

In-between

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A History of Space is the History of Wars (16 August - 1 September 2007)

Sanné Mestrom

Between the idea and the reality. Between the motion and the act. Falls the shadow. – T.S. Elliott

On first appearances it seems that the components of this show are at odds. Delicately washed abstract grey-scale watercolours of faceted architectural forms converse with of nameless newspaper clippings of street riots and struggles secured to the wall with tape. There is an almost unsolvable opposition between the meticulously executed watercolours and the rough-cut xeroxed newspaper clippings. Consequently this show could be read as an exhibition of discrete works to be considered independently or conceived of as a unified installation. I tend towards that later, in a search for a meaning and connection in the space between the watercolours and photocopies. It is this interstice that invites me to linger, poised at the juncture between the images, contemplating their connections and divergences.

Visually there is a unifying monochromatic schema to the whole installation. There is a conflict of black and white; dark and bright; presence and absence; past and present; but then there are the fissures, the layers of ambiguity, the bits that fall inside and outside, the shadows. It is not the oppositions of black and white that interest, it is the countless shades of grey in-between. Those moments when the black surfaces of the masking tape turn shining white in the right light; the loosely hung layers of white paper that trace dark outlines onto the wall; the maze of tones in the countless layers of watercolour washes.



More though than the coordinated monochromatic masking tape, it is the title of this exhibition that holds all the pieces of the show together. The title evokes the way history and place are meshed together in experience. The way territories are demarcated and challenged, where abstract notions of borders are contested. The way histories are construed as series of progressive stages propelled forward by conflict. These notions of history, territory, time and space are all constructed bi-products of social relations and conventions. In Mestrom's work there is a possible suggestion that the notions of space and history themselves have shattered upon examination, no longer stable, coherent or homogenous. Presented here are fragments of time and space—scraps of paper, off-cuts of history snippets of space, shards of time. The newspaper cuttings are both remnants of someone's lived experience and abstract signifiers that stand as place holders for ideas of historical struggle and our shared mediated perception of events. The watercolours are like delicate layers of memory that disintegrate into a thousand tiny pieces the closer they come to being recalled. The conventional abstraction of time and space as measurable and quantifiable, in seconds and millimetres, is only one possible understanding of duration. It is a utilitarian version that reduces the intensity of moments and points to equal measures. We can perceive in Mestrom's work different durations comprised not of stable advancing and evenly spaced units but of fluctuating dimensions and singular moments of differing intensity and inconsistency. In order to have a stable concept of time and space there must also be a stable vantage point to begin measuring from. Is it a fractured subject that views this space and time—looking through different eyes, shattered eyes, nauseous eyes, compound eyes, digital eyes?



As computer aided drawings translated by the familiar technology of the hand coupled with a pencil and brush Mestrom's watercolours straddle the new/old divide between technologies. However at first it takes a few passes to discern which technique has been used in creating the abstract, layered, maze-like structures. An ever-so-slight pooling of watercolour pigment on the lower lip of the paper discloses the handmade construction, which seems astonishingly machine-like in execution. The computer's products are transformed laboriously into exquisitely handcrafted patchworks of ink to produce a geometric abstraction that seems as natural as the facets inside a sugar crystal. For Mestrom the virtual spaces created by the computer act as a tool for abstracting, twisting, layering and fracturing space. All technology has this potential for opening up new connections and intersections; rupturing new ways of perceiving but also for mechanistically shutting down engagement with the world into habitual modes.

Mestrom's usage of technology that opens up a network of possibilities is strongly contrasted against the samples of the banal use of technologies in mass communication. History through these mediums becomes is not what is seen but more what is let to be made visible. Not what is seen but what *can* be seen. Inevitably, some things are illuminated, others cast into the shadow. For the contemporary moment Beatriz Colominia notes that "despite, or perhaps because of, the radical doubt of what constitutes an image of contemporary war, certain images are pushed forward to cover the huge gap in perception"¹ Just as the images Mestrome has selected here have come to signify a cultural revolution conducted through street riots and protests.

The repetition and duplication of images and forms is as strong method used in Mestome's exhibition. The watercolours are all versions of the same architectural model rotated flipped and pivoted. The media cuttings are copies of newspaper prints - themselves duplicates. The entire show is also a transposed repetition of a travelling exhibition. What is the result and intention of this repetition? Does it cause the work to become ingrained in the unconscious, or loose its affect, drained of significance? Does it reveal a pattern, or form a simulacra – a sign torn from its signified? Or to be trapped in an eternal return forever lacing the lived past with the actual present to appear again in the future? Does it open up the possibility that exists with repletion for unintentional slippage and variation? These images could be seen as exemplars of Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image that fuse both the virtual memory of that which has gone before and that which is possible to appear again, with the actual nuances, physicality and particularities of the present moment."²

There is a sublime feeling in the infinitely expanding and echoing macrocosmic or microcosmic spaces of watercolours. They produce a beautiful vertigo sending the viewer swirling around the architectonic space of the picture plane. This view point can momentarily flick to send you crawling across the flat grey lozenges of pigment laid out across the surface. Perception shudders between seeing surface and depth where complete abstraction can give way to realism produced in the optical illusion of pictorial space. The concept of the sublime can also be evoked when reflecting on individual inconsequence to the events of world history which we are distanced from further when we perceive them transposed and digested by the media. The sublime aesthetic experience appeals to both intellect and emotion, constructing a momentary resolution in the ceaseless conflict between reason and feeling.³ Evoking awe and admiration whilst asking us to consider the contingency of our view of the present on artificial constructs such as space and time.

¹ Griffin, Tim Beatriz Colominia & Homi K. Bhabha 'In Conversation: Domesticity at War' *Artforum* Summer 2007 45 (10) p. 442-447

² Deleuze, G. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* 1989 p 81

³ Holt, Jason 'A Comprehensivist Theory of Art' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 1996 (36) p. 427-8