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*Exactitude—it presses upon me like a pestle
grinding spices in a mortar.*

—JAMES COWAN

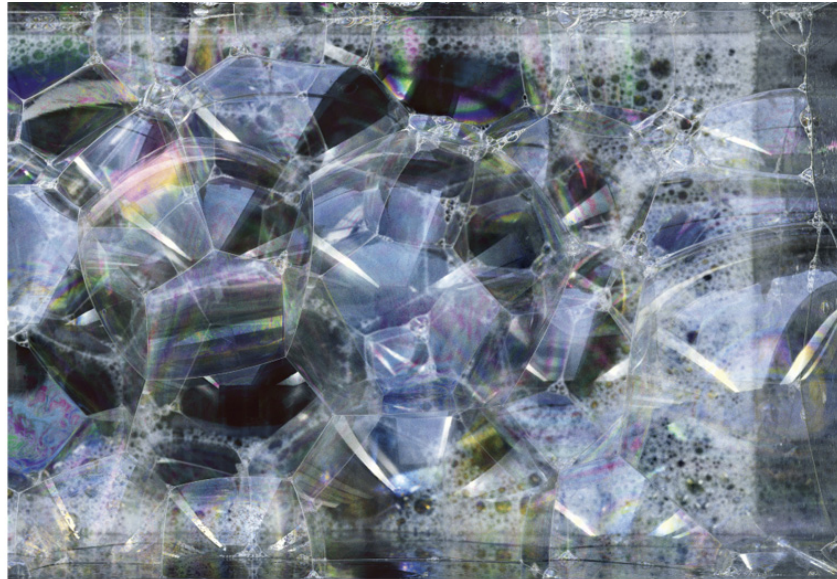
*...This is what these images have in common...
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Not famous or monumental places. In short,
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—ALAIN PAIEMENT

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The iconic photo of the orphaned Earth as a big blue marble was taken by the astronauts of NASA's Apollo 8 mission. As the astronaut Bill Anders later put it in a documentary about the mission, "We came all this way to explore the moon, and the most important thing is that we discovered the Earth."¹

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THE PHOTOGRAPHER ALAIN PAIEMENT'S
MACRO-MICRO JOURNEYS
by GARY MICHAEL DAULT

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FEATURE

Only the Precarious

The photographer Alain Païement's macro-micro journeys

By Gary Michael Dault

POSTED: SEPTEMBER 15, 2007

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—James Cowan

...This is what these images have in common... snatches of a journey and reconstructed objects. Not famous or monumental places. In short, only the precarious.

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I was thinking about NASA's big blue marble, and about looking down and around—rather than looking across and at—during a recent visit to Montreal to see Alain Païement. I wanted to catch up with his work, of which I felt I knew too little, and, having written briefly about an exhibition of his soap-bubble and foam images at Toronto's Leo Kamen Gallery in late 2006 for the *Globe and Mail*, I particularly wanted to see his even more ambitious, architecturally- scaled bubble-work murals, commissioned by and installed in the biological-sciences building of the Université du Québec à Montréal. In essence, I went to Montreal to practice a different kind of seeing.

Spherical thinking, seeing and mapping from above and in the round, has been the province of Alain Païement's work for a long time—at least since his 1987 *Beyond Polders* and the remarkable *Amphithéâtre Bachelard* (1988). For the latter work, Païement, informed by the Mercator system of “planispheric” projection (which allows the spherical globe to be represented on a flat surface), began to record, photographically, an entire architectural interior—in this case a lecture hall at the Sorbonne—by scanning it from a fixed point with an omnidirectional camera. For the final work, the outside of a sphere was covered with the resulting photographs. “Inside university amphitheatres,” Païement wrote at the time, “I take pictures of everything that surrounds me. I cut them up and assemble them as a spherical panorama, which I invert: as if all that is visible from our point of view were turned inside out like a skin, as if the heavens' vault were drawn on the outside of a globe.”² This desire to render an architectural space in its totality would order much of the artist's work to come.

It informs, for example, the extraordinary series of photographic projects Païement initiated in 1996 with *Constellation (squat)*, which he identifies as his first aerial photo of an architectural interior, a vertiginous view in which the camera, hovering high above an apparently roofless and remarkably squalid room temporarily occupied by an assortment of junkies, maps the site spread out below it, providing the viewer with a momentary (though curiously timeless) inventory of the room's detritus.

I sit with Païement in the Café Cherrier on rue St-Denis, and he tells me about his having come gradually and inevitably (from a background in painting) to his now all-consuming interest in “building photography.” It was always, he notes, about finding a persuasive means of locating oneself, of siting, of positioning, of coming to understand where one is in the world, in the universe.³ “My concerns were always very process-oriented,” Païement says. “I was trying to find a way to represent the world by way of one method.” In all of his work since 1994, he points out, everything in the film plane has been parallel to the surface being photographed. The impassivity of the camera, its inexorable flat scan of the spaces Païement chooses for his encyclopedic photo-analyses, clearly contributes to the resulting works a “sense of non-composition.” (“It is the outlook of no one,” Païement wrote in a note accompanying “Refaire Surface,” an exhibition of an ongoing body of work he mounted in Brussels earlier this year. “We observe without yet being there. Just meters away, just before landing.”)

There are lots of classic photographs taken from above: one thinks of works by Kertész, Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy—but these are primarily about formal dislocation, the frisson of a change of morphological viewpoint, a newly directed view as willed disorientation.

