

THE SPACE BETWEEN

When Kevin Todd describes “certainty (as) rather a small island”, he writes from personal experience, both of the certainties of mathematics, physics and geometry (his early training was as an engineering draftsman) and of the constrictions of literal isolation (growing up in Ireland, living and working in New Zealand and Tasmania). On an island, certainties erode. Perspectives shift: from near to far, from there to here, from sky to earth to ocean.

His first solo exhibition in Australia was entitled *Grid/Navigate/Arrive/Photograph*, a sequence of words which speaks both of precision and estrangement. The grid, the mapping, the abstraction of place comes before the journey. The photographic points of view in this show were constructed, calculated: at nine sites over a period of a year, the artist hung his vision on an imaginary vertical grid erected on an imaginary line (Lat. 33.50 s, running east-west through Sydney Heads). The resulting photomosaic lattices, distorted by angle of vision into strange rhombic building blocks, are enhanced in their scientism by a geometric web of projection lines drawn on the wall. It all seems as cool and rational as a Sol Lewitt wall drawing from the late 1960s. But just as Lewitt’s close-hatched minimalism became more complex and contradictory, succumbing to the baroque paradoxes of numbering, in these works Todd subverts the mathematical system he has himself so laboriously constructed.

Missing squares at the edge of each grid represent the decay of the totalising imperial vision, rather invoking the entropic and chaotic experiences of dispossession and of exile. More notably, the works in *Grid/Navigate/Arrive/Photograph* devote the largest part of their surface area to “the immeasurability and ubiquity of the sky...and the unanalyzable surfacelessness of the clouds”. These repetitions and overlappings of vaporous non-space challenge the pictures’ “objective” realities of personal position and Sydney real estate.

Todd deliberately pursues this dissolution of certainty, this wearing away of the island, this disappearance of the ground beneath his/your feet. His landscapes are scaffolded, but evacuated of distance, of image, of space, of plane, of meaning. He courts the void which is at the heart of the Sublime, both in the landscape and in the abstract frame.

Cartographies sees further erosion, from two different directions. In terms of the image, the earth and sky and their horizon disappear entirely, replaced with aerial photographs. Of twenty-seven panels, seventeen depict sea surfaces, and most of the remainder are terrestrially ambiguous – islands, or Antarctica’s “land” of ice and snow. In terms of the media employed, the systems of imaging involved, Todd goes even beyond the clouds; the source photographs are not “real” visions, but satellite images, computer enhanced. In a further dematerialisation, the images were broken into twenty-five A4 tesserae and faxed, again via satellite, from the Australian Antarctic Division bases at Mawson, Davis, Casey and Macquarie Island. The transmitted images were laser-printed onto milky-transparent polyester film, a support which gives the work a further penetrability, permeability, ghostliness, uncertainty. Here enhanced by some of the sea surface titles –

Deception Bay, Broken Bay, Storm Bay, Bay of Fires, Anxious Bay – these trackless wastes of water again evoke the Sublime horror of emptiness, of banishment. The settler grips the ship's rail, watching the surge and self-erasure of the sea before and behind, and hoping he can trust the captain's charts, compass and chronometer.

One of the key issues faced (not to say overstated) by digital imagists is the technology's claim to the authority of an original, empirical photographic truth. Todd seeks to magnify the distance travelled from that truth, from the light-laden spatial and material moment. More, he is happy to set aside that truth (indefinitely, if necessary) and to consider vision as abstract process rather than as personal experience, or by extension, simply as a metaphor.

If the satellite is at one end of the imaging scale, at the other is the scanning electron microscope. Following *Cartographies* Todd attempted *Anatomies*. In this project (not represented in the current exhibition) he investigated the clouds within, using a battery of medical imaging technologies to read the “unanalyzable surfacelessness” of the human body's internal systems, organs and cells, to picture the essence of life itself, to find or represent the soul, even.

