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Vantage Points and Vanishing Spaces

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Artist Ann Shelton's new series Room Room consistently uses the circular pictorial format, which can be linked by association to an aperture, convex mirror, fisheye, keyhole, peephole, porthole, or vignette. Shelton thus incorporates a willful distortion that calls attention to the image as a concerted representation. In recent years, Shelton has created images that she subsequently installed in the manner of a diptych, thereby allowing the photographs to play with notions of doubling and reflection. In her use of this technique of display, available vantage points become manifold and the reversed images reiterate how artificial (and artful) any specific grouping of images is bound to be. Shelton does not attempt to create a portrait of naturalised vision, but instead — and more intriguingly — builds her works as strategic, layered constructions.

In the works which comprise Room Room, the initial image becomes a mere starting point for various procedural effects. Here Shelton has used a 4 x 5" large format view camera. A film negative of this size records even minute details with stark clarity, but after this initial stage, Shelton chose to use digital

technology in order to create the convex distortion and circular shape of the final images. By using the convex form, recalling the Claude glass (or mirror), an optical tool used primarily by painters, Shelton aligns her own contextualisation of this particular set of twenty images with the historical framing of vision.

Art historian Arnaud Maillet in his lively and detailed study of the “Claude” or “black” mirror (named after the French landscape painter Claude Lorrain) writes that: “a view reduced in the Claude mirror is transformed into an ideal view, that is, one with a universal character. The Claude mirror eliminates particular details and imperfections. This removal of triviality brings forth an abstraction, that of ideal beauty. The mirror allows one to select and combine different elements, which the reflection presents as a unity.”¹ From the 19th Century Romantic poet Coleridge to the 21st Century pop band Arcade Fire, the black mirror has been referenced and enthused upon for its evocative and poetic qualities.

Although Shelton’s photographs are often lushly beautiful in a relatively conventional manner, they are then put to use within a conceptual apparatus that betrays her skepticism and criticality of received ideas, including photographic conventions in particular. Photography by its intrinsic qualities — which can now be stretched and reconstituted in so many respects due to digital technologies — necessarily involves a distancing from any original context. Photography indexes and records the camera/photographer’s viewpoint, thus implicating the eventual spectator as witness. The evidentiary quality of the medium presents to the viewer records which may appear to consecrate truthfulness on one or several levels. To instead confound

photography's claims to veracity by emphasising its malleability and receptivity to creative manipulations is a highly significant aspect of Shelton's practice.

Furthermore, Shelton's artistic approach has been defined in large part by its incorporation of seemingly contradictory aspects, for example: recording images of partying revelers and the subsequent debris as an intimate photo album (Redeye, 1994); "retakes" of film locations as undisturbed, quietist landscapes (A Kind of Sleep, 2004); or recording an obsessively customised personal library in a minimalist photo installation (a library to scale, 2006). Interestingly, the consideration of the disinhabited exterior landscape is one of Shelton's most predominant creative devices, and in the current series, the views are all of interiors, and seem to allude to interiority in its psychic sense as well.

Here Shelton has transformed what were once intimate spaces into more public documents, which nonetheless maintain a stillness and quietude that acts as a poetic lure to the spectator. They are also on their way to becoming the sole vestigial evidence of a site that has disappeared. As Roland Barthes once evocatively remarked: "Each reading of a photo, and there are billions worldwide in a day, each perception and reading of a photo is implicitly, in a repressed manner, a contact with what has ceased to exist, a contact with death. I think that is the way to approach the photographic enigma, at least that is how I experience photography: as a fascinating and funereal enigma."

² Although in this instance Shelton's enigmatic pictures, one might say, are documents despite their artistry, and artworks despite their status as records.

By photographing a now-abandoned site — a residential treatment centre for drug and alcohol dependency on Rotoroa Island in the Hauraki Gulf ³ — Shelton interweaves considerations of how the divide between nature and culture has been perceived, then and now. To isolate a group of individual citizens in the act of recovery, recuperation, convalescence with the intention of fostering their later emergence, Phoenix-like (the very name of the building photographed here refers to that mythological creature) from that process reflects a Modern notion of enlisting quarantine and captivity for the greater public good. Today these assumptions have been problematised, and are metaphorically effaced and revised by the act of demolishing the structure itself. Perhaps this becomes even more evident with the current transformation of the island itself into a conservation area: an entirely different type of sanctuary.

Reclamation of such extant sites and subsequent transformation of their use is not uncommon today and has occurred at various locations in Aotearoa/New Zealand, a nation in which both the restoration-protection of natural landscape and addressing of Maori land claims via the Waitangi Tribunal are ongoing concerns. Very often such “reclaimed” sites were originally industrial in purpose, including gasworks, mines, and landfills. Shelton’s chosen site itself enacts a type of doubling, or mirroring, as it can be considered a number of points, within an small, isolated island, almost unnoticed in its location off the coast of New Zealand, itself often referred to as an isolated faraway place, differentiated and categorised by its separateness.

