

Conversations Across Time: Three Contemporary Re-imaginings

The three artists who make up 'Sense of Soane' are each image-manipulators with a history of experimentation. Emily Allchurch is a sculptor turned photographer; Anne Desmet began as a printmaker but now pushes the possibilities of collage; Catrin Huber is a painter with an architect's fascination for walls and ceilings. Altogether, this promises much for an exhibition staged in a John Soane house and *Sense of Soane* delivers handsomely.

The differences between the three artists make for a complex yet coherent show in which ideas, imagery and moods bounce between the three and indeed off the walls of the house itself. John Soane, you could say, is the fourth artist in this exhibition. Bringing him into the conversation opens out the intellectual mood to make this a reflection within Enlightenment traditions of thought. The questioning frame of mind that took Soane and his contemporaries off on the Grand Tour is much in evidence here, along with a desire to explore the optical qualities of light and a fascination with the Classical world. The works have all been made with Soane's spaces in mind but there is no sense that the three have adjusted their own practices in deference to the grand old man. This exhibition is very much a conversation between equals across time.

Of the three artists' work, Emily Allchurch's piece *Grand Tour: In Search of Soane (after Gandy)* offers the most overt references to Soane. As the title implies, the starting point is the famous watercolour by Joseph Gandy, painted in 1818 in homage to his mentor. Allchurch's work is presented in the upstairs drawing room and, from a distance, seems to be a straightforward homage to Gandy's *Public and Private Buildings executed by Sir John Soane between 1780 and 1815*. But approach the glowing backlit transparency and you see that this is just the start of the story, or is it the end? Are we in 1818 or 2012? As the scene opens up into detail you enter a more modern, albeit surreal, world where the laws of scale and sense have been suspended. Tiny buildings stand next to large red telephone boxes, fanlights have found their way into frames and interior rooms enfold exterior facades. You realize the scene was only pretending to be a simulacrum, after all, but the deeper you enter into the image the more highly charged the riddle becomes.

The clue is of course the title. This bravura image is about Allchurch's own Grand Tour around the country to visit Soane's extant buildings. The details that make up the whole are the photographs she took on this journey, distilled, manipulated and meticulously assembled using digital software to create a seamless whole. Hers is a rather extraordinary technique: one that sprang from frustration that her search to locate interesting urban vistas to photograph required her to discount fascinating architectural detail. For Allchurch, details tell stories and stories are the heart of her work. Looking into her multi-layered images could be likened to looking through a microscope and finding worlds within worlds, but a better simile is perhaps one from literature. *Grand Tour: In Search of Soane (after*

Gandy) is the visual equivalent of a novel or play, the interweaving of episodes and encounters created by the artist's imagination and skill. These are works of authored artifice where the power is dramatic power and the narrative is consciously controlled.

The theatrical metaphor also harks back to the original *Gandy* drawing. Both images have a stage-set quality but, whereas *Gandy* conjures up a dark cave showing Soane, the Magus, brooding amongst his golden treasures, Allchurch's mood is cooler. This is a journey through the grey light of the real world showing Soane's buildings as they actually are. Soane the Magus also appears in Allchurch's image but here he has been turned to stone. He is now a portrait bust and Allchurch is the alchemist, albeit an invisible one represented through the tools of her trade: guidebooks, maps, camera and a photographer's light placed prominently in the foreground like a magical talisman.

In Allchurch's work, the micro is embedded in the macro. By contrast, Anne Desmet's work seems to operate in reverse. It is the small scale that first catches your eye, inviting you to peer closer into archaeological fragments, which then somehow open up into buildings and skylines. It is no surprise to see Desmet tuning in so unerringly to Soane's neo-classical mind-set. She is herself a classicist who cites Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a continuing influence. As with Allchurch, there is a subversive quality to her image-making. Familiar buildings disintegrate and reassemble; cities are transplanted across time; modern London and ancient Rome co-exist – a notion with which Soane would have felt at home.

The 25 pieces Desmet has created for Pitzhanger are, she says, a conscious attempt to bring the visual intensity of the Soane Museum into the relatively empty Pitzhanger. All demonstrate her virtuoso technique as a collagist, working with tiny fragments and slivers of prints to create multi-layered and compelling vignettes. The subject matter is often architectural and Italian – indeed many of the titles could have come straight from the notebook of an 18th-century British artist returning from the Grand Tour. However, as Desmet points out, these images are not documentary *aide memoires*: these are 'the places you take back from the Grand Tour in your head', evocations of an Italian dream re-imagined in the cooler light of London.

