Perceptions and Disjunctions in Urban Space

Matthew Carter

Exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the degree of

Master of Art & Design, AUT University, 2009

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgment is made in the acknowledgments.

Matthew Carter

Date:

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Abstract

In this studio based visual arts project I am exploring through representational painting and compositing, perceptions, conjunctions and disjunctions in space and time in the urban environment. My approach situates the stranger as the phenomenological self, the perceptual being, at the centre of the research who explores the spatio-psychology of the city in the light of contradictory philosophies that move between seeing the city as a place of social malaise to seeing it as a malleable space for each individual within it.

Introduction

This is a studio and practice based research project using drawing, photography, digital image manipulation (compositing) and moving image (video) to create paintings about; perception, space, time, place, identity, and the city.

Ideas and perceptions about space and place have changed over the last hundred years or so notably in physics, philosophy, geography and art. New conceptual spaces have been created; cyberspace and the virtual spaces of games, social networks and forums all of which are having implications on our perceptions of urban space.

The political, social and psychological implications of space have also been recognised. *Sexuality & Space*, a series of papers written for Princeton Papers on Architecture, notes the importance of space surrounding issues of sexuality and a feminist perspective (Colomina 1992). How we socially produce space has been widely discussed, notably by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, (Lefebvre 1991) in which he examines how we have produced the spaces, buildings and institutions, and how those new spaces in turn produce the (spatial) activity within them.

In the last thirty years, space has become as important as the historical and the social. Edward Soja describes in *Thirdspace* (1996), how the most interesting new thinking about space comes from a 'radical postmodernist perspective'. This is not to say that time is not important. Some of the new thinking about space has noted the way that space is inextricably linked with time. Nigel Thrift observes that one of the new important principles is that space is in constant motion, and is distributed without boundaries whereby every entity is changing (2006). So 'space is inextricably linked with time,' as Lefebvre says, 'but cannot be conflated with it. To think of one without the other is meaningless' (1991 p12).

The term space is often used without excluding the specific type of space that is place. While in physics the term 'space' is used to describe the absence of matter, in other fields, such as philosophy, the term space can be inclusive of place. Lefebvre rarely used the word place yet it was incorporated into his idea of 'lived space' and 'everyday life' (Soja 1996). What constitutes a place is under scrutiny as different types of places, for example transient spac-

es, are identified. Often the idea of an authentic place is associated with people having identification with it. The pervasive commercialisation of places has been felt by some to be creating placelessness (Relph 1976) and it has been argued that Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) are also helping create a 'placeless' world (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). Surfaces and façades in the urban landscapes bring into question the oppositions of real and virtual; authentic and fake. These relate to Relph's convictions about placelessness. Beneath those façades the city's infrastructure of networks become more numerous and interweaving; the philosopher Jean Baudrillard's prediction is of a future in which we communicate only through networks and behind screens (Baudrillard 1998) and I will be discussing this and his ideas about hyperreality and simulacra. Other observers, Marshall McLuhan, for example, have recognised that information technology could be a powerful positive force (Mattelart 1999).

There have always been multiple and varied perceptions of the city. It has long been perceived by some to be the cause of a social malaise, sometimes linked with the idea that our technology is subduing the earth, or sometimes the city is seen as a site of moral failure (Raban 1974).

There have been attempts to fix some of the social ills with urban planning and new ideas in architecture. In investigating these multiple perceptions of the city, I look at point of view and orientation, and the spatial locations of the viewer and the self.

I have identified some research questions which relate to: New thinking about space and time; the idea that the city is a place of ills; the inauthentic place and how it is perceived by those within it, particularly the newcomer or stranger to the city. If new thinking about space and place affect perceptions of the lived spaces of the city, how do my perceptions of the spatio-psychology in urban spaces have a material effect on my painting and compositing practice? The multiple and varied individual conceptions of the city distinguish it from the suburb, the village and the small town (Raban 1974). How does this characteristic affect my practice of painting and how can it both reflect and stimulate new thinking about urban spaces in art? Lastly, how does compositing fit in to inform my painting practice?

Methodological Approach: The Phenomenological Self

'We see the things themselves, the world is what we see', writes Merleau-Ponty in the opening statement of *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). He is describing a perceptual faith; a faith that the things out there, which we perceive to be there, are in fact there. Phenomenolism is described as the philosophy that claims that all knowledge comes from sensory perception. Merleau-Ponty's rigorous and vivid analysis of perception from the point of view of the self can be understood as being a phenomenological approach. How I perceive the city from my point of view or perspective is at the heart of my approach which forms much of my own methodology. I am perceiving the city from the point of view of my own self, as experienced through my sensing and awareness while allowing for the awareness of others views, and other potential views, all being nevertheless part of my processing of my sensory perceptions, cognitive perceptions and reflective perceptions.

Points of View

In representing urban places, I felt a need to get some distance from the street and perceive it as a planner or cartographer might - from a high viewpoint. The usual viewpoint is from street level, where one can experience a sense of claustrophobia, hemmed in between tall buildings where sunlight has difficulty penetrating. I wanted to see if there were new aspects of the city, which were unfamiliar and so I avoided the street level and got as high as possible to look down at it. I found multi-storey car parks to be the easiest way to get the high viewpoint. There are many to be found in the city, they are easily accessible public spaces and usually there is no requirement to explain why one is there. As well as providing new urban viewpoints, multi-storey car park rooftops almost completely eliminate the street level anxiety. Not known as a destination for tourists, I have found these multi-storey car parks to be an urban equivalent of the rural mountaintop.

