

The Landscape Looks Back

What does it mean to look at a portion of the world and find it beautiful, moving, distant, familiar, available or strange? What kind of relation is established when experiencing pleasure, desire or belonging before a view? Are these affects born from recognition, possession, longing, or from the sense of being held by what one sees? And what happens when the landscape looks back, when it refuses to remain a surface and is accepted as a living presence with a past and future history?

Modern Western mindsets invented landscapes to frame the world. A landscape was a view organised from a given position. It implied a horizon, a spectator, a distance from which the world could be composed. Artists contributed to this by using paint to turn land into images. Cartography abstracted territories into surfaces. Travel writing, garden design, property regimes and colonial descriptions helped transform places into scenes to be admired, crossed, classified and possessed. Viewers stood before the world, moved by its beauty or force, while remaining separated from it by the very structure of looking.

The history of the imagery of land is inseparable from forms of ownership and extraction. Often, to perceive land as landscape is to see it as something arranged for the eye, lacking history, available to be consumed and owned. Fields become views. Forests become scenery. Rivers become lines in a composition. Animals, plants, stones, winds, waters and soils appear as figures within an image, held together by the observer's position. The landscape becomes intimate and distant at once: something one feels, desires and remembers, while remaining protected from what it demands.

These questions acquire a particular urgency in Comporta, a place whose image has often been reduced to the promise of stillness: white sand, pine trees, rice fields, low houses, long horizons, a slower rhythm of summer life. To many visitors, Comporta is an escape from history. Yet this apparent quiet actually has many layers. This portion of the lower Sado River belongs to an old history. Human presence in the region reaches back to Mesolithic communities who lived from fishing, shellfish gathering, hunting and foraging along the wetlands. Over time, the Sado became a corridor of trade, salt production, agriculture and territorial control, linking the estuary to Mediterranean routes and to the fortified city of Alcácer do Sal. This older history also carries forms of violence that the landscape's present beauty can easily obscure. From the early modern period onward, the Sado basin was shaped by salt production, agriculture and rice cultivation, activities that depended on hard labour and, at different moments, on enslaved African workers.

To speak of water, fields and rice in Comporta is therefore to speak of ecological adaptation and social inequality at once. The landscape was never merely natural. The rice fields carry the memory of intensive, repetitive labour. The dunes register wind and erosion. The estuary holds birds, fish, salt marshes, mudflats and tidal rhythms. Comporta's beauty was never outside history. It was made through relations between river and ocean, land and property, labour and leisure, cultivation and vulnerability.

Today, these older tensions meet new ones. Comporta has become one of Europe's most desired coastal destinations, and its aura of simplicity has been translated into real estate value, seasonal consumption and controlled forms of authenticity. Tourism and investment have brought visibility and cultural attention, while also intensifying pressure on housing, local life, ecosystems and access. What is marketed as silence can become exclusion. What is described as preservation can also produce displacement. The landscape that appears open and soft is increasingly traversed by economic forces that determine who can remain, who can work, who can visit, and who can call the place home.

The title *Soft Ground* gives form to this condition. Soft ground receives footprints, water, seeds, buildings, ruins, roots and memory. It also registers pressure. In Comporta, ground is a literal condition of instability. Recent floods, storms, coastal erosion and rising heat have made environmental change visible, while speculation and seasonal economies reshape the social terrain. The crisis is ecological, social and political at once. It is felt in water and sand, in housing and labour, in infrastructures and ecosystems, in the fragile balance between what is protected and what is consumed. This is where landscape can no longer be understood as a passive view.

In parallel, and in recent years, aligning themselves with indigenous mindsets, many artists and thinkers have challenged this inherited distance. They have asked how perception might change once the world is understood as a community of agencies rather than a view. David Abram has written powerfully about perception as a reciprocal event, a form of participation through which bodies are touched by what they encounter. For him, the more-than-human world is animate, expressive and sensorially entangled with us. To relate to a place is to enter into relation with its beings, sounds, rhythms and textures. Vinciane Despret's research on birds offers another way of undoing the idea of territory as a fixed possession. Through the philosopher's attention to how birds sing, nest, court, defend, improvise and compose their worlds, territory becomes less a bounded space than a practice of expression. It is made through gestures, calls, repetitions and relations. A bird performs a territory, listens it into being, answers others within it, modifies it through song and presence. This understanding proposes that the world is built through relations, through forms of attunement and attention, and that belonging is never passive. It is an activity, a continuous negotiation between bodies and places.

To look at Comporta from this perspective is to ask how one is implicated in it. What histories made this view possible? What forms of labour shaped it? Which species inhabit it? What has been silenced in order for it to appear peaceful? What forms of cultivation, migration, extraction, care and loss are held in its surface? The pleasure of looking does not disappear. It becomes more complex. Beauty becomes inseparable from responsibility.

The landscape looks back when it refuses to be consumed as atmosphere. It looks back through floods, erosion, heat, birdsong, labour, mud, salt, insects, weeds and the slow persistence of those who remain. It asks us to be less certain of our distance. It asks us to understand that every view is also a relation, and that every relation carries consequences. To stand before a landscape is also to stand in its soft ground. Every view contains a demand: to feel the world's presence without turning it into possession.

– Filipa Ramos