Urban Chiaroscuro (after Piranesi) – Behind the scenes

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Everything I've ever made has been an assemblage of parts. In my sketchbooks as I grew up I would stick down a few photographs on the page and imagine the space in between. As a student of sculpture my structures were laboriously crafted, with many pieces waxing and waning to create the whole. My first serious photograph as an MA student at the Royal Collage of Art was a 2.5m x 2m blow-up of my palm, scaled up in sections, with the veins traced around to echo the road maps of my past and presented as a giant free-standing jigsaw puzzle. Soon after graduating I discovered a way of constructing images out of observed fragments, which totally made sense as a way to interpret the world around me. At the time I had no idea that I was dipping into the realm of the capriccio.

The natural starting point for this journey lay in the luminous paintings of the master landscape painter Claude Lorrain (c.1604-1682). I was drawn to his working process, which originated in his first hand observation of nature, proceeded by an unashamed rearrangement of the parts to create the most harmonious compositions imaginable. Claude was one of the first painters for whom the true subject was the landscape. His sketches from nature became his image library, an aide-memoire back in the studio, and the resulting paintings seem composed like theatrical scenography, more for dramatic impact rather than any concern for topographical accuracy. All these traits resonated with my own interests and feelings about how to filter a post-modern experience.

For my subject I chose the forlorn and forgotten urban landscapes of east London where I was living. I wanted to elevate these municipal buildings of the 19th century, built with Victorian pride and optimism, and free them from their physical restraints; providing a new setting more worthy of their classical aspirations. Claude's painting became my template and guide, onto which I would painstakingly reconstruct the scene from an assortment of photographs I had taken, using up-to-date digital software. It is an act of extreme collage; one where I have total control over the final image and can interpret the original message to place a narrative with resonance to an audience today. I applied this technique to recreate some of my favourite paintings from Western Art. In all of the *Settings* series a sense of theatre and artifice is reinforced by the use of backlit photographic material to illuminate the images. The light source becomes an additional seductive device to draw the viewer into the world presented. No humans populate these landscapes (although there are constant traces of their presence), inviting the viewer to become the protagonist in these subverted Arcadian fictions.

Following the London terrorist attacks in July 2005, a tangible feeling of fear and paranoia permeated its population. It coloured my own interactions and drew out a deeper, personal memory of danger, which I felt compelled to embrace. I became acutely aware of the culture of surveillance and control enveloping the city dweller, seemingly at odds with the freedoms we enjoy as 21st century citizens of Europe. This time it was the work of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778) that I turned to for inspiration. His *Carcere d'Invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons), first published 1743-45 and reworked for even darker menace in 1760, spoke strongly to me and seemed as fresh and relevant to a modern audience as to his own. Piranesi's prison fantasies; haunting meditations on the human condition, thought to have come to him in the delirium of fever, could be seen to exist all around the city today. Thus began my endeavour to recreate a

number of the original plates from a collage of real architecture and street paraphernalia sourced in contemporary London, Rome and Paris.

There are two parts to my making process. The first is the hunting down and gathering of my image library. This is usually a brief, intensive encounter with a city, where my role is one of an observer, to document and absorb an impression of the place. Using the original image as a constant reference, I track down buildings and objects that can be used to recreate it from everyday life. My concern is to extract the part of the building or object that is useful to me, rather then creating a well-composed photograph. I enjoy discovering a place by foot, camera-in-hand, to capture the twists and turns of my navigation, allowing chance and intrigue to guide me as much as the map. It is physically tiring but exhilarating work, and I feel open and receptive to everything around me. For *Urban Chiaroscuro* I was drawn to parts of the city far from the tourist trail, and frequently had to dare myself to enter the darker recesses of the sites I wanted to photograph. Challenging my own sense of danger in the collation of the source material helped me create the atmosphere of oppression that runs throughout.

Part two is the meticulous construction of each picture back home in my studio: each one a reworking of a specific plate from Piranesi's *Carcere*. It takes several weeks to complete a picture. This requires the careful sifting through thousands of images to select the details that will build my story. I see each artwork as a journey around the city compressed into a single scene. Working one picture at a time, I digitally collaged dozens if not hundreds of photographic fragments over the framework of Piranesi's plates, blending the images to create a seamless new space. The ropes, pulleys and tortuous devices in Piranesi's *Carcere* are replaced by 'Big Brother' 360° CCTV and tannoy systems, and at every turn law and order tightens its grip. The introduction of colour in my recreations, and the modelling of light and shade, helps to reinforce a sense of foreboding. The tools I use to create these subtle effects: erasing and blending layers, and modulating colour, contrast, perspective, focus, highlight and shadow, require a painters eye and skill, except that for me the traditional canvas is replaced by a computer screen.

