The perception from the ground is completely different, almost magical in fact: the salt lake appears between a foreground - brown hill texture - a few miles ahead, and a distant silhouette of a bluish mountain. It's sublime, it seems unreal. Some would inevitably have been content to describe this vision as a "lunar landscape", but Banham doesn't. He focuses on the irregularity of the white surface, the topographic deformations generated by the heat and the movements of hot air, the extreme luminescence of the salt crystals, the diffraction of the light, the perfect brightness of the white with this brown in the foreground and this blue in the background ... and with that the deep awareness of being there in the right place and at the right time.

Going back in the car, he thinks about all these impressions, the light in Monet's paintings, bushes, snakes and white mirages ... and long before they reach the road, he knows he has become a desert freak.

Extract 2:

Fifteen minutes later, the light is less direct, more yellow, the shadows lengthen and the colors are reviving. I recognize the nine-mile mountain that Stefan often talks about in his document and who faces the house. I take a right, the barrier is in front of me. Looking up at the hill, it is there.

The first impression coming out of the car: silence. This house, which I had imagined differently, each time. Matter, gray, dried wood, cracked by the sun; the shelter as consumed by the desert. Part lost in advance ... So immediately it's beautiful, the vain gesture of building.

On the terrace, a rustic raft of gray wood, and the house, sits evenly framed on it. The beauty of the small building shines in this moment in its transparency through the fully glazed entrance door: the living room parquet, smooth and varnished, the wood stove on the right, a bouquet of dry herbs, a small table on the left flanked by two profiles of Scandinavian chairs, and perfectly above: a light, a semi-spherical suspension. The view represents a magnificent twenty-mile orange panorama: sky fire, mountains fire, earth and vegetation fire.