Aerial art, in some form or another, has existed for hundreds of years. Aboriginal art uses this high view to show

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph
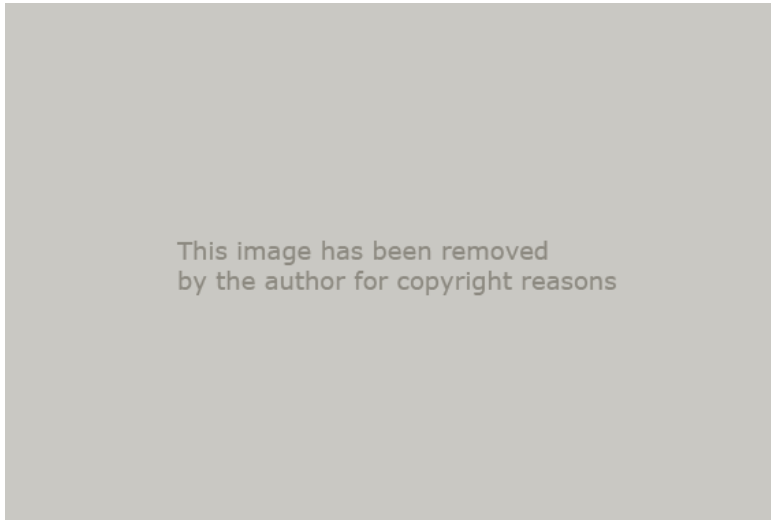
Untitled, Dirk Skreber, 1999, oil on canvas, 279 x 400 cm

Untitled (Ultra Violence), Dirk Skreber, 1999, oil on canvas,
165 x 190 cm

ancestral pathways linking waterholes and sacred sites. Western aerial art in the 20th Century often employs a view of the land from a birds-eye perspective approaching a projection without converging perspective lines, like the axonometric projections that architects use. The painter Dirk Skreber is one of those artists using a high aerial viewpoint in his paintings. Taking as his source imagery, views of the earth that have become familiar through news footage of natural disasters, Skreber employs a distance from the subject matter and articulates dissociation from the original source material. In *Untitled (Ultra Violence)* (1999), an aerial view of Columbine High School, Skreber 'forces consideration of the chilling banality of evil and its ability to fester and erupt in the least expected places' (Molon 2002 p310). This extreme distancing evokes a calmness that belies the unpleasant reality of what has happened on the ground and in Skreber's case is unsettling because of the shock of the contrast between the reality on the ground and the psychological comfort of the bird's eye view point.

Explorations of spaces in the paintings of Matthias Weischer, as shown here in *Living Room* (1999), form a space made up of 2D elements pinned together in 3D space. Likewise Arif Ozakca takes 2D cutouts of figures from disparate sources as shown in *Untitled* (2007), and assembles them together to form a reconstruction. This technique of rearranging elements from dislocated sources became part of my working method to construct compositions for paintings.

Weischer's work in particular deals with the space of the painting in a way which sometimes subverts the illusury nature of painting by deliberately ommitting elements (the shadows of the small table to the right) creating impossible spatial locations (2001).

There is an admission in both of these paintings of the 2D nature of the sources. Locating them in 3D space has become known as 2½ D compositing. In the motion graphic design industry I used the same compositing techniques and during the project applied them to painting.

Living Room, Matthias Weischer, 1999, oil on canvas, 170 x 190 cm

Untitled, Arif Ozakca, 2007, oil paint, gold leaf and screen print on linen, 181 x 244 cm

The idea of the Flaneur developed by Baudelaire, described the practice in 19th century France of casually strolling through the streets to experience the city. Walter Benjamin among others describes the Flaneur as a bourgeois dilettante. By getting up close to and involved with the intensely lived spaces, busy markets, run down quarters, experiencing the colour, noise, and smells, it was felt the Flaneur was able to really understand urban life while remaining a detached observer (Wilson 2002). As I strolled around the city, I began to move within a third dimension as much as possible, up and down; along the z-axis of conceptual space, away from and back down again to street level. In obtaining views from multi-storey car parks I discovered a new three-dimensional way of exploring the city. There is strong contrast between the busyness of the street to being enclosed alone inside the small steel lift, then quickly out again into the bright sunlight on the car park rooftop, and then back down again into the crowds below. Up high, in the open, with no one there, it becomes a private space. The penthouse apartments are up at this level, housing the privileged and wealthy. Perhaps those with power (from Lefebvre's concept of Representations of Space – Conceived Space) who can change and invent the hard fabric of the city and survey it from on high. This

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

was God's own position and it reminds me that I am also, through my painting practice, conceiving my own city by taking the elements I want, compositing them, then rearranging and manipulating them how I want.

There are many ways to conceive points of view. From theories of perspective: 2 point; 4 point; curvilinear, to the projections used in architecture, the worms-eye view, the aerial view, and so on. These theories assume a single point from which the world is perceived. The axonometric projection having infinite distance from the object is more difficult to locate at a single point in space. This is an attempt at the ultimate vantage point, to be all seeing.

The photo composite *Roadscape*, encompasses a range of views, resulting in a super fish-eye lens view in which there is no up or down. Our sense of orientation of our bodies to the planet is dependent on a number of factors like the effect of gravity on our semi-circular canals and

Roadscape, Matthew Carter, 2009, Photo composite

our knowledge of what should be up or down. From up high, looking down, I found new affects on perception, challenging the orthodox perception of orientation. Being sited all around the globe our bodies are variously orientated in all possible directions. We can get a sense of this while looking down from the high point, looking to one side then the other. Looking at someone walking upside down, while one's body is upright, is perceptually different than looking at the same person upside down while one's body is also upside down. Likewise if one's head is tilted down and to the side looking at someone walking, the direction of his or her body is lateral across the field of vision, and is perceptually different than if the same view is observed with the head upright.

These various perceptions of a place and the infinite number of viewpoints of them are part of the reality of a place. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it in *Phenomenology of Perception:*

> *When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can 'see'; but back of my lamp is nothing but the face*

14

> *which it 'shows' to the chimney.*

And also;

> *The completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden.* (Merleau-Ponty 2002)

The infinite number of possible views, even before considering time, is complicated further by the perception of oneself as being distinct from another's perception. Perhaps the view has more to do with the self than with the object being viewed.

