

THE LANDSCAPE OF TIME (Essay by Antonia Jackson)

“Memory is always incomplete, always imperfect, always falling into ruins; but the ruins themselves, like no other traces, are treasures: our guide to situating ourselves in a landscape of time”

Rebecca Solnit
The Ruins of Memory¹

While in her essay, Rebecca Solnit relates to ruins as architectural, we can argue that these can take many other forms: rediscovered family photographs, old film footage, historical images sourced on the internet, disregarded objects or sketches executed in haste as to record a fleeting trace of time. These ruins of time, once discarded and taken out of their original context become fossils out of which the artist can extract new meanings through the power of imagination. It is Walter Benjamin through his study of the disregarded 19th century Paris Arcades (Die Passagen) who understood the allegorical (and therefore poetic) potential that can be released from the outmoded commodity², pivot to his idea of the ‘dialectical image’. Thus fragments of the past ‘blasted out of the continuum of history’³ were meant to release their dialectical power by coming together in constellations and illuminating each other. By picking up the rubble of the past and reassembling it, Walter Benjamin presents us with both a philosophical and aesthetic approach, in his time developed by the Surrealists and the Dada movement who experimented with collage, assemblage and the Ready-Made. Nowadays many contemporary artists produce conceptual work out of the ruin and memory, creating archives out of the archive through film and digital media with the example of Tacita Dean, Jane and Louise Wilson, Uriel Orlow to name just a few. These artworks while very clever and very well executed are, to my mind, however ‘dry’ and lack the contemplative and emotional potential allowed by painting. Indeed painting is a particularly appropriate medium to explore memory. It is slow, transformative and versatile; it allows experimentation with colour and light to create mood; it allows the artist to recapture time. This is what the artists involved in ‘the Landscape of Time’ exhibition attempt to achieve through their varied painting practice.

Picking up the rubble, Tom Down builds up flimsy physical models out of discarded cardboard and polystyrene. Playing on scale and illusion with the camera, he then transposes them back into paint. Taken out of their original context and thanks to the artifice of paint, they take on new meanings and suddenly become solid strange poetic landscapes reminiscent of stage sets. Their emptiness and stillness gives the

¹ *Storming the Gates of Paradise : Landscapes for Politics*. Rebecca Solnit, 2006

² *The Dialectics of Seeing, Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Susan Buck-Morss, 1989

³ *Illuminations, Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin, 1999

feeling that time is suspended as if we were looking at an interrupted film. Their dark atmosphere conveyed by subtle mid-tones and contrasting light renders them unfamiliar and recalls the Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich but also somehow, the strange atmosphere of De Chirico's petrified landscapes.



Tom Down, Study for Empty Mountain 1, oil on canvas(2018) 40 x 30 cm

In Nicole Price's paintings, the rubble becomes old family photographs sourced out of the family album. Manipulated and juxtaposed in a process reminiscent of John Stezaker's collages, they are then transposed into miniature paintings on aluminium and become like a delicate repository of memory, suspended in time. There again, the versatility of paint allows for the recovery of personal memory and for its dialogue with collective memory through the simplification of visual information as well as the use of a muted palette and melancholic tones.



Nicole Price, Cold Hands in Pockets, oil on aluminium (2017), 26 x 20 cm

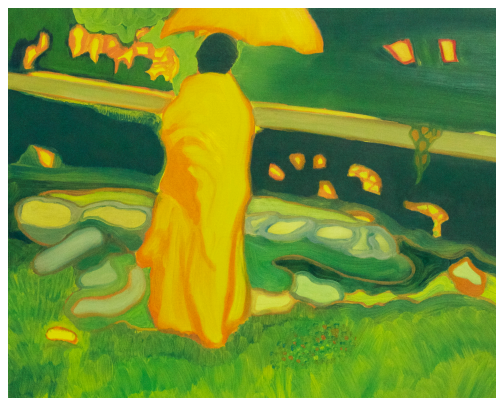
Melancholic scenes of another age, belonging to the sphere of collective memory, are Ed Saye's subject matter. Sourced imagery referencing past historical utopian times (here the Hippy era of the 1970s) uprooted from its original context goes through various stages of transformation at the hand of the painter and the image is gradually allowed to dissolve into abstraction like a fading memory. This is the



result of a slow and complex layering process, from the application of transparent glazes over a coloured ground that sets the atmosphere of the painting to the erasure of elements of the image through sanding and finally the application of impasto paint. Finally, the choice of a subdued colour palette reminds of the faded hues of old photographs and postcards.

