

## **Emily Allchurch and the Old Masters**

By Dr Xavier Bray & Dr Minna Moore Ede, National Gallery, London.

When the eighteenth-century *vedute* painter, Canaletto, employed his *camera obscura* to paint the Grand Canal in Venice it was not only topographical accuracy he was seeking but also an aid to framing and editing his compositions. The *camera obscura*, a small box which rendered the three-dimensional world into two dimensions, had been used by artists since the sixteenth-century. According to the contemporary painter David Hockney, its use was far more widespread than is admitted by art historians today, employed by countless artists over the centuries as their 'secret weapon'. Whether or not Hockney is correct, the way in which artists construct their images has always been a point of interest for their audience.

It is this that is so compelling about the work of Emily Allchurch, for in an innovative reversal of this way of rationalising the world, she uses the Old Masters as her own *camera obscura*. Exploiting celebrated compositions by Piero della Francesca, Giorgione, Raphael, Pieter Brueghel, Claude, Canaletto, Turner, Friedrich and most recently Piranesi, Allchurch leads our eye through the viewfinder of an image that at first glance we know, into a composition that is in fact totally imagined and yet meticulously constructed. By selecting, assembling and positioning thousands of digital photographs primarily of London and more recently Rome and Paris, Allchurch rebuilds their compositions with the contemporary urban landscapes of today.

For her first series of work, 'Settings', Allchurch turned initially to an artist who was a master of the grand landscape tradition, the French painter, Claude Lorrain. Using the National Gallery as her reference point, she chose his *Landscape with Aeneas at Delos* (1672), a painting that is typical of Claude in its idyllic vision of a lost Golden Age. His skilful use of aerial perspective so that the foreground recedes gradually into the distance, the careful selection of landscape elements and classical architecture, and all of it bathed in a light that evokes a specific time of day, these were the ingredients of Claude's harmonious landscape style. Even today, Claude's landscapes carry with them the authority of the classical past and it is precisely this that Allchurch sought for her own work. She acknowledges that she began with Claude because she wanted 'an elevated space', into which she could insert her contemporary vision.

Entitling her work, *Outlook (after Claude)*, Allchurch transposes the mood and content of the National Gallery painting to the present day. One of Claude's greatest abilities was the rendering of light. He particularly favoured early morning and evening when the quality of light was especially atmospheric and he tended to illuminate his compositions from the back so that the whole image glowed. Allchurch is immensely sensitive to this and imitates it well. The effect is enhanced by the fact that when displayed, all her photomontages are mounted as transparencies and lit from behind by light boxes.

The nostalgia of Claude's composition in which Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*, laments his lost Trojan past, is acknowledged by Allchurch's inclusion of a telescope which takes the place of the Aeneas and his family, pointing out towards the horizon, as a symbol of longing. Interestingly, although Claude includes the Pantheon in his painting, one of the great surviving buildings of ancient Rome which he would have drawn and copied, he uses it to represent the Temple of Apollo, a building that he was obliged to imagine. Allchurch, in turn, replaces the Pantheon with a contemporary place of worship, a Baptist meeting house, the Metropolitan Tabernacle in Elephant and Castle. Paradoxically, by deconstructing Allchurch's image, we are reminded that, of course, Claude's landscapes were themselves very carefully constructed.

Elsewhere, however, Allchurch's desire to make a social comment leads her to alter the mood of the original work. In *Setting No.2 (after Canaletto)*, Canaletto's brightly lit Grand Canal full of gondoliers and merchant vessels, is replaced with a gritty London view of the Grand Union Canal complete with a gaggle of geese and a barge. Whereas Canaletto's scene is bustling and lively, Allchurch's is one of eerie silence illuminated by a metallic light. Devoid of figures, one wonders why there are video cameras on the right hand side of the composition: who are they watching? Although Canaletto's *Grand Canal* (c.1738) - like the Claude - has provided a compositional structure for Allchurch, in this instance her vision within it has also been pushed further by the subject of the original work itself. It is as though Canaletto's painting, so full of life, has inspired her to create this image of emptiness, a comment perhaps on the anonymity of society today.