New Perceptions of Space and Place

How do we perceive the world behind us, beyond our field of view, so that we are not concerned that it is out of view and do not feel that it no longer exists? In Lefebvre's terms, perhaps we conceive that area rather than perceive it. Anosognosia is a condition whereby a patient is unaware of or denies the existence of a disability, sometimes even a severe one like blindness. There is no perception of the absence (Ivry and Robertson 1998). While not being anosognosic, we all exhibit the ability to deny absences. The blind spot; a gap in our vision where the optic nerve joins the retina can be easily demonstrated and covers a surprisingly large area of our visual field. Our perception fills in this unnoticed absence with whatever colour and form surrounds it. It is not black or grey (Wade 1998). The processing here of our perceptual mind is rather like a form of digital compression whereby, in the absence of any significantly new information, a value similar to the adjacent value is given to the blank area. This seems to differ from the way we perceive the regions outside of our field of view (behind us). Maurice Merleau-Ponty has described this in his book, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 'Our horizons of visual field are strangely difficult to per-

ceive. They are not greyed out or black' (Merleau-Ponty 2002).

The newcomer to a place experiences it in a peculiar way. How a place is perceived initially changes over time, as it becomes better known. In my perceptions of a new place there is a shifting sensibility that occurs in phases after the first experience of it. That initial perception fades on repeated returns and a new, more permanent one emerges. While travelling through places I have tried to re-imagine the initial sensibility that I experienced by invoking it. The initial sense can be lost or after a period of time away from the place this sense of seeing anew can return quite easily. These multiple or shifting sensibilities of a place are significant for me in painting a place, because they allow for multiple or shifting perceptions in both time and space.

In *Z-space* (2009), the degree of finish, degree of detail and degree of layering in different areas of the painting changes over the surface leaving bare canvas exposed in places. In the roof or awning I tried a variety of different painting techniques including 'loose' and 'tight' painting together, rubbing out, glazing, layering within the same image (the awning) looking for disjunctions and perceptual anomalies within the space. These various and inconstant ways of painting might present a problem for the viewer. Why is, for example, a human figure not completed? Is it because the painter cannot paint figures or stopped halfway? This issue could be resolved by unhinging the image from the painterly treatment so that the image is disconnected from the problem of how to paint it. The details of *Z-space* here show where the treatment was bounded by the image (the window), and where it was not (the awning).

Z-space, Matthew Carter, 2009, oil on linen, 600 x 1200 mm

Details, *Z-space*
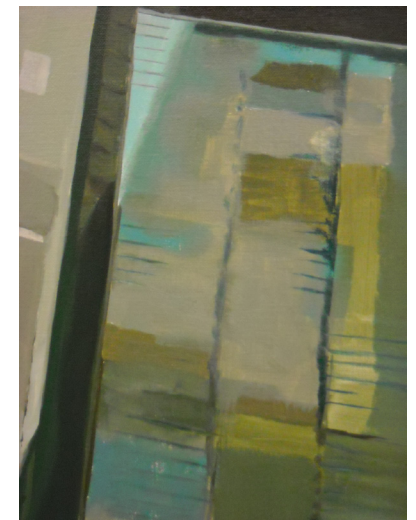
Painting and Compositing

In the digital world compositing uses software like Photoshop and After Effects (moving). In the analogue world it can be applied to oil painting on the material of canvas or board. Compositing became a valuable process for me. At first to compose a figure, which had been shot separately, into a new place prior to painting it. The same compositing techniques derived from motion graphics of copying, blurring and so on can be used in painting. Likewise, techniques used in oil painting; layering, glazing, etc, can be employed back into compositing. In this way they inform each other and at the same time challenge one another by questioning whether a particular technique can be achieved by the other. Subsequently as I used compositing more intensively, my painting changed to incorporate some of the ideas I had researched; Meta narratives or sub narratives like the idea of the city as a place of ills.

In moving from one medium to another I am establishing distance from the original. The links between the final work and the original may be broken. The painter Peter Doig has described this as an important aspect of his work, and he comments that the original material might be quite uninteresting - a postcard for example - but that by reworking it, he is looking for something else which might be disconnected from the original. In his painting, *Pelican (Stag)* (2009), distancing enables an ambiguous narrative to develop, which may be far from the original 'truth'.
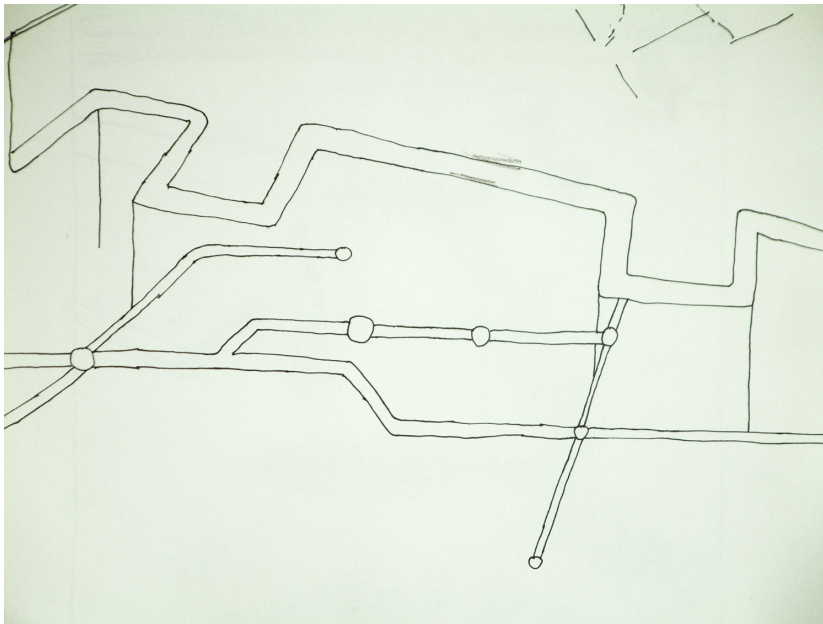
This image has been removed by the author for copyright reasons

*Pelican (Stag)*, Peter Doig, 2009, oil on canvas, 276 x 200 cm

Changing Speed and Finishedness

Drawing can become a practice that short-circuits the conscious reflection to some degree. A fast rate of working focused my energies and avoided me being sidetracked. The rapidly made drawings shown below were made with simple materials producing simple, more ambiguous images which might have no logical place or rationale. This speed of working seemed to engage the subconscious much more than with painting over days or weeks. At this other slow end of the scale I started painting with the best available materials; Belgian linen, hand-made cedar stretchers, artists quality paint. I held back the desire to get the work completed, leaving a painting to sit for days or weeks. Different psychological activity seemed to me to be engaged.