Ed Saye, Study for Happy Hippie Home, oil on wood panel, 28 x 35cm

By contrast, it is a very vivid colour palette, influenced by post-Impressionism, that dominates Antonia Jackson's paintings, creating a surreal dreamlike atmosphere in her paintings and a sense of heightened memory. Usually painted on board with thin layers of paint carefully laid over a carefully chosen ground that lays the general mood of the painting like for Ed Saye, they aim to reflect the instability of memory. They originate in carefully selected stills from rediscovered Super 8 reels shot by her father in the 70s and 80s around the world while on business travel, again fragments of the past shot on an obsolete medium and archives of a pre mass-tourism world. Such images are low definition by nature and the resulting paintings will hover between abstraction and figuration where the elements of the degraded image gradually dissolve into flat shapes and traces of the past to result in melancholic fabricated memories.



Antonia Jackson, *The Wandering Monk* (Sri Lanka 1980s), oil on plywood (2017), 51 x 41 cm

Unlike the previously mentioned painters, Helen Bermingham's imagery originates in her own memories from rural Ireland as well as images imprinted on her mind. Daily drawings are for Helen Bermingham a way of recovering those memories in a process that is more reminiscent of Freud's 'heimlich' and 'unheimlich' than Walter Benjamin's approach, whereby long buried and repressed memories resurface involuntarily and what was once familiar becomes unfamiliar and strange. Thus her current paintings belonging to the 'Fictionscape' series exhibited here are both remembered and imagined landscapes that dissolve into psychological spaces. The blurring and disrupting of the image on canvas through gestural flat brushwork is essential to allow memories to both disappear and reappear. At times, the images emerging can resemble a fragile Babel tower. Moreover, a subtle and almost monochromatic use of colour with a dominant of green reminiscent of the Irish landscape combined with thin layers of paint applied and erased result in ethereal and melancholic traces of the past.



Helen Bermingham, *Tower*, Oil on canvas (2018), 30 x 25 cm

By contrast, in Susie Hamilton's paintings, a lone peculiar figure is bathed in an intensely bright light enhanced by vivid colours. That figure is reduced to an abstract shape or a trace of a figure by gestural brushwork, as if it had been recorded in haste to freeze a moment in time, a fleeting memory from a trip to Morocco. But for Susie Hamilton, sunlight and shadows also express the idea that the figure is 'trapped in its own finitude', as if petrified by an existential burden of choice, much like the main protagonist in *L'Etranger* by Camus, a reference for Susie. It creates an uncomfortable feeling for the viewer and again a sense of the familiar that has become unfamiliar. Thus, through the artifice of paint and the use of light, colour, shadows and gesture, Susie Hamilton manages to turn a captured moment of everyday life into an uncanny and mysterious trace of the past.



Susie Hamilton, Berber, oil on canvas(2014), 50 x 50 cm

While discussing the painting practice of the above artists in relation to the context of the exhibition I have become increasingly aware that the language of painting and the language of memory are closely intertwined: like memory at work, the present artists deconstruct, reconstruct, erase, blurr, disrupt, simplify, splice, layer, dissolve, saturate and de-saturate, create illusion, turn the familiar into the unfamiliar. The unpredictability of the painting process echoes the unreliability of memory. Eventually each artist discussed here recreates half remembered, half imagined spaces, imbued with melancholy and at times existential, a 'guide to situating ourselves in the landscape of time'.