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‘World-Shaping’: Choreographies of Mapping and Construction.

Much of Shaun Murray’s recent drawing practice has been developed in response to the immediate urban and riverine topographies of his local area: the jetties, bridges, riverside pathways and public spaces of the river Thames at Battersea, London. The works perform a conceptual connecting and utopic reconfiguration of different sites along an approximately three-mile stretch of the Thames, from Wandsworth bridge to Chelsea bridge.

Fig. 1. Shaun Murray, *The Screen, The Spectrum and the Pendulum (Ineffaceable Illuminations)* (2021).

Previous, related drawing series by Murray carry titles such as *Thames Bathymetry* (2017) and *Chthonic Deluge* (2012). Both of these emphasise depth; a revelatory melting away of the discernible ground toward the hidden layers of the landscape across empirical and mythical registers. (Bathymetry is the study of the depths of a body of water and chthonic refers more universally to the underworld.) This present series carries the general title *Ineffaceable Illuminations* (borrowed from the writings of philosopher and mathematician Gilles Châtelet). Whilst we are still immersed in a space of uncertain ground and ambiguous depths characteristic of Murray’s wider work, the more exclusive focus on the sub-riverine has now shifted toward other points of visual purchase, other parts of the land/city-scape, reflecting a recent period of attention in his thinking on the meaning and use of city parks and monuments. In the new series a different spatial balance is set, with chthonic depth and surface perspectives colliding in a now shallower, lower region of the image, to support a greater attention to height: a space of flight for a choreography of levitation; the trajectory of projectiles and aerial constructions.

Figs. 2 and 3. Shaun Murray, *The Screen, The Spectrum and the Pendulum (Ineffaceable Illuminations)* (2021).

Evocations and speculative construction

Murray defines his drawing processes as a search to find ways to represent new things within a process of exploratory mapping; bringing into visibility through invented visual languages, previously inaccessible data. Many conceptual tensions and contradictions are active within this process of thinking through drawing, which could be said to broadly stretch and contort between the creative, the critical and professional identities of the architect. The drawings map real sites whilst giving figure to utopic desires. They draw on the empirical and scientific registers of diagramming, but also approach shamanistic intensities of invention. (Murray includes in his broad range of references the ‘inhabited’ drawing processes of the Navaho sand mandalas). They deal fastidiously with the embodied and the material whilst invoking corporeal liberation from such constraints.

Châtelet's writings on diagramming and gesture from the early 1990s articulate something approximate to the complexity of Murray's drawing as exploratory mapping, performing a similar trans-disciplinary cut across evidential and poetic fields of endeavour. Châtelet writes, 'A diagram can transfix a gesture, bring it to rest, long before it curls up into a sign, which is why modern geometers and cosmologists like diagrams with their peremptory power of evocation. They capture gestures mid-flight [...] they are moments when being is glimpsed smiling.'¹

Fig. 4. Shaun Murray, *The Screen, The Spectrum and the Pendulum (Ineffaceable Illuminations)* (2021).

Murray also defines his work as a preparation for 'construction'. At face value, this would seem an expression of fidelity to a broad notion of architectonics, if not architecture as such, from someone operating at the outer limits of the conventions of architectural representation. However, there is also an implicit complexity and critique here – or even the terms of a *negation* – of conventional and existing architectural construction, the existing city fabric. There is the sense in Murray's approach to drawing and his absolute investment in it, that the processes undertaken by him are not just research for some future construction that would add to and augment the present built environment. Rather, it is more like a fundamental, revisionary act of excavation and divination through drawing, that would provide the preconditions and the deeper knowledges for any genuine 'construction' to happen at all.

'Construction' thus contains a speculative hope for a future that the drawings seek to bring closer, and establish the conditions for. Murray also initiates a move toward a form of physical construction from within the drawing process itself. At an advanced stage in the evolution of its forms he begins a phase of three-dimensional modelling (cardboard armatures wrapped in a layer of clay and subject to further sculpting). These could be said to perform a kind of reification of the play of abstraction within the drawings toward something more solid and artefact-like, generating three-dimensional 'agents' from within the new abstract space created in the drawings. The modelling facilitates a slow performance of breaking the frame of representation in a radical sense: not simply a movement from the picture plane to the three-dimensional object, but the creation of a choreographic agent that *stands-in* for a future of 'construction' and of the material transformation of the external reality.

Fig. 5. Shaun Murray, *Mirror Curtain (Ineffaceable Illuminations)* (2021).

Fig. 6. Shaun Murray, *The Pendulum (Ineffaceable Illuminations)* (2021).

Topographic precedents and 'world shaping'

Murray understands his work to share common ground with a range of contemporary abstract painters and installation artists, such as Julie Mehretu, Sarah Sze and Jorinde Voigt. Their work broadly echoes the combination of abstraction, the notational and the figurative to be found in Murray's work. However, he is also insistent on the importance of the physical site and sited field research that is largely absent from those practices. In this sense, an older lineage of modern topographic representation opens up a productive set of

comparisons. Among those raised by Murray himself are the annotated maps, diagrams and topographic sketches of landscapes made by Alfred Wainwright that make up his *Pictorial Guides to the Lakeland Fells* series (1955-66).

The striking quality of the *Pictorial Guides* – and of great relevance to Murray's work – is the combination of different techniques of the line, through drawing, writing and notation, on the same page. To follow the *Guides* one has to become accustomed to a constant shift in the value of the line as it transitions from the delineations of the map view, to the contour and hatching of the topographic portrait, to the directional arrows that accompany Wainwright's annotations, to the varying status of text, both within and separate from the illustrations. It is not that Murray replicates any of these individual techniques of line, as such, but that his work could be said to occupy a similar space of slippage between more conventional, spatial representations. Murray's spatial abstractions possess something akin to the blank space between the various drawings and texts of a Wainwright page: a space in which the eye, without fixing attention on any specific mode of line, is aware of an extreme spatial instability generated by their proximity.