Païement's photographs work differently. By moving around above their subject, they reorient us in an entirely new and rather profound way. In an artist's book (its title, *The World As I Found It*, borrowed brilliantly from Wittgenstein) accompanying a 2003 mounting, at the Pratt Institute's Pratt Manhattan Gallery, of Païement's highly ambitious *Parages*—the artist's overhead anatomy of his apartment on Montreal's boulevard St-Laurent (including the bakery downstairs and some of the street life outside the building)—the curator Yam Lau suggests that the work points up the extent to which our lives are not merely “the isolated spectacles so demanded by the culture of consumption.” “The particular point of view afforded here, a view from above,” writes Lau, “affects a different way of seeing and believing. It seems to displace the limit of an anthropomorphic vision and show how the world in its totality might work. Such a view gives one the feeling that the world takes care of itself.”

Bubbles, too, take care of themselves. They float free like balloons. They hover like planets, little gas giants in the void. They are tiny totalities, the triumph of surface tension over probability.

When Païement showed a selection of his gallery-scale bubble photographs in Toronto in 2006, the press release from Leo Kamen Gallery stressed their “organic,” “sub-aquatic” and “celestial” qualities. There were essentially two bubble formats: the *Expansible* works and the *Mosaïque Fluide* works. Exhibited together, they constituted what Païement characterized, in his gallery statement, as “a musical score composed of links, dislocations, rifts, silences and punctuations.”⁴

The *Expansible* (as in expanding universe) works are the vivacious product of numerous photographs seamlessly stitched together and “corrected” (as with Païement's overhead scans) by digitalization. The *Mosaïque Fluide* works are about bubbles born in a box—a small rectangular Plexiglas box just 12 centimetres deep, filled with glycerin and dish soap (“I tried three different brands,” Païement tells me)—which seemed to be the best generator of big, long-lasting bubbles. He photographed them, in their incubator-box, with a four-by-five-inch camera.

The *Expansible* bubbles, by contrast, are as extravagantly uncontained as their *Mosaïque Fluide* counterparts are boxed in. Here, photographed on the fly, as it were, with a small digital camera, single bubbles and bubble clusters, alive with iridescence, both charmingly animate the deep blue space they seem to float freely in—the “punctuations” Païement mentioned—and reflect, in their fluid surfaces, both the artist himself and the room he was





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in when he chased them down with his camera.

In the two site-specific Montreal murals, the same things happen, but on a vast scale. The *Mosaïque Fluide* mural, on the ground floor of the building, is 58 feet long. The even larger *Expansible*, downstairs, is 102 feet long.

The mural upstairs is impossibly complex, with bubbles meeting, melding, interfering with one another, scintillating (like Keats's "beaded bubbles" of wine "winking at the brim") in unpredictable colours, crowded and close-packed emblems of continual gestation and defeat. What a delicate, diaphanous contesting there is for 58 running feet!

Downstairs, in the long *Expansible* mural, the discrete, free floating bubbles and bubble clusters—which vary in size from huge and close-up and Jupiterian at one end to tiny and lost in space and Plutoesque at the other—seem like bounded worlds, each with an unknowable inner life and an impassive, if chromatically entertaining, surface.

When I returned from Montreal, I filled my notebook with pages of drifting bubble musings:

—We are no longer looking down on them (as one looks down at much of Paiement's work); we look across at them and into them and into the space they inhabit (but that is, in fact, how we view the artist's top-down works).

—The intangibility of the bubbles is made tangible by photographic freezing. And yet our reflections in the murals' surfaces quicken them again.

—Bubbles are order and disorder, nature and reason, stasis and kineticism.

—Bubbles are close to clouds.

—Bubbles are little blue marbles.

—In the bubble murals, near and far are simultaneously united and confounded.

—Bubbles seem to be on a restless quest for location—which will be the death of them.

—We can't really look at bubbles. Paiement has to hold them still for us. He has to construct a vision for us—a point of view, and a certain amount of rumination time.

—The bubbles are stationary; we are in orbit around them.

—Bubbles are tiny panopticons that ignore us.

Notes

1. Part of what was "discovered," as Fuller subsequently pointed out, was that the Earth's surface assuredly did not extend to infinity in all directions—and therefore would not forever support being junked up with garbage.

2. The curator and critic Anne-Marie Ninacs, commenting on this work, notes that "What the terrestrial globe and the amphitheatre have in common as well is that both affirm vision as construction, in what they actually are (a maquette and a locus of representation) and in their function (transcription and conception of the world). This affirmation is furthermore explicitly renewed by the use of photography, a constructed gaze that, from this point on in Paiement's work, takes over the place and function of cartography as an endeavour aimed at the rational representation of the world."

3. There is something about Paiement's passionate pursuit of the verities of global positioning, both objectively documented and subjectively mediated, that reminds me of Charles and Ray Eames's famous 1977 film *Powers of Ten*. Working within an optical area measuring one metre square, the filmmakers use a sleeping man at a picnic as a threshold or hinge point for a dizzying macro-micro, inside-outside journey that zooms out to the edge of the observable universe and then in to a single atom inside the man's hand, spanning 38 powers of ten. In the preface to the flipbook derived from the film, it is noted that "Our point of view is always perpendicular to this man." Paiement's aerial scans of his chosen shards of terrain are also made with the camera perpendicular to the photographed plane (and subsequently free to move over that terrain parallel to it). Anne-Marie Ninacs notes that in the trajectory of his career, Paiement's "first bird's-eye views seem like the departure point for a fantastic 'zoom in,' a long,

4. The French writer Alfred Jarry, author of the proto-Dada play *Ubu Roi*, was apparently so taken with C. V. Boys's book *Soap-Bubbles: Their Colours and Forces Which Mould Them* that he incorporated some of it, holus-bolus, into his para-novel *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, pataphysician* (1898), a book dedicated to explaining "the universe supplementary to this one."

5. The classic formula for superior bubbles: 2/3 cup dishwashing liquid, one gallon water, 35 millilitres glycerin.

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