Wall-Tube, Matthew Carter, pen on paper, 2008, 300 x 420 mm
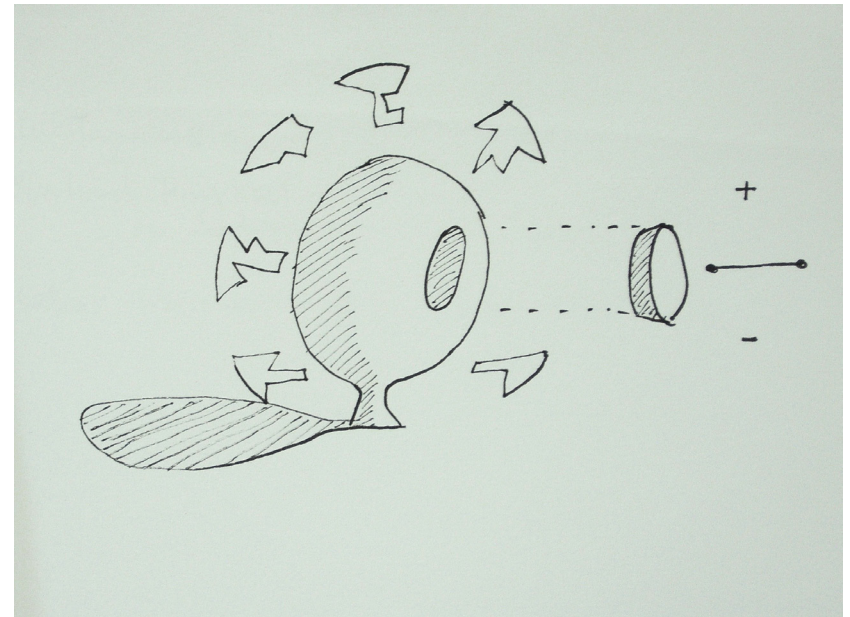
Plug-Tree, Matthew Carter, pen on paper, 2008, 150 x 200 mm

Materiality of Painting

Poiesis is a term derived from ancient Greek to describe a process of making in which the creation is allowed to emerge rather than be forced. One of the characteristics of painting as opposed to the digital world is its materiality and physicality. In opposition to the conceptual spaces of the virtual worlds, the materiality of paint, canvas and wood have an undeniable 'real world' quality. The experience of tactile sensation, the smell and even the sound of the materials: the paint; the canvas; cedar; the staples, are mostly absent from the virtual world. The sensory experience includes also the weight of the painting, which is affected by the weight of the wood and canvas and the quantities of paint. This is before describing the visual aspects: The proximity of each part of the object to each eye as part of binocular vision; the constantly changing focusing of each eye; the changing perspective, size, and orientation of the painting as the head swivels, tilts and moves up to and away from it. It is difficult to imagine a virtual reality world in which these things could be simulated.

Linear and Aerial Perspective

Combining different viewpoints in one painting challenges the single 'real' viewpoint paradigm. In *Walking Space* (2009), the façade to the right and the building on the left together give the viewer clues about the likely location of the viewer in the space of the painting, but the perspective of the building in the centre is distorted making the point of view extremely hard to locate. Other buildings have slightly shifted viewpoints that further complicate the location of the viewer. Uncertainties about the time are evident in the shadows from figures and buildings. They are incompatible in their directions suggesting further point of viewer location difficulties, but also suggesting time of day anomalies.

Walking Space, Matthew Carter, 2009, oil on linen, 1200 x 1700 mm

20

Landscape painting often explores atmospheric qualities to give a sense of distance. Chinese Ming dynasty landscape painting sometimes used aerial perspective, sometimes ignoring it and sometimes reversing it (Greene 2006). In traditional aerial perspective, the images in the distance have less colour and less tonal contrast to describe the effect of the air on the light. In the hyperreal world, however, endless clarity might exist, there being no atmosphere. The reversal of aerial perspective seen in *K-Block* (2008), gives the foreground figure an ethereal quality. A link is made across the space between the walkways through the gaze of the near figure, indicating spatial depth. The reversal of aerial perspective works against that depth.

K-Block, Matthew Carter, 2008, oil on canvas, 1600 x 1300 mm

Formats – Landscape/Portrait

Framing of a view in the city of urban 'mountains' changes the perceptions of our field of view from a general oval shape, which is horizontal, to a more vertical one. Vertical space becomes important as the vertiginous cliffs of city architecture lead the eye up and down. For my painting, the vertical (portrait) format was chosen for that reason. In *Steps* (2008), the portrait format helps the vertiginous view, throwing the viewer forward.

If the direction of view is steeply looking down however, the orthodox orientation of the edges of the painting frame with respect to up, down, left and right are challenged. By using a landscape format, I found that because of the downwards direction of the view, it enabled the viewpoint to be expanded to the left and right, bringing the eye line back up to the horizontal on each side, in a swinging pendulum motion. This new orientation of the panoramic view becomes *dis*-orientating, as the view swings round from the vertical to the horizontal at 90 degrees on either side. The absence of sky gives the tall buildings a dominating presence in the landscape.

Steps, Matthew Carter, 2008, oil on canvas, 1600 x 1300mm

22

Space and Place:
Urban Spatio-Psychology and Anxiety

The city has been associated with social ills for as far back in history as one can look. Jonathan Raban writes that cities were built originally to keep out the invading strangers and if they avoided being sacked or burned to the ground then they fell to their own ruin by insistent self-indulgence. Saint Augustine in *City of God* wrote that the fate of the great cities Babylon, Troy, Athens, Rome, all had the mark of Cain who murdered his brother in founding the capital city of the Roman Empire (Raban 1974).

As I move around the streets I sense that anxiety is an important psychological component in urban centres at street level whether it is in amongst the crowds or in the dark recesses of alleyways. The city is densely populated during the day but is vacated by many at night. Anonymity is a characteristic of urban life, which can lead to alienation but the worst fears are of the most violent crimes, rape and murder, random acts of violence which the city is perceived to be host to, whether or not the statistics show us that these crimes are no more common in the city than the country. Soja borrows from Celeste Olalquiaga

Untitled (deserted warehouse), Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital still from tv screen

23

and Michel Foucault in identifying an urban psychasthenia, 'defined as a disturbance in the relation between the self and surrounding territory' (1996 p.198). The psychological affect of being in the city streets vary from excitement to anxiety, alienation and disorientation and these psychological states change with time and place. This is a characteristic of the large city as is the ceaseless day and night activity. There is an ever-changing theatre of reality in which one can be one of the actors and/or one of the audience.