By using this site almost as if a theatrical set or cinematic location, Shelton makes the act of picturing plainly apparent.⁴ Each photograph depicting a room in one of the buildings of the now-defunct centre records in detail an inventory of such prosaic details as carpeting, paneling, light switches, door handles, molding, windows, curtains, stripped beds, electric radiators, chests of drawers, tables, chairs, and desks. Although recorded in Shelton's elegant and exacting fashion, all this clarity spawns ambiguity and ambivalence. What exactly are we gaining the privilege to see? What might have occurred in these rooms now stripped of all but cursory reminders of their previous inhabitants?

In Shelton's portrayal we are to a degree on a walking tour that becomes eerie and mysterious. The rooms are haunted spaces insofar as they act as quiet representations in which voices of occupants have gone missing, vanished. As viewers of these representations, we reach for associative links, both symbolically and iconographically. Is a door handle a cross? What is the use of light and its halo effect doing in most of these images? As the rooms are emptied and nearly indistinguishable, one seeks out differences: marks on walls, floors, ceiling, a picture left hanging in place, a curtain blowing in the breeze.

Shelton's images enact a type of serial repetition, although each image is markedly different. In staring at her images we become confrontational. But one might say with whom or what? In fact, Shelton is in conversation with the realm of a photographic (rather than actual) reality in which the light from a window seems to shine back with a disarming directness. Moreover, the rounded edge of the frame anthropomorphically

seduces the viewer, with its organicism, contradicting the geometric perpendicular axes of the interior spaces. By concerning herself with charged historical sites and their abandonment, Shelton's approach strikes an accord with other recent works dealing with temporality, memory, and historical events especially via representations and actions that reenact and reinterpret the past. These include works by Tacita Dean, Jeremy Deller, Thomas Demand, Mark Dion, Cornelia Parker, Simon Starling, and Luc Tuymans. Notably most of the artists I've mentioned above use photography to some degree, even the painter Tuymans who often works from (and comments upon) photographs. This is not purely accidental one might conclude, as the indexical nature of the photographic medium records and collates the imprint of history more effectively than any other competitor.

One of Shelton's undeniable strengths is to photograph with such startling acuity and directness that she bypasses melancholy, nostalgia, and sentiment, in favour of a clearer — one might say cooler — point of view, leaving the spectator to draw specific conclusions on his/her own. Shelton's demonstrated skill in engaging with reenactments, retracing steps, and plotting new coordinates to negotiate past events is not without its significant prehistory. As a former newspaper photographer her journalistic instincts have not disappeared, but have been transposed contextually and in addition gained in complexity and nuance.

Again by the certain, unwavering gaze we become privy to, as spectators we inhabit a normative viewpoint, almost as authority/clinician, once removed through the gaze of the artist/documentarian/photographer. But the subjects once

observed in these environments are now gone, and by reiterating the mode of entering into and creating an inventory of this place, Shelton enacts a Postmodern response to this Modern institution. Photography then becomes not only a descriptive mechanism, but a means of analysing and dissecting standard vantage points. By reinscribing the gaze of the “powerful” — the camera-eye lends privilege to any human-eye — once the “powerless” have left, Shelton interrogates how the gaze functions and operates.

If we think however of the cone of vision set out and demarcated in Euclidian geometry and later developments such as Brunelleschi’s perspectival schema, and broadly speaking, the historical ordering and codification of vision in Western culture, this was concurrent with the invention of myriad tools, prostheses, and mechanisms for recording imagery which in turn involved mirroring, doubling, repetition, and projection. Philosophers, psychoanalysts, and theorists of the 20th Century interrogated the gaze with intensive scrutiny.⁵ Although here to recall the notion of the diegetic space — that which exists outside of the camera’s rectilinear frame — we are often intrigued in Shelton’s images by what is not on display, not accessible to us, and not immediately apparent.

The characters in this now-historical situation have left the stage, yet Shelton is front and centre to record their aftereffects and reverberations. What residual tremors are perceptible to the camera eye? How might we better understand the subtle resonance of these circular, constricted pictures of claustrophobic and peculiar cells? What can we see when the image becomes impenetrable to extracting specific meanings? Perhaps most significantly we can use Ann Shelton’s

compelling images as newly configured sites to assist us in generating our own conceptions and speculations.

1. Mailet, Arnaud. *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*. Tr. Jeff Fort. New York: Zone Books, 2004, 143.
 2. Barthes, Roland. *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. Tr. Linda Coverdale. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 356.
 3. Established in the early 1900s by The Salvation Army, the island facility was a functional, purpose-built centre for rehabilitation until its last clients left in December 2005. Currently leased by the Salvation Army to a charitable trust, Rotoroa Island is making a transition, to a conservation estate.
 4. It is interesting to note that one of Shelton's diptychs graces the cover of the recently published study *New Zealand Filmmakers*, Ian Conrich and Stuart Murray, eds. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007.
 5. For further readings on this topic, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, and Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990.
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