

Journey into Space

'Every harmonic and architectural possibility will start to move around you.'

Arthur Rimbaud, 'Illuminations'.

If we perceive the real world through convoluted perceptual and cognitive negotiations with the complexities of the spaces and volumes that surround us, how much more complex is our relationship with imagined worlds and their ineffable spaces and volumes? Reality and illusion share many factors in common, and the thresholds between them are often extremely mutable and transient. After all it is through the mediation of our minds and their infinite capacities for permutation, and their access to imagination, that these thresholds are mapped, often instantaneously and fleetingly. In his book, *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino assures us that "It is the mood of the beholder that gives the city of Zembrude its form"¹. Each subtle nuance of mood, every memory mined from our store of experiences, or our subliminally ingrained cultural expectations can decisively colour the ways in which we perceive or interpret a given image or scenario placed before us. The French *nouveau roman* writer Alain Robbe-Grillet enjoys the potential for the generation of ambience through his descriptions of the play of light and shadow in architectural spaces, as demonstrated by the following passage in his book *Jealousy*;

*"The three windows of the office have their blinds more than half lowered at this hour. Thus the office is plunged into a dimness which makes it difficult to judge distances. Lines are just as distinct but the succession of planes gives no impression of depth, so that hands instinctively reach out in front of the body to measure the space more precisely"*².

Here the ambience is unsettling but somewhat reminiscent of the American artist James Turrell's manipulation of spatial configurations through his sophisticated use of coloured light. Turrell confuses our visual senses of distance and perspective and as a consequence spatially transforms interior spaces, creating illusory surfaces, corners and junctions, simply through this judicious use of light. Tess Glanville engages with our cognitive ability to 'fill in' the missing details when given vague outline details, in her UV tape simulations of architectural details from the Gallery. Where "*it is difficult to judge distances*" as in Robbe-Grillet's text above, then we tend to make optical compensations, in Glanville's case interpreting her two-dimensional representations of space as the actual spaces that they represent. We are constantly confronted by synthetic realities and constantly modify our cognitive strategies to deal with them.



Tess Glanville Scotchlight Interior, Scotchlight™ tape, Chapman Gallery, Salford, 2005

In *synthetic reality* the artists variously manipulate, in their own distinctive ways, the spaces of the Gallery. They question the viewer's perceptual strategies, confounding our assumptions and expectations, drawing us into a collaborative, interactive relationship with their work.

The individually specific viewing process that moulds or transforms a viewer's perception of an artwork or piece of literature is addressed in the ideas of the 'Reception Theory', where the 'closure' of the work is conceived of as the responsibility of the viewer, so that the work is gifted with an infinitely variable, albeit subliminal ontology, in which the closures are legion.

The anarchic Rumanian philosopher E.M. Cioran contemplates the negative of this phenomenon when he asserts that "There are a thousand perceptions of Nothing and only one word to translate them"³. Here in *synthetic reality* we might contemplate works that have a thousand silent closures triggered by one physical reality. It becomes patently obvious in considering the ever transmutating ontologies of these works, then, that the temporal aspect of the viewing experience is equally as important, if not more important than the spatial aspect, as we adjust our reception and interpretation of the works from moment to moment. Tess Glanville in her intriguing work addresses the theme of time lapse, how the passage and duration of time can be measured in terms of the visual changes in our surroundings triggered by the continually changing orientation of natural light. Here, she expresses temporal as well as spatial disjunction, as she transposes one architectural space into another, by means of photography and applied UV tape, each part of the process facilitated by a different expression and use of light.

Light and darkness must work in tandem to configure the visual universe. Light and shadow perform a perpetual dance, now swift and fleeting, now ponderous, barely perceptible, and the spatial dynamics of this dance give us the clues to our place and orientation in the universe. Each time this dance is interrupted or transfigured then our perceptual orientation is shifted accordingly.

Brad Lochore's fascination with shadows and the way they offer a distorted image of the object whose occlusion of light provides their existence, explores those distortions of 'reality' that such a relationship can generate. If sources of illumination themselves cast shadows that demand our attention, then we begin to question a status quo that is normally taken for granted and consequently our perception and understanding of that space is transformed.



Brad Lochore, Double Blind, Oil on Canvas, 2001

Shadows carry sinister, 'other worldly' connotations and the dance of light and dark becomes an uncanny one. The complexities of our 'journey into space' constantly escalate.