The philosopher Henri Lefebvre was born in a remote part of the country and came to the city as a newcomer. Coming from this rural part of France, he considered himself an outsider in the city, raising the idea of the centre/periphery binarism. He described the changes that occurred in perceptions of space when, during the Middle Ages, the building of cathedrals in the urban centres created a new spatial dimension; the rural landscape of the horizontal was broken up by sharp rising diagonals and verticals, and the new space freed itself from the old, achieving illumination and elevation. (Lefebvre 1974 p 256-257).

Symonds Street, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital Photograph

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital Photograph

The rooftops of multi-storey car parks provide a safe haven and the space of calm and rational thought, reflection and observation. The potentially threatening aspects of the dark alleys at street level are lifted away. There is no one above, there is no surveillance, and nothing dangerous lurking out of one's field of view, no Big Brother. Instead one becomes Big Brother. This is the God view. There is a spatio-psychological sense of security. This bird's eye view is the view of the urban planners and architects; the people inhabiting Lefebvre's conceived space who work to develop the city on paper. It is also the view reserved for those in power. The expensive penthouse apartments are up here with helicopter landing pads and swimming pools. The inhabitants of New York were divided up by Jonathan Raban (1991) into two groups; the *Air People* and the *Street People.* The *Air People* never lingered on the streets, terrified that the *Street People* might do them some harm. But this high vantage point, I remember, is also the space of my dreams, recurring lucid dreams of flying, dreams of transcendence, a space which is open for anyone to inhabit, where one's body overcomes the powerful force of gravity. The psychological comfort sensed from this high vantage point is so strong that it denies the activity on the

25

ground. This same sense of security can be found in the architecture of some interiors. Adolf Loos' Moller House in Vienna, has open plan living spaces which enable views through the walls and spaces. The way that comfort here relates to power and control has been recognised by Beatriz Colomina (1992) in *The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism.* The interior of the Moller House has seating areas that have the seat backs firmly built into nooks so that a person seated there would be able to survey the entire living space; the windows are opaque, made of ground glass, letting in diffuse light, while not allowing the gaze through, either in or out.

Untitled (stairwell), Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital Photograph

Spatial Thought

Construction is continuous in the city. But construction is not just about the fabric of buildings. The city is made up of lived spaces and socially created spaces. Buildings, streets, offices, civic spaces, leisure spaces are either occupied or pulled down to make way for new spaces constructed in their place. In my explorations around the city the presence of space is undeniable. The dazzlingly bright quality of light in Auckland reveals the spaces in stark

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

contrasts. While it illuminates and reveals space it also conceals those spaces it doesn't reach.

There have been important changes in the way we are thinking about space. At the micro level, our understanding of how solid matter may look has changed dramatically, so that surfaces are no longer clearly defined; boundaries between regions of matter are blurred and complicated. We may have been thinking of ourselves in the geographical world at a single point within time and space but this view too is being challenged (Thrift 2006). In geography, space is often seen as socially constructed and in a continual process of production.

In *Thirdspace,* Edward Soja, drawing on the work of Lefebvre, shows that whereas in the past there was an emphasis on history, time, social relations and society, the emphasis has now turned to space in a critical engagement with issues around the related concepts of place, location, architecture, city, home, territory and environment (1996). Soja develops the idea of a trialectical way of thinking whereby the old dialectics of modernism had a third, different, component added. Thus he introduces the 'trialectics of being': Historicality-Sociality-Spatiality.

Going deeper into the spatial aspect of this trialectic, he maps the trialectics of spatiality: Perceived-Conceived-Lived. This trialectic, which relates to Lefebvre's three concepts, is a useful one for me to carry in mind in the context of my practice.

Nigel Thrift writes about space in *Theory, Culture & Society* (2006), and he believes that there are some important new principles. He notes that everything is distributed in space; at the microscopic level, physics has shown us that even a pinhead has intricate spatial properties. 'Space is distributed without boundaries and all objects to greater or lesser degree show some process of shedding off or adding to.' This relates to the importance of time and he observes that every space is in constant motion. He maintains that there is no one kind of space; there are 'points, planes, parabolas; blots, blurs and blackouts' (Thrift 2006). Michel Foucault wrote a series of notes, discovered just before his death, which were later published under the title *Of Other Spaces,* in which he wrote, 'The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.' And 'the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time' (Soja 1996). Space has become the new history.

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

28

Place and Placelessness

What makes places and how they are created or destroyed is the central concern of Edward Relph's book *Place and Placelessness* (1976). His central theme is that we are losing authentic places, which are being replaced by placeless ones. This loss, he claims, is largely caused by commercialisation, uniformity, standardisation and mass media. As manifestations of this growing placelessness he points to the kitsch, the modern shopping mall, and mass-produced products largely created by large corporations. These things he states are to the detriment of our places, making them bland and uniform. Others however, believe the move towards placelessness is not all one way and that there are authentic places being created as well as being lost. It has been claimed that cyberspace is an example of such a space that produces new authentic places (Dodge and Kitchin 2001).

Some of the photographs I have taken around the streets in Auckland like this one taken off Symonds Street, seem to embody what Relph meant by placelessness. Here it is created by large advertising billboards and a monumental building that seems to lack the human aspect of architec-

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

ture; a sort of faceless building.

In *The Production of Space,* Henri Lefebvre claims that the idea of the city being a place of social ills has a reactionary purpose to divert attention away from critical discourse towards the idea that humankind is a failed species on a doomed planet (1991).

29

The space of the inner city is bounded and highly populated in the daytime. However, at night, it can become deserted as people go home to the suburbs. Some postmodern cities have almost lost their centres completely. Orange County, a new type of experimental city in California, which Soja calls an *Exopolis*, is a doughnut shaped city that is inside out (1996).