As the *Settings* series progressed, the psychological content of Allchurch's work becomes heightened as does her technical response to the original work of art. A

piece that demonstrates this beautifully is *Winter Landscape (after Friedrich)* based on the National Gallery's painting of 1811 by the German artist, Caspar David Friedrich. In Friedrich's mystical snow scene we see a cripple who has abandoned his crutches and leans against a rock, raising his hands in prayer before a crucifix which rises out of a group of fir trees. In the background, the silhouette of a Gothic church appears, almost like a vision, out of the mist. A pink dawn colours the sky, reinforcing the message of hope and salvation in the painting. Friedrich himself wrote that his aim was not, 'the faithful representation of air, water, rocks and trees...but the reflection of soul and emotion of these objects.'

One of the most praiseworthy aspects of Allchurch's work is that one never feels that she simply uses an Old Master without first trying to fully comprehend its message. *Winter Landscape (after Friedrich)* is perhaps the most poignant and sensitive of the *Settings* series. In it, the praying cripple is replaced with an old mat and blanket and an empty beer can but without the homeless person who must once have lain on it. His presence is denoted by a street sign that reads 'Pilgrim Hill', and yet the fact that there is no figure praying before the Crucifix, makes one question the lack of spirituality in today's society. Are the homeless the hermits of the modern era? The artfulness and atmospheric quality of Friedrich's snowscape is subtly updated into a London view. The pointed spire of Stoke Newington cemetery chapel takes the place of Friedrich's Gothic church, and there is the same pinkish hue of dawn pushing through the mist. Allchurch's modern vision has been convincingly and seamlessly laid over the old and there is an extraordinary sense of continuity between past and present.

In the *Setting* series as a whole there is a continued awareness of the similarities and differences between the cities and societies of the past and those today. This idea becomes the focus of Allchurch's reworking of Pieter Brueghel's *Tower of Babel* (1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) in *Tower of London (after Brueghel)*. Brueghel's painting was itself a response to the religious unease of his own times. In the light of the Protestant Martin Luther's criticism of the Catholic Church in the early sixteenth-century, Brueghel's image mocks those who, according to the Old Testament, tried to reach God by building a tower to the heavens and were then divinely punished and made to speak in different tongues. His Tower of Babel, which is a marvellous architectural fantasy, but in which the Colosseum among other buildings is recognisable, is crumbling, for its foundations - both architectural and

spiritual - are weak. The message is of the importance of faith alone, a central tenet of Protestantism.

Certainly Brueghel, who had been to Rome to study architecture, must have been attracted by the architectural nature of this spiritual metaphor, and Allchurch too seems to have been attracted to the same notion. Her Tower of Babel is composed of London's urban landscape – the Albert Hall is instantly recognisable, a clever substitute for Brueghel's Colosseum, on which it was in fact based. But Brueghel's sense of religious foreboding is replaced by something far more sinister as one notices the aeroplane on the left of her composition which is heading directly for the Tower. This reference to 9/11 alerts us to the many symbols of different faiths within the work - the Hindu temple, the Jewish synagogue, the mosque – all of it seemingly under threat from the plane which is heading for the tower. Rather than this being an explicit reference to the destruction of one particular religion in the way that Brueghel's was, Allchurch seems to be pointing to the disillusion of London's multi-faith society today. As the street sign in the lower left hand corner, 'Unity Close' implies, it is tolerance and peaceful co-existence that is under threat from a fundamentalist few.

Allchurch's most recent work, *Urban Chiaroscuro*, after Piranesi's etchings, the *Carceri d'invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons), 1761, provides greater scope to develop this darker, more psychological aspect of her work. In the same way that for Piranesi the *Carceri* were an imaginative leap away from the architectural *vedute* he had been designing, so too are they for Allchurch. Without the structural clarity that an artist like Claude provided, the architectural immensity and spatial ambiguity of Piranesi's prison interiors give her much freer reign to evolve her contemporary vision. Throughout the *Settings* series, Allchurch's response to the Old Masters is both thoughtful and provocative, but in choosing to work from Piranesi's fantastical etchings she sets herself a range of new challenges, pushing her work to a new level both technically and emotionally.

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