The most visually arresting pieces are the 11 collages on convex glass discs. A new departure for Desmet, these were directly inspired by the convex mirrors Soane dotted around his house in an attempt to catch and redirect light. Here, glass also works its magic for Desmet, adding a lustrous finish to the surfaces and an extra optical distortion, which she finds exciting: 'I love the way the eye reads a curve differently.' The curve presented its own challenges to her collage technique ('things are sliding and moving around as fast as you lay them out') but the results are stunning, with the convex glass acting as a subtle magnifying lens to intensify the optical effects she creates.

The colour blue features strongly in these convex pieces. Titles identify the blues as sky, each shade evoking a distinctive quality of light: a strong hot blue for *Under Roman Skies*, a

more ambiguous texture for *Under London Skies*. The most dramatic effect is reserved for the largest piece, *Pantheon – Oculus*, where the richness of the blue, collaged with a distorted view of the interior of Rome’s Pantheon, creates an almost spiritual conjunction of the manmade and the natural. This work is placed directly beneath the central oculus in Soane’s breakfast room – another round circle of painted fantasy-sky. The two oculi reflect each other, but dare one say that Desmet’s blue is by far the more profound.

Sky brings us on to Catrin Huber’s work in the ground floor drawing room. *Grammar of Clouds* is a *coup de theatre*: the most daring of the works on show and also the most architectural. Soane, it is said, designed his buildings from the inside and Huber too has started with the room itself. The drawing room, she noted, in her proposal for the piece, looked ‘empty and almost neglected’ compared to the other rooms at Pitzhanger, which express his dramatic use of interior light and colour schemes ‘to orchestrate movement through the building’. To Huber, the drawing room stood out as the exception: ‘the room’s white ceiling sticks out like a blank canvas’.

The comment reveals Huber’s background as a painter, but she is an unusual painter in being interested in representing three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane – not just as a clever exercise in perspective, but as a way of creating mood and ambiguity. Huber has a longstanding interest in Roman frescoes, another affinity with Soane, and her treatment of Pitzhanger’s drawing room is beautifully simple: the theme of the painted sky in the breakfast room is re-imagined as a colossal theatrical effect – a capriccio on a grand scale. *Grammar of Clouds* expands Soane’s room upwards, through the ceiling, to create not just another physical space but a sense of the infinite. Is this the sky? Clouds seem to present themselves in the washes of colour, but these *trompe l’oeil* clouds bring their own conundrums. Are they specimens or ciphers: scientific or picturesque?

Huber’s technique adds more complexity: the projected clouds are based on her collages, which combine manipulated photographs of clouds with ink drawings. *Grammar of Clouds* might look like a painted ceiling but it hovers between the material and the immaterial. ‘How do you represent clouds?’ Huber asks. ‘I love that they are in an amorphous state of flux and therefore can be said to undermine perspective.’

The work marks a departure for Huber in that it is the first time she has worked with projections for a site-specific piece. Working directly with light is of course another Soanian resonance and, in developing the piece, Huber was particularly struck by the qualities of light at his Lincoln’s Inn Fields house: cool green in places, warm glowing yellow elsewhere. All three artists, but perhaps particularly Huber, remind us that Soane was a showman-artificer as much as proto-modernist. Responding to the primitive qualities of classical architecture did not preclude the great man from choosing a more theatrical and indeed playful persona in his exploration of light and space. At Pitzhanger, he built some mock Roman ruins in the grounds, to tease his visitors, and he might well have been thrilled to see coloured clouds washing over his drawing room ceiling.

It is arguably easier to think about John Soane at Pitzhanger rather than at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Pitzhanger offers a more cerebral way of experiencing the qualities of modernity for which Soane is justifiably famous and it is fascinating to see the three artists muse, in their own individual ways, on the resonances and continuities between Classical, Enlightenment and Contemporary. The exhibition might also be said to express a more Romantic sensibility – a belief in feeding the imagination as a way of pursuing knowledge.

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