The city is the theatre for many disparate identities, movements and flux and the sense of place changes here

more than in the suburbs. In my own work, I am compositing elements from real places in urban Auckland. Buildings, roads, and figures are rearranged to form new imagined places.

As the transition from day to night occurs in the inner city, a strange sense of absence occurs in some parts while other places; restaurants, theatres and bars become busy. Professionals leave their workplaces and head for the suburbs. The daytime offices, which were lived authentic places during the day become placeless ones at night. The painter, Paul Winstanley's work is characterised by this strange atmosphere of absence as in *Viewing Room* (1997), where the place has been vacated but an ethereal imprint of the day's activities seems to remain. The silence and stillness is accentuated by the loss of the occupants.

This image has been removed by the author for copyright reasons

Viewing Room, Paul Winstanley, 1997, oil on linen, 183 x 253 cm

This temporal transition is explored in my painting *Untitled (5),* in the light sources. There are two or three sunlight sources here. As well as coming from different directions, the quality of the light in the different sources changes. On the buildings on the right the sun is higher, being earlier in the day than the building on the left. The façades of these buildings point to the city itself as an exemplary façade. The buildings on the right are groundless in another sense. They float above the ground in virtual space. But there is evidence of real lived space high up; the pergola behind the façade on the right hand building.

Road markings are clear in the painting, but traffic is absent, raising questions about functions of city spaces by pedestrians and the abandonment of the city. People are also absent and the pavements seem to have dissolved into the paint. The perspectives and orientations of the different buildings are disjunctional to one another as well as with the ground. The space between the walkways and the awnings above them is a lost or absent space. The pavement is a transitional space but there is no one there, further questioning the time of day.

Detail, *Untitled (5)*

Untitled (5), Matthew Carter, 2009, oil on linen, 1200 x 1700 mm

The Telematic Age and the Soft City.

In the modernist era there were huge technological and societal changes and the need to adapt to those changes is still apparent. Analysts like Jean Baudrillard, have concerns about the pervasive information and communication technology. If we are increasingly using cyberspace as a means of interacting socially then there should logically be a reduction in the physical activity in the city. Jonathan Raban's Soft City of pubs, theatres and restaurants gives way to Facebook and Second Life.

With the development of cyberspace, it can be argued that the distinctions between the virtual and the real are lessening (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). A convincing reality is created by the mass media, a reality that we have started to accept as truth constructed through the proliferation of simulacra – copies of the originals. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), the philosopher Jean Baudrillard observes that simulacra are linked to commodification of society and that when these copies become more real or authentic than the original itself, then hyperreality comes into existence. In his essay *The Ecstasy of Communication*, (Baudrillard 1998), he predicts a nightmare post-modern world of hyperreality in which we engage only through networks and screens where face-to-face communication lessens to the point of obscurity. As the need to move around in everyday space is lessened, so our bodies will become less necessary. He leads us to the idea that as a product of evolution we will begin to have no use for our bodies and that they will waste away as they become unnecessary. This vision however is countered by the need to be in the city physically, which is much in evidence. The Internet may augment the fabric of the city but to imagine it could replace it seems very unlikely. The excitement of being in the physical environment of the city completely overshadows the experience of online social interaction.

In *Soft City*, Jonathan Raban writes as a newcomer to London in the 1970's where he discovers that his anonymity in the city makes it a malleable plastic place for him. *Soft City* has been noted for its characteristically post-modern sense of multiplicity related to the façades and masks that can be worn by individuals (Harvey 1990). The city is many different things to different people, and as Raban writes, 'we can mould it to be what we want, act in it as though in a theatre, while it in turn moulds us as we come up against the hard city.'

In my painting *Confrontations with Undecidability* (2009), exaggerated disjunctions in the fabric of the streets, the buildings and their relationships to each other reflect the malleable nature of the city. The fact that painting is simulacra may be apparent, but I tried to challenge the idea of the fake or inauthentic implicit in this statement. During the photo compositing for this painting, I have distorted the perspective views of the buildings, changing the points of view. The pinkish building on the right is viewed from a very low level close up, whereas the central wall has a distant perspective despite being nearer. The slab of concrete floating in space on the left is also viewed from distance yet from its shadow, it should be nearer to us than anything else. The wall in the centre conceals a disjunction between the two divergent streets. In the hard city, disjunctions are both apparent and concealed.

Confrontations with Undecidability, Matthew Carter, 2009, oil on linen, 600 x 1200 mm

Confrontations with Undecidability, unfinished

Confrontations with Undecidability, Detail

Here is the painting at an early stage without the shadows, which I added in later. The flatness of the surface of the roads made the disjunctions unbelievable so I added in the strong shadows through the centre of the painting. This has the effect of almost dividing the painting down the middle, severing the two streets and changing the spatiality.

The detail opposite, shows the road trailing down to the edge, the distant buildings and vehicles, where I tried to explore the disjunctions in perceptions of space and time. Here the painting has broken down into plastic space, allowing multiple readings for some of the images and warping the space.

Cyberspace and Proxies

ICT's and cyberspace have been described as technologies that are making space irrelevant. De-localisation is being furthered by the development and rapid expansion of the Internet. They are producing spacelessness in their conceptual spaces. Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin have written in *Mapping Cyberspace* about recent claims about the 'death of distance' as deniable and contend that the real world of geographic space is still important (2001).

Alphaworld and Second Life are examples of virtual worlds in which inhabitants can contribute to the building of a spatial environment and live in it online. Once a participant has signed up, he or she creates an avatar to use as the virtual embodiment of him/herself, and then moves around in the world, exploring, socialising, and building (producing) space. The conceptual spaces of the Internet - virtual worlds are being turned into social places as an alternative to being out in the real geographic world.

Jonathan Raban, the author of *Soft City*, writes in *My Own Private Metropolis* that his daughter now uses the internet with its social networking sites as an alternative to the pubs and restaurants where he met his friends and that the internet has become his daughter's 'soft city' (2008).

The experience of travelling in cyberspace is similar to going somewhere by proxy; perhaps that is an important aspect of the attraction of it. Virtual worlds like Second Life have become enormously popular. Avatars, which embody the self have freedom and physical safety to wander around at will, to say and do what they like without fear. One is acting by proxy, but a proxy with close proximity. The avatar feels like oneself, yet is strangely detached from one's body; the schizoid post-modern condition.

