Planterwald: a modern ruin in progress in Berlin

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PHOTO: Lynne Marsh
Production photograph from Planterwald by Lynne Marsh

Planterwald is a visual record of a modern ruin. It's a video of Kulturpark Planterwald, a once thriving Playland-like fun park in what used to be East Berlin, that closed early this millennium.

Lynne Marsh's 17-minute high-definition video records rusting, twisting metal guideway for a roller coaster and vines and undergrowth climbing around pillars and walls.

Could anything be sadder than an amusement park without any amusement?

Marsh has an eye for telling details. On a Ferris wheel, the cabs lie motionless against a light blue sky. Its carefully manufactured circular shape and spokes are in stark contrast with the wild grass and bushes growing up around it.

A gold-colored theatrical mask, of the kind used to entice fairgoers into an attraction, lies on its side on the ground. The playing surface of a broken pinball machine is covered with dinosaurs. In English, the

text reads Danger/Dinosaur and Raptors/Danger.

The site's past is intertwined with that of Berlin, a city with an abundance of history. From its start in 1969 into the 1980s, it was a successful and popular entertainment park. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of West and East Germany in 1989, two things happened: the site was privatized and the area was declared a nature sanctuary. Mismanagement and a decline in attendance eventually forced its closure.

But as Marsh said in an interview, Planterwald is one of the many sites after unification that existed in a nebulous legal zone between the political and economic system of the capitalist west and communist east. Its complicated status continues today: guards still patrol the site, protecting a capitalist asset whose value has all but disappeared.

Planterwald is a video that does more than record broken windows, chained doors and graffiti in front of it. Throughout the video, the camera is constantly moving. It pans left, it pans right. It hovers. It performs nearly impossible manuevers over water features full of debris. It moves with the assurance of a dancer following a choreographic idea. I was going to compare it to ballet but that's too 19th century. The camera is much more of a modern, 20th century dancer in the way it moves horizontally across the landscape.

To make the camera appear to hover over Planterwald, Marsh used a pole cam. It's a nine-meter Fibreglass pole with a lens at the end which can be remotely controlled with a joystick at the bottom of the pole. A monitor allows the operator to see where the camera is moving. The pole is on a tripod that can be swung in any direction. She called it a light-weight portable crane.

"That's how we got all these almost impossible shots where the lens is moving through the architecture and floating above things and hovering above things for what seems a long period of time," she said in an interview. "There is something beyond the human in those shots."

Planterwald looks like a relic of forgotten economic system. As I watched, I couldn't help but think of the rusting rides and empty buildings as an echo of the abandoned ideals and dreams of communism.

Planterwald continues to Saturday, Oct. 12 at Or Gallery.

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