The journey starts in the streets of London. The contrasting colour palette of the two scenes suggests shifting times of day and mood. The pallid yellow of *Urban Chiaroscuro 1: London (after Piranesi)* (Carcere VI, 2nd state) is derived from the colour of east London brick lit by a weak, wintery sun. The architecture is a composite of public buildings in Whitehall, alongside council housing, algae covered walls of the Thames Embankment and towering construction sites in Canary Wharf. My own reflection in the foreground mirror bears witness to events unfolding and the ominous plume of smoke. Street signs and graffiti remind you to watch your back, whilst surveillance cameras offer little reassurance. Only the distant stairwell and works lift, sparkling in the light, promise a reprieve. *Urban Chiaroscuro 2: London (after Piranesi)* (Carcere XVI, 1st state) reveals London by night, with its metallic blue hues and hybrid passageways of old London Bridge and the new Jubilee Line Underground extension. A pool of light; unclear whether lunar or man-made, strikes a steely floor, and out of the gloom a lone female quickens her step away from danger. Paint splattered on a prison wall, 'a wanted' poster, smashed windows, a barred doorway and spiked railings all add to the uncomfortable terrain.

The next three prints in the series take Rome as their subject. The striking chiaroscuro effects of Piranesi's prints are transposed effortlessly through the intense Roman sun casting its light and shade. The warm sienna glow of the eternal city radiates from the core of *Urban Chiaroscuro 3: Rome (after Piranesi)* (Carcere III, 2nd state). Above the smoking embers a ghostly figure crosses a bridge below a tatty peace flag. Vaulted ceilings link several millennia of architecture from the prisons of ancient Rome to the housing ghetto of Corviale in the city's modern-day suburbs. The fiery tones of *Urban Chiaroscuro 4: Rome (after Piranesi)* (Carcere VII, 2nd state) are more reminiscent of a labyrinthine inferno. The spiralling water tower forms the centrepiece to

an eclectic voyage, encompassing cannonballs from Castel Sant'Angelo, pedestrian ramps and flyovers, decorative interiors from Saint Peter's Basilica and grim hanging hooks from old Tastaccio abattoir. All the while a silent witness casts its shadow and La Bocca della Verità (the mouth of truth) threatens tough judgment on all who pass. *Urban Chiaroscuro 5: Rome (after Piranesi)* (Carcere IV, 1st state) presents a welcome counterpoint with the only exterior expanse in the whole series. The fair weather clouds and cool palette complement the Fascist architecture of Mussolini's EUR, a southern suburb of Rome, from which the image is largely composed. Scrawled across the Ponte Fabricio (the oldest surviving bridge across the Tiber) is the declaration that 'all gods are dead, except those which make us stronger'.

The final chapter takes us to Paris and an exploration of the city from its medieval remnants to the dominant architecture of Baron Haussman's modernization program of the 19th century, with glimpses of ultra-modern design squeezed between. The omnipresent cream-grey Parisian limestone dictates the appearance of *Urban Chiaroscuro 6: Paris (after Piranesi)* (Carcere XII, 2nd state). A platform with arches emblazoned with the national motto *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, supports a structural medley of Senate House, Viaduc de Passy, the Grand Palais and Parc de la Villette. Street art, political propaganda and municipal signage jostle for attention up front, whilst in the distance a tiny figure kneels in prayer inside a mosque. *Urban Chiaroscuro 7: Paris (after Piranesi)* (Carcere XV, 2nd state) captures the city in the evening sunlight. Four chained gargoyles and the disquieting representation of the *Raft of the Medusa* from Géricault's grave sets the tone. Colossal archways lead us from the shadowy prison walls of La Santé to the gleaming staircase of the Palais de Justice. A banner declares Paris the capital of the free, yet at every turn danger looms close in these 'boulevards du crime'.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Piranesi and his masterful eye for the theatrical, learnt as a young apprentice to the stage designers of his native Venice. It tunes with my own interest in staging a scene composed from real life, but frequently transcending into flights of fantasy. *Urban Chiaroscuro* was completed in 2007, so it is too soon to speculate on the long-term significance of my homage. Despite the architectural hyperbole of their construction, I hope each image can be seen to form a relevant record of the city it presents and the mindscapes of its inhabitants at the start of the 21st century. As an artist I have often felt on the outside of prevailing trends and fashions in the art scene. However, in contributing to this book, it has been reassuring to realize that I am actually part of a group of artists whose shared investigation goes back several centuries. Artists who have blazed their own trail in the pursuit of the capriccio as a means to make sense of the world.