Conclusion

At the start of this research project the figure was central in importance. The conceptual frame was the stranger in a new place. During the development of the research, that stranger evolved into a proxy, like an avatar in cyberspace. I became more interested in the conceptualising of the city in a wider context and less about my perceptions of another figure within urban space. The vertical shift away from street level was important in terms of this broader context as well as the obvious vantage point, but it also enabled me to make a psychological shift from tension and disquiet in the locus of the street to the peace of the empty car park. This shift enabled me to make a transition from the perceptual through compositing to the conceptual.

My research questions were framed in relation to: The city as a place of malaise; its authenticity; how it is perceived in different ways; how the stranger perceives it; how new thinking about space has affected perceptions; how spatio-psychology affects my painting; how multiple conceptions affect my practice and how that in turn could change others' perceptions.

The perceived problems of the city leading to anxiety and urban psychasthenia are reduced by the creation of the new type of city, the exopolis, where the centre has gone. Through compositing, however, I found myself constructing an anti-exopolis where the centeredness is intensified. While the city can have negative aspects, through the project, it emerged as diverse and inspiring. If authenticity is linked to identification with a place, then the city does contain authentic places. What seemed placeless up close, was transcended with distance during the project and continue to shift, in space (particularly vertical space), and over time as the sensibility of a new place changed. As a stranger to the city my perceptions had a vivid quality that now, may have become more elusive as they are changing over time. The new conceptions and thinking about the city (cyberspace and socially produced space) changed my perceptions dimensionally. My understanding of the spatio-psychology of the city spaces has affected my practice, particularly in looking for distancing strategies in the research and the work whilst acknowledging the attractive and repellent nature of the city. Lastly, the multiple conceptions of the city, its psycho-geography, the unseen spaces, networks, and

transitional spaces, with significant use of compositing, resulted in conceptions, of new more intense conjunctions of city façades as signifiers of the 'real'.

The research questions are still open for continuing investigation and I am pursuing those areas of my painting where the images break down or become plastic as they refer to time and space. I will explore these deconstructions of imagery in relation to the flux of people and vehicles within and around the fabric of the architecture of the city.
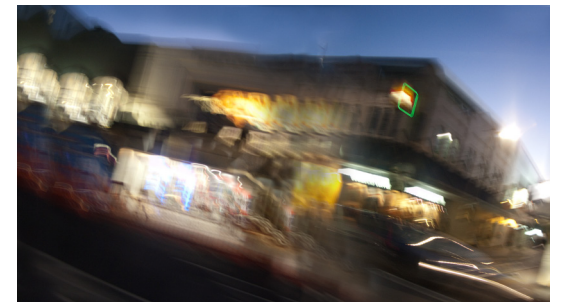
Visual Documentation
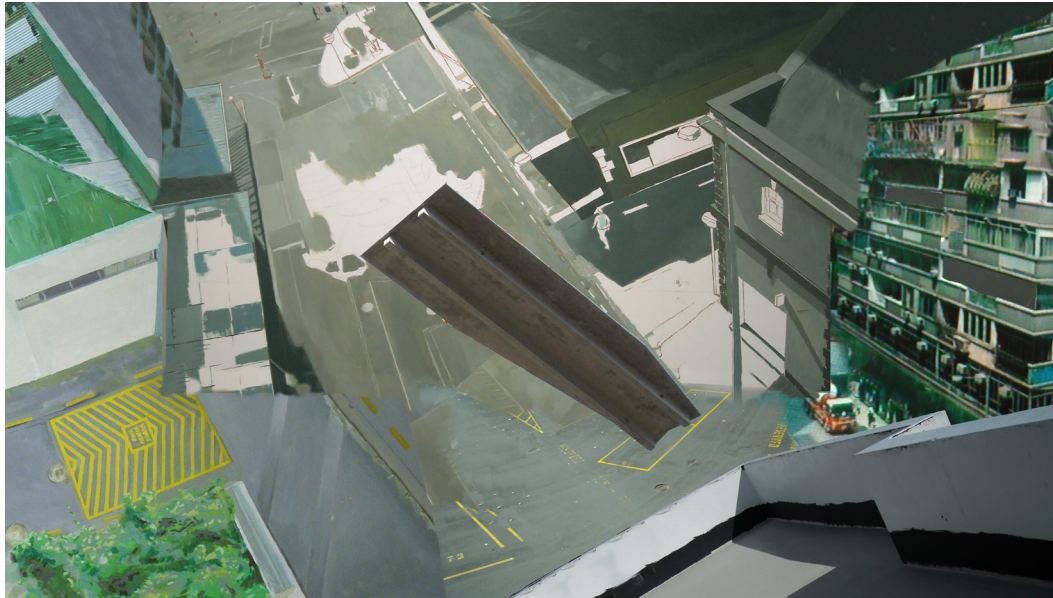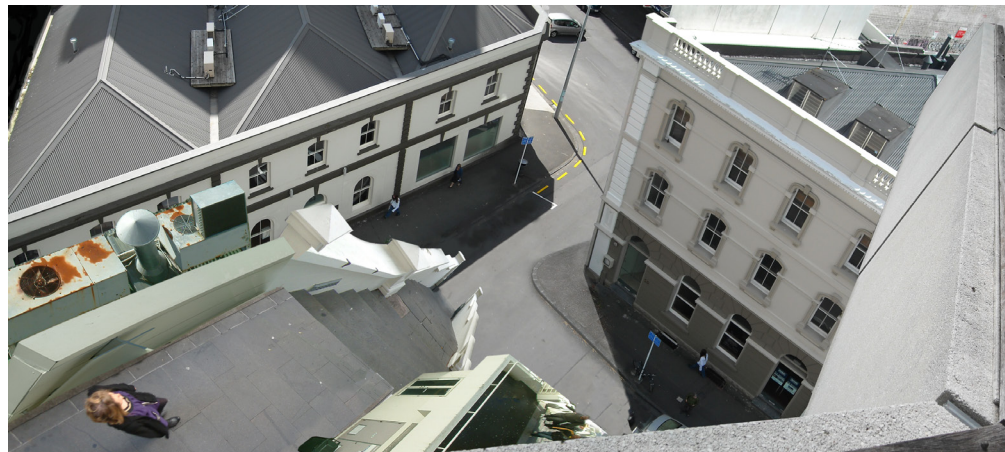

