

Urban Chiaroscuro

This series of of backlit transparencies, makes reference to the master Italian etcher Giovanni Battista Piranesi's acclaimed series, *Carceri d'Invenzione (Imaginary Prisons)* c.1745-1761.

Although inspired by the architecture of Rome, these 16 remarkable etchings are all imaginary capricci. The resulting sinister prison fantasies with their boundless space, impossible structures and spatial paradoxes were seen by many as a commentary on the restrictive social order of his time. For *Urban Chiaroscuro*, I have reconstructed a number of the series, fragment by contemporary fragment, from photographs of very real architecture found in London, Rome and Paris today. Like Piranesi's originals, there is evidently a subtext to the series, offering a visual meditation on contemporary urban existence, and specifically a suggestion of the claustrophobic climate of fear – and indeed the prevalence of the technology of surveillance.

As with my previous series, each piece is created using my well-established technique of sifting through many hundreds of my own photographs, identifying and selecting what is required and digitally splicing them to fashion a seamless and *apparently* visually faithful reconstruction of the original work. It is on closer inspection that the story unravels. Pendulum lighting is replaced by 360° CCTV cameras, alarms and Tannoy systems, wooden staircases by escalators and flyovers, and the barely outlined figures by lone pedestrians, reflections and shadows. The walls and floors are littered with graffiti and detritus with street signs vainly attempting to impose order and control.

'Chiaroscuro', from the Italian meaning 'clear dark', echoes the contradictions working within these works. These visions of the city appear claustrophobic and threatening; these are places where nature is excluded and yet simultaneously the viewer is shown high vaulted spaces without apparent limits, through which the imagination can wander. Strong contrast creates highlights and shadows, injecting light and hope into murky paranoia-ridden chambers. And of course, the illumination of a lightbox further intensifies the dramatic allusion inherent in the work.

Each piece is given a dominant colour which reflects the city it represents, from the yellow brick of London, to the rich sienna of Rome and the stone white hues of Paris. Individual works form a hybrid of the vibrant architectural heritage found in each city. From London, a journey which takes you from the imposing architecture around the City of London and the Ministry of Defence, to the Jubilee line on the Underground; in Rome a synthesis of ancient and modern from Castel Sant' Angelo, to the Fascist style of EUR suburb and the immense modern housing estate of Il Corviale; and in Paris from the order and grace of Haussmann's boulevards, to riverside bridges and contemporary design at La Villette and Institute du Monde Arabe.