

Emily Allchurch

David Shariatmadari

The loftiness of Claude, the harmony of Piero della Francesca, the perfection of Raphael. These are not qualities we necessarily associate with a dirty, fraught metropolis like London, but this hasn't stopped Emily Allchurch viewing her adopted hometown through the prism of Classicism. From a distance her painstakingly assembled digital collages look like copies. The eye is lazy and assumes it's looking at a Fontanesi or Turner print and not Allchurch's interpretation of these artists' work. Close-up is where the fun begins, especially if you're a Londoner. Allchurch has reconstructed well-known paintings from scratch, fragment by contemporary fragment – the trick is to guess where the pieces came from. Spend some time investigating that majestic cornice and you'll find it is part pub sign, part grimy office exterior. The classical and baroque buildings of London – inner city churches, hospitals and banks – are co-opted to form part of a new temple at Delos or a Bridge of Sighs. Seeing parts of familiar landmarks out of context is confusing but this very sense of disorientation instantly engages the viewer, at first in a game of spot-the-monument but ultimately on a deeper level.

Not all of these stunningly detailed, backlit transparencies refer to po-faced Renaissance or Enlightenment works. Allchurch has engaged with at least one artist whose style seems less at odds with the grubby, chaotic context of the city. She pays homage to Breughel's epic *The Tower of Babel* (DATE) in her own dramatic reworking of the painting. The Royal Albert Hall is there along with curving curtain walls, theatres, blank arches, tunnel entrances and apartment blocks. It's tempting to draw the conclusion that London, at the moment a Mecca for tower builders, is doomed just as Babel was. It is certainly not difficult to find a note of pessimism in these images. Though they contain no people, Allchurch is clearly concerned about the lives of her hybrid cities' inhabitants. They are alienated and closely scrutinised – a line of graffiti by a lonely canal reads 'I KNOW I HAVE LOST' and references to CCTV are pointed.

A body of work Allchurch feels has particular resonance today is Piranesi's group of etchings known as *Carceri d'Invenzione* [Imaginary Prisons] (DATE?). She is in the middle of executing her own series based on them. Bleak, nightmarish visions said to have come to the artist while he was suffering from a fever, they have been interpreted not only as a reflection of Piranesi's state of mind, but as a piece of social commentary. In the context of Allchurch's work they represent a claustrophobic vision of the city as a place of entrapment rather than of freedom, a place where nature is squeezed out and the technology of surveillance threatens to overwhelm.

In one sense Allchurch is being irreverent, playing around with our sense of these great works as grand, noble, sacred even. There is plenty of wry humour: satellite dishes, neon signs and other incongruous objects make meaningful appearances, and graffiti covers the walls of the rotunda in Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin* (DATE?). But there's a flip side to this degradation. In bringing these masterpieces back down to earth Allchurch is at the same time elevating our own experience of the mundane. The frustration of the original paintings (or the delight, depending on your point of view) is that they often portray impossibly idealised worlds. One answer is total iconoclasm – show the filth and the fury, where your predecessors show rolling landscapes. And yet there is still something about London, about any modern city, that deserves myth and allegory, though perhaps not in the same unquestioning mode as before. Allchurch manages somehow to bridge the gap between the exalted and the banal and the result is a knowing lyricism for our times.

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