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, digital photo composite

Shadow, Matthew Carter, 2009, digital photo composite

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, digital photo composite

Fast Road, Matthew Carter, 2009, oil on linen, 1200 x 1700 mm

Untitled 1, Matthew Carter, 2009, digital photo composite

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

41

Roadscape, Matthew Carter, 2009, digital photo composite

Planet Yard, Matthew Carter, 2009, digital photo composite

Untitled (Yard 2), Matthew Carter, 2009, digital photo composite

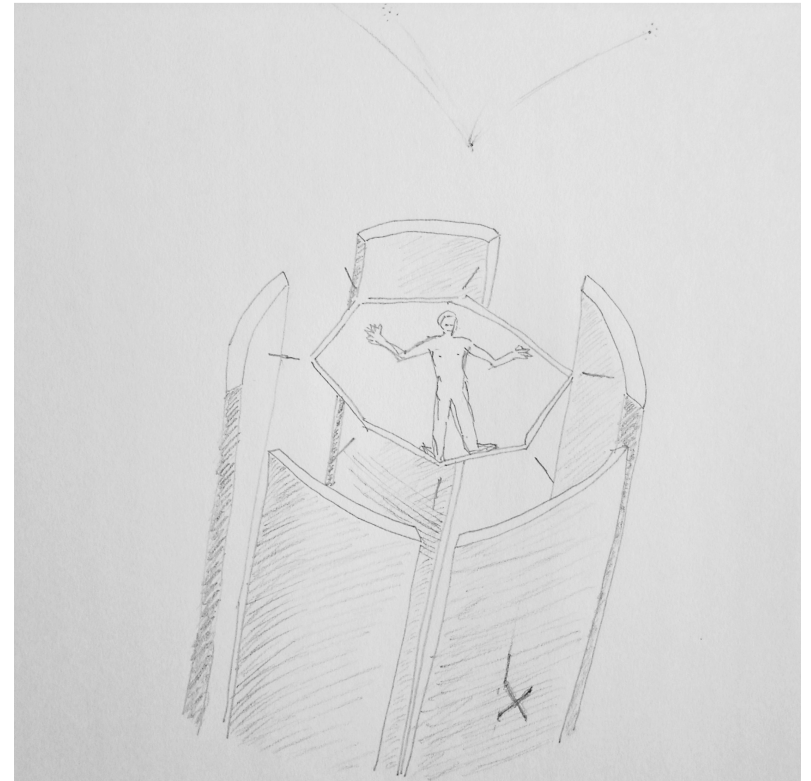*Untitled (Yard 3)*, Matthew Carter, 2009, digital photo composite

Fast Road 1, Matthew Carter, 2009, digital photo composite

Developmental Work

Urban Park 6, Matthew Carter, 2008, oil on canvas
1200 x 1200 mm

Particle tube, Matthew Carter, 2009, graphite on paper,
210 x 300 mm

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

Untitled, Matthew Carter, 2009, Digital photograph

Installation for Final Graduation Exhibition

Installation of paintings for the final thesis exhibition at AUT
St Paul Street Gallery 2, Auckland, November 2009

Installation

Untitled (5), Matthew Carter, 2009, oil on linen, 1200 x 1700 mm

46

Installation

Installation

Untitled (6), Matthew Carter, 2009, oil on linen, 1200 x 1700 mm

Installation

References

Baudrillard, J. (1994). Simulacra and Simulation. Michigan, The Universtiy of Michigan Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1998). The Ecstasy of Communication. The Anti-Aesthetic: essays on postmodern culture. H. Foster. New York, The New Press: 145-154.

Colomina, B., Ed. (1992). Sexuality & Space. Princeton Papers on Architecture. New York, Princeton Architectural Press.

Dodge, M. and R. Kitchin (2001). Mapping Cyberspace. New York, Routledge.

Doig, P. (2009). Pelican (Stag), [Oil on canvas]

Greene, D. (2006). How to Respond to Strangeness in Art: Four studies in the unfamiliar. New York, The Edwin Mellen Press.

Harvey, D. (1990). The Condition of Postmodernity. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.

Ivry, R. B. and L. C. Robertson (1998). The Two Sides of Perception. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). The Production of Space. Malden, MA
Oxford, UK, Blackwell Publishing.

Mattelart, A. (1999). Mapping Modernity: Utopia and Comunications Networks. Mappings. D. Cosgrove. London, Reaktion Books: 169-192.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). The Visible and the Invisible. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). Selections from Phenomenology of Perception. Vision and Mind: Selected readings in the philosophy of perception. A. Noe and A. Thompson. Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press: 15-34.

Molon, D. (2002). Dirk Skreber. Vitamin P: New perspectives in painting. V. Breuvart. London, New York, Phaidon Press.

Raban, J. (1974). Soft City. London, Hamish Hamilton Ltd.

Raban, J. (2008). My Own Private Metropolis. Financial Times. London.

Relph, E. (1976). Place and Placelessness. London, Pion Limited.

Skreber, D. (1999) Untitled, [Oil on canvas]

Skreber, D. (1999) Untitled (Ultra Violence), [Oil on canvas]

Soja, E. W. (1996). Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places. Cambridge, Massachusetts Oxford, UK, Blackwell Publishers.

Thrift, N. (2006). Space. Theory, Culture & Society, Sage Publications.

Wade, N. J. (1998). A Natural History of Vision. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press.

Weischer, M. (Artist). (2001). Egyptian Room [Oil on canvas].

Wilson, E. (2002). The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women. The Blackwell City Reader. G. Bridge and S. Watson. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing: 419-427.

Ozakca, A. (Artist). (2007). Untitled II [Oil paint, gold leaf and screen print on linen].

Weischer, M. (Artist). (2001). Egyptian Room [Oil on canvas].

Winstanley, P. (Artist). (1997). Viewing Room [Oil on linen].