Light informs while darkness obscures. Light inspires while darkness inhibits. At night we casually switch light on and off in our houses and take street and security lighting for granted, seemingly oblivious to the light pollution to which we are contributing and to which Victoria Forrest's 'light drawings' draw our attention. This pollution can be clearly witnessed from the International Space Station that the infrequent flights of the space shuttles serve. This brings us neatly back to the idea of a journey into space. This journey can equally be internal or external, terrestrial or cosmic, but in the context of *synthetic reality*, we can consider this

journey as an exploration of the spaces of these works through their resonance with the spaces of our inner world where light and darkness exert powerfully emotive influences.

According to the Hindu concept of *Maya*, the world is nothing more than illusion, an illusion that deprives us of the realisation of our true nature. The effectiveness of the ways in which we deal with this illusion is proportionate to the degree to which we recognise how every day we are constantly seduced by illusions posing as reality, and whether we penetrate and expose these illusions. Haroon Mirza's screen that absorbs daylight on one side and synthetic projected light on the other, bridges that gap between illusion and reality where real time and recorded, replayed time, merge on its diaphanous membrane.

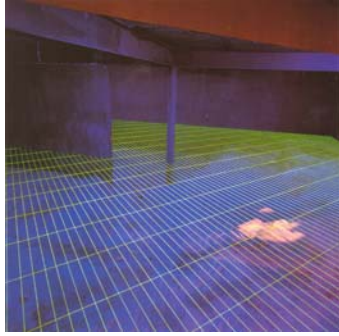


Haroon Mirza, *Trial* installation shot, video still, 2005

Within a matter of seconds, on entering a room, we have completed our visual assessment, lingering perhaps, briefly, on some unusual or unorthodox feature, where scan turns into gaze. We have personalised it, it has become a subjective encodement of an objective physicality, an adjective rather than a noun, and the nuances of the play of light have been instrumental in shaping that adjective. Taegon Kim attempts to disrupt our perceptual habits with his ethereal constructions composed of blue nylon thread, which, stretched in series across the Gallery, describe planes that bisect and undermine its architectural integrity. These delicate planes subvert the utilitarian nature of the space; they exoticise that adjective into which we cognitively transform the room, their intrusions effectively close off the space, exerting a power that belies their ephemeral physicality, creating an abstruse ambience that confounds our expectations. These abbreviated spaces are unsettling because we like the security of orthodoxy, as George Perec writes in his book *Species of Spaces and other Pieces*,

*"I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted, places that might be points of reference, of departure."*⁴

This statement expresses an inbuilt desire for the intimacy of familiarity that we all experience, and that Taegon challenges in his work.



Taegon Kim, Floor, Fluorescent thread, UV light, Total Open-Air Museum, Changheung

If we take light and its subtly informative illumination for granted as we move about in our architectural labyrinths, then maybe the artists in *synthetic reality* will give us pause for thought and encourage us to look at our surroundings with new eyes and be freshly engaged by the peripheral subtleties that normally pass us by in our increasingly driven lives. In this way, like Ally Wallace's simulacral wall, our surroundings will be given a different weight and significance merely through a re-alignment of our perceptual habits and the intervention of imagination. The interplay of memory and imagination is central to our ability to recognise our situation and to securely inhabit that recognition. This inhabiting or empathetic connection with our surroundings must be rooted in our sense of identity grounded in previous experience and its associated memories. This whole process of habituation as a contingent exploration of memories with their veneer of imagination is neatly encapsulated by the poet Jeremy Reed in this extract from his poem *House of Mirrors* bringing us back to the imagined worlds with which I began :-

The house is somewhere. It is under rain

or clear, but we can't realize its presence

without self-identity.....

the house is there if the traveller stops

and lets the image stabilize; but where

and how is the location made,

and is there anyone inside? Perhaps

there'll be a double or an analyst,

or someone that I should have known,

but never got to, and a central room

in which to meditate; a red Rothko

prominent on one wall? I'll stay a time,

inquisitive, exploratory,

and meet in every room someone I've been,

*the states of mind, the visual roles assumed.*⁵

The fact that there are more questions than answers keeps us guessing as to our destiny and our fate, and the journeys into space with which the artists in this exhibition present us, pose many questions regarding the spaces within which we live and the illusions by which we are constantly assailed. Hopefully our awareness of the synthetic nature of our world will be sharpened and our ability to reconcile our true natures with this will be quickened.

Roy Exley.

¹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* [Trans. William Weaver], Vintage, London, 1997. Page 66.

² Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy* [Trans. Richard Howard], John Calder, London, 1997. Page 40.

³ E.M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist* [Trans. Richard Howard], Quartet Books, London, 1987. Page 152.

⁴ George Perec, *Species of Spaces and other Pieces* [Trans. John Sturrock], Penguin Books, London, 1997. Page 91.

⁵ Jeremy Reed, *red-haired android*, Grafton, London, 1992. Page 81.