Fig. 7. Alfred Wainwright, topographic illustration from *The Western Fells* (1966)

Murray himself originates from Cumbria, the county of the Fells, and it is clear that Wainwright's work connects Murray to early landscape memories and a datum of landscape experience. This perhaps in part accounts for why he searches for and invents a landscape of monumental depth and height within the estuary plain of London: a displacement and projection of the home landscape of granitic morphology to the sedimentary silts of the adopted city.

There are also productive comparisons to make here between Murray's work and the topographic imagery of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, which he developed as a separate career from his architectural practice from around the early 1920s. Reminiscent of the potential for spatial ambiguity on Wainwright's pages, Mackintosh's watercolour landscapes shift viewpoints in their construction of the landscape within the same image. In many of the views of Southern French mountain villages and Port Vendres, Mackintosh constructs, in the lower third of the image, a bird's eye position of floating elevation above a landscape, whilst, in the upper third, the view flattens to become more like a topographic profile of foreshortening and compression. Between the two, landscape forms – exposed geology, fields and roads that cut through – contort and twist in a reconciliatory mid-ground, of more molten, abstract forms. (See, for example, *Port Vendres*, 1924-26 and *Mont Alba*, 1924-27.)

Murray noted in response to Mackintosh's work that everything has 'equal presence', that it is rendered at the same weight of delineation and solidity (rock, vegetation, shadow, water), and that it amounts to a project of 'world shaping' (a re-forming of the external reality according to a visionary and utopian project of renewal and transformation).² Murray notes here qualities and drives very much active in his own work and approximate to his own ambition for 'construction'.

Colour 'tags' and restless composition

The other kinship Murray's work shares with that of Mackintosh is the strong and operative role of colour. In both Murray and Mackintosh's imagery is a work of strong colour variation within a broad palette. This contributes to a complexity of tectonic form, by facilitating a clarity in the distinction of component parts. Both take on a kind of choreographic reconfiguration of the object, in this regard, with machinic overtones. Mackintosh's work often exhibits a Cubo-Futurist, mechanical angularity to the landscape tectonics (softened by persistent, Art-Deco instincts), reflecting the paintings' provenance in the avant-garde of the 1920s. With Murray, the tectonic parts are resonant with the super-plasticity and ultra-thin layering of the digitally assisted assembly plants of the 21st century.

Fig. 8. Shaun Murray, *Allusive Figures (Ineffaceable Illuminations)* (2021).

Colour in Murray's drawings is deployed through an intuited control of varied transparencies and opacity, in a selective overlapping, masking, slicing, movement of parts and planes. This is in part informed by a preliminary practice of sketching within a much looser use of watercolour, but which transforms substantially within the pen and airbrushed acetate layers of the final works to a precise rendering of, what appears to be, an incommensurable complexity of forms and trajectories. Murray's use of colour is not coded, it does not bring a system into play, but is of a more random generation of, what he refers to as, 'colour tagged parts'.³ Colour as 'tag' is, therefore, in the mode of an identifier, the giving to a form the added character or signature of colour, assisting in its legibility and distinction as it is set loose into the monumental movement of the totality of parts.

The nature of this movement, the disposition of its plasticity in the assemblage of its choreographies and gestures, is what defines Murray's work in its contemporariness, in its expression of the period through which pass. The intersection of line toward the creation of varied yet choreographed planar forms of colour is reminiscent of certain line-driven abstraction of mid-twentieth century painting and graphic art, and I am drawn, in particular, to make a comparison with the work of the English printmaker and painter Stanley William Hayter (see, for example, *Paysage Anthrophage*, 1937 and *Myth of Creation*, 1940). Murray's work certainly carries an after-glow of avant-garde, modernist energies from this period. However, his work is also instinctively navigating/channelling these lingering reflexes of modernist drives into the long extension of post modernity through which we uncertainly travel. Work such as Hayter's carries a characteristically Modernist, centripetal energy of the vortex that confidently binds, *gestalt*-like, its abstractions together. Murray's compositions, on the other hand, shift and slide free from any centre, and we are unsure if their components are in a state of dispersal, or collision, or if its parts intersect or associate at the behest of any force other than pure chance.

The relationship of components within Murray's work is ultimately in a state of perpetual restlessness and revision. The construction of the drawings across multiple, acetate layers – that may themselves shift in their alignment – and the adding beneath and atop of the layers the choreographic 'agents' of moulded clay, means that the composition is never itself 'fixed', as such. The act of recording the works photographically does not define a moment of completion, or signing-off, like the definitive action of a frame, but is merely a

required stage in the drawings' movement toward dissemination. What we view on the page here are, by definition, unique details, partial views, specific performative moments of engagement with the work through their recording. The drawings' photography is embraced as another moment of the drawings' process; another glimpse at 'illumination', in Châtelet's terminology, the capturing of configurations in 'mid-flight'.

Notes

1. Gilles Châtelet, *Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics, and Physics* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p. 10. *Figuring Space* was originally published in the French as *Les Enjeux du mobile* (Éditions du Seuil, 1993). Châtelet's other works include, *To Live and Think Like Pigs: The Incitement of Envy and Boredom in Market Democracies*, 1998 (translated into English 2014).
2. In conversation with the author, 21 July, 2021.
3. In conversation with the author, 21 July, 2021.