

# SOFIE THORSEN

AUS: DIE WELT ALS KULISSE, KATALOG,  
GALERIE IM TAXI PALAIS, INNSBRUCK

How to look at a changing landscape? Where to focus, what to look at? And what would it be like to be able to perceive a colourless world consisting only of shades of light and shadow? A kind of vision for which we don't have a precise language? Can I describe a landscape accurately with such uncertain images? [SOFIE THORSEN]

## Little White Dots

**The Achromatic Island** (2010) is a cinematic and photographic approach to the reproduction of landscape, as well as a multilayered investigation into the perception of colours and vision as such.

The installation is based on the film of the same name, made in 2009, which Sofie Thorsen has broken down into a three-dimensional, black and white arrangement. An aerial image of the Danish island Fur gives the viewer information about location. A number of very coarse-grained black and white photographs – in stark contrast to this sharply-defined, detailed aerial view – document the island's special topographical and architectonic features.

How can landscape be characterised in general in the media of film and photography, given its increasingly mediated formatting? And how can this characterisation come about when the images have been robbed of their colours; when they are dominated by black, grey, white, shadow and light? Sofie Thorsen attempts to find a form of representation for something that is impossible to portray: the vision of those suffering from achromatopsia. This specific, genetic form of colour blindness appeared in a disproportionately large proportion of Fur's population until the middle of the last century. Achromatopic people see the world in nuances of shadow and light; colour is a suggestion of different shades, based on descriptions provided by those who do see in colour. This dysfunction in one's sense of colour causes extreme sensitivity to

light and a fuzziness of vision amounting to ca. 1/10 of the average acuteness of vision. Nevertheless, quotations from those who suffer from the problem indicate that their perception of what they see is sharp rather than blurred. The quotations were taken from scientific research into achromatopsia and are projected in white letters onto a black background. They describe achromatopic vision and the associated, unbridgeable differences in perception to a visual majority.

The quotations function as distant subtitles to the large-format film projection on the opposite wall. This represents an artistic approach to achromatopic vision through filmic (and photographic) subjects; long camera takes, over-exposure, close-ups or zooms cause a fuzziness in one's field of vision, blurred edges or the dissolution of images into separate dots. The images' reduction and abstraction makes them reminiscent of black and white drawings – a medium that Sofie Thorsen employs repeatedly because of its descriptive quality and its profound art-historical references.

Besides this description of vision, **The Achromatic Island** also tells us about the island itself: about the large-scale agricultural concerns which have driven out the original, small rural homesteads; about the simple suburban family homes, which are hard to distinguish from the holiday homes that point to tourism as the island's main source of income. In between there are functional buildings, stone quarries where the sedimented rock diatomite is mined, and industrial sites where the same rock is processed.



Any definition of time is eliminated by the film's black and white aesthetics and its inherent slowness. The visible cars, architecture and landscape do not allow us to pinpoint a specific era. One recognises the landscape as cinematic, as one already seen in films. The cinematographically schooled eye projects a memory of wide open American landscapes and suburban residential areas constructed on the principle of auto-mobility into the close-up. The topographical characteristics of the island become generally representative of wide open landscapes in films.

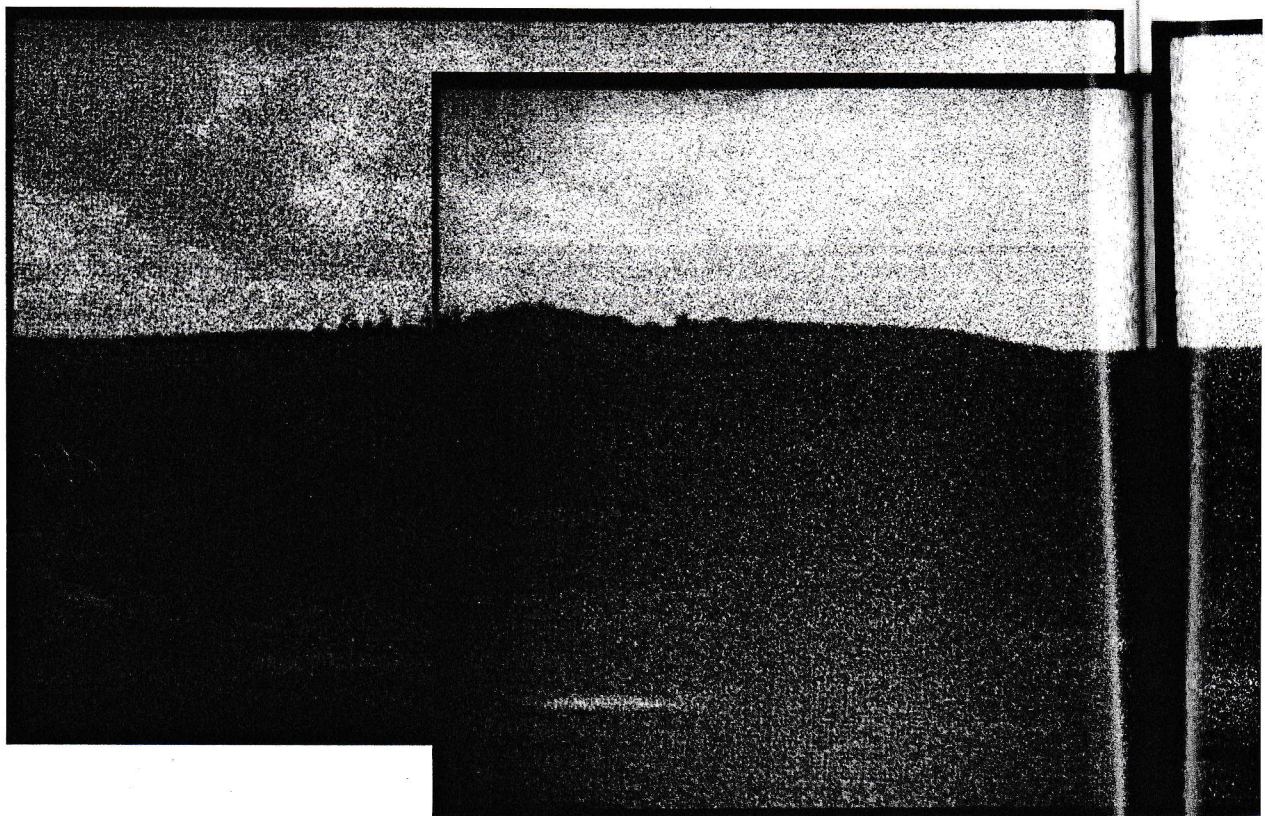
Just as the suspension of geographical location and time points to other possible places and times, the film indirectly examines universal socio-political questions such as structural changes to living environments following the effects of globalisation. The island has become open to the outside world, meaning that achromatopsia is almost a thing of the past; but on the other hand, the island's economic basis is now different. As a final part of the installation, a monitor shows an interview with the only person

with achromatopic vision left on Fur. The camera looks out through a kitchen window into the countryside and zooms into the distance while he describes what he sees and how he perceives his surroundings.

A magnifying glass which Sofie Thorsen films in the local geology museum is a pointer to the normalisation of vision using technical devices. To what extent is our perception interpreted, and how is it influenced by our socialisation? How may it become a mechanism of exclusion, when what I believe that I can see does not correspond to the norm? The man interviewed here wonders why he could not have been taught colours as a classification of tonality, since he can discern them as varying gradations of shadow.

Addressing the particular subject of achromatopsia, Thorsen questions forms of perception and gives the viewer space to reassess the conditions of his or her own personal vision.

[ CHRISTINA NÄGELE ]



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