Meteorological and medical images share the graphic artefacts of digital technology. The visible is reduced to “mysteriously disintegrating smears and patterns”, a photo-industrial screen of puddled molten slag, perforated steel, wire mesh, pixels flaking off in specks of rust, drifting smuts of particulate. Moreover, both sets of machines are artificial visualisers, “looking” with physics other than the physics of visible light.

This seeing without light, this purely rational, technological and schematic construction of the world is also the basis of *Topographies*, a series produced in association scientists at the Australian Museum. In these works, Todd focusses on landscape data quite detached from its sensory dimension. This is not to say that the images are sterile; on the contrary, the artist finds in systems of data presentation (maps, charts, graphs, tables, diagrams and their various technical notations and archetypal glyphs) the aesthetic qualities that he formerly explored in and around natural landforms.

With this sequence we are back with 1960s geometric abstraction, 1970s minimalism, 1980s gridded photo-panoramas, but again (still) there are complicating factors, twists. This time it is the hand-drawn grids (in the pastel red, yellow and green of geologists' dating colour code) which humanise the work. Paradoxically, it is in a geometric overlay that the actual asserts itself against the virtual.

Furthermore, the computer-generated topographies behind the squares and mapping symbols are chaotic, a product of the number cascades of complex digital imaging software. This chaos is not like that of the all-over entropic field of nature; rather, it consists in localised collapses of mounds of data. The bald, surrealist, monochrome hills appear, but are not. They are not connected; there is no land use pattern, no subterranean aquifer, no root system, no Big Yam Dreaming, no custodian, no owner. They are peaks of sifted flour, Antarctic snowdrifts: fragile and easily blown away.

Thus instead of constructing an easy dialectical opposition between unruly nature and cognitive discipline, he allows the processes of immersion and detachment (in place and in knowledge) to co-exist in harmony, indeed, to flow in and out of each other.

The logical extension of such a paradigm shift is a change in the frame of reference, the frame of vision. In the post-Renaissance European tradition the window is a central trope. The window determines the limits of the view, both in terms of perimeter and of plane. Its rectilinear edges and glazing bars establish the geometry of illusion (the grid of perspective) and transcription (the drawing frame and the “squared-up” canvas). In Todd’s latest work the window is thrown out of itself. From a fixed yet transparent barrier, he moves to an opaque but penetrable opening. The eye goes through a window, but the whole body goes through a door.

In the *Metaphysical Doors*, two pierced wooden panels hang in space, wall-less, roomless. Their “front” sides are patterned with digital-geometric piercings, their backs are painted yellow. (In classical Chinese temple art, yellow is the colour of the altar of earth.) The jigsaw cutouts from the door panels are arrayed beyond the “entrance”, held in formation by perspective lines, colours and shadows playing across the gallery wall behind. The door panels and their mural reflections exist on quite separate planes, yet are still of and in each other; they insist on maintaining a threshold state, a state of flux, of passing through, of becoming. They represent “the tension between the desire for certainty...and the power of experiencing”.

From interdependence, hybridity and mutual cancelling-out Todd has constructed a strange, synthetic creole of information and experience, perspective and fog, photograph and place. This is his second language, the language of the space between.

The accent is recognisable in a recent image (from *Seed*, 1999) of a computer-drawn, girder-fronded palm tree caught in a glasshouse grid, a vegetal virtual Crystal Palace. Here, meaning oscillates between grandeur and a gag (Todd is, after all, from Cork). The work conjures up images of far time, of ancient flora, or (from more recent history) of the tropical bits (including parts of Australia) of European national empires, but it could also be a nice bathroom tile or a Maroochydhore shopping centre mural. In the perspectival lozenge at the foot of the palm tree’s trunk is a virtual shadow, a colonial spatrie work field, fans of darkness on a flat but horizonless plane. These shadows are like ripples of sand under high tide water. Another small island of certainty shrinks before our eyes.

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