





A History of Space is the History of Wars

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In these large, monochromatic drawings, Sanné Mestrom activates a wild spatial realm. Space is mutable and unsettled, constructed from a cataclysmic arrangement of shard-like forms that crash into the picture from above and below, pressing into our field of vision in a rush of overlapping contours. Unsettled, and without the secure foothold of a single-point perspective, each composition alludes to the presence of a larger continuum, a massive unravelling of space that can be imagined well beyond the paper's edge.

Looking over these fractured worlds, we struggle to maintain a stable point of view. As we follow the edge of one form it is likely to be interrupted by another moving in a different direction. Elsewhere, veils of tone, both light and dark, conflate surface and depth. Or our eye might come to rest on a shape defined by its opacity, its singular blackness creating a geometric gash, an open wound surrounded by the clutter of three-dimensionality. In one work, black paper collaged to the drawing further confuses the delineations between figure and ground. In their spatial restlessness, these drawings encourage a perceptual paradox. Mestrom entices us to linger over the intricacy of their veiled and crystalline forms, whilst the accumulated fortress of these same forms simultaneously locks us out, asserting the work as an impenetrable surface. This mixed-message encourages the viewer to apprehend the image in small jolts as the eye traverses the work in fits and starts that are guided by the spatial turbulence within.

Whilst they play with the vagaries of space, these works are not simply exercises in form. *A history of space is the history of wars* positions space as a battleground. Indeed, the history of represented space is the history



of ideologies, of a series of dominant 'scopic regimes' and perspectives, in which conceptions of the viewer have been imagined in relation to a series of received representational frameworks. In this context, the eyes of Mestrom's viewer, agitated and active, can perhaps be contrasted with the singular, stationary eye of a viewer faced by a representation guided by the serene linearity of single-point perspective.¹

Of course, a series of drawings cannot carry the weight of the contested history of space, nor can the viewer of these works be positioned as the heavy container for a critique of vision within this history. Instead, *A history of space is the history of wars* continues Mestrom's ongoing,

critical engagement with space as an active, political and contested realm, developed in tandem with an interest in the discourse of language as a similarly activated system.

In *The myth of a political vision* 2004, Mestrom employed the nineteenth century device of the stereoscope in order to activate and emphasise a virtual space between the viewer and the work. In *A man's name*, exhibited at TCB Art Inc. in October 2005, Mestrom literally posed the question "Take away a man's name and what is left?" in gouache on the darkened walls of the gallery. The words tumbled into the darkness as if echoing the dislocated state that namelessness brings to the forgotten subject. Both projects seek to animate and re-evaluate certain conventions. In the former, it is the practice of looking. Here, the stereoscope, a highly popular visual mechanism from the nineteenth century, is projected into the virtually mediated realm of the twenty-first century. In the latter, it is the received notion of language as a marker of a man's place in the world, a patriarchal conceit that Mestrom unravels in the space of the gallery. In each of these projects, a subject is placed squarely within the 'frame' of the work, whether it is the viewer looking through the stereoscope, or the nameless, floating subject imagined in *A man's name*. Similarly, whilst the works in this current exhibition are tightly bound by the edge of the picture, the presence of a viewer standing in space, eyes engaged in a restless dance of active looking, is necessary to fully activate the work in the context of Mestrom's *oeuvre*.

In this age of computer-aided drawing, Mestrom's monochromes enact a certain trickery. At first glance they are flawlessly executed, as if by a sophisticated drawing machine or high-resolution printer. In fact, they

are painstakingly inked by hand over time, a careful act that results in a perfect surface that ironically mimics the mechanical. At the edge of the work, however, there is an occasional puncturing of this apparent seamlessness. This can be found in the pools of ink and water that culminate in a watery edge running counter to the geometries working their way across the picture. This staining of the picture plane, aided and abetted by gravity's pull, reminds us of the active relationship between ink, water and paper that occurs in the making of these drawings. Like the dripping band of paint that formed the 'dark line' in Mestrom's gallery performance, these watery pools are evidence of material process. Contained by the paper's edge whilst leaking towards it, they echo the drag and drip of the skeins of paint formed by the movement of the artist's body as it marks out the space of the gallery in the work "*what keeps us this side of that dark line?*" (2006). Such residues remind us that, despite the persistence of ideological boundaries, it is possible to pull at the seams of the representational screen.

Image front: *A history of space is the history of wars* 2006
watercolour, each panel 120cm x 160cm

Images this page left to right:

Broken Window (Brunswick, Melbourne 1933), type-C print, 2006

A history of space is the history of wars (#5) 2006
watercolour and collage on paper

Broken Window (University of California, Berkeley, 1964), type-C print, 2006

¹For a discussion of prevailing visual systems in the history of representation in modernity, see Martin Jay, 'Scopic regimes of modernity', in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster, 1988, p3-23.

