Re-Imagined Prisons

Emily Allchurch’s new series, *Urban Chiaroscuro*, is a photographic homage to Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s (1729-78) darkest work; but it is also an exploration of her own imagination. The starting point for each picture is a specific plate from the eighteenth century architect’s sinister *Carceri d’Invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons), first published 1749-50, an enigmatic series of etchings that has been admired by creators as diverse as Aldous Huxley and M.C. Escher – Huxley described them as ‘the strangest and in some ways the most beautiful of Piranesi’s etchings’. Allchurch has painstakingly collaged found elements on the visual structure of each of seven plates: every detail is a contemporary photograph she has made for this purpose, and a complete image may involve the seamless integration of hundreds of parts. *Urban Chiaroscuro 5: Rome*, for instance, is composed from multiple images of Mussolini’s fascist architecture, an ancient bridge, a contemporary street sign, and so on. In one sense, then, nothing here is invented. Everything is consciously chosen. The framework is Piranesi’s; the imagery is documentary, collected and composed from the real world. This technique of visual transposition, like a strict poetic rhyme scheme, sets the parameters within which Allchurch’s own creativity emerges.

The effect is uncanny. The images are familiar yet strange. Those who know the Piranesi originals will recognise the organisation that masks the details of construction; those who don’t, will recognise present-day elements, yet be drawn into these incongruous womb-like spaces that nevertheless have an air of menace. They are scenes in which a murder or a mugging might have taken place: apparently deserted, but observed from afar by unseen authorities who are too distant or unconcerned to intervene. The presence of surveillance cameras suggests that something bad might happen. The scale is unclear. Steps lead somewhere, but where? Windows are barred with grilles. Light from elsewhere suggests there might be a way out, another exit, but only for those who are prepared to run, their footsteps echoing up high into the vaulted atrium.

The surveillance cameras and mirrors, modern signs and graffiti and other contemporary details gradually become apparent as the eye travels around the created space.
Urban Chiaroscuro I: London (after Piranesi)
These spaces are not completely devoid of human presence: within some a tiny figure can be found — a man kneeling praying in the inside of a mosque, the artist’s own reflection in a curved mirror as she photographs the scene, a blurred figure striding quickly away from danger; tiny figures of workmen in a lift. In all seven there is some trace of humanity, a shadow if not a person. But the architecture and the space dominate and there is nothing reassuring about discovering that you are not alone here.

Within the strict formal architectural space and the constraints of Piranesi’s structures, Allchurch places elements with contemporary resonance which can be decoded one by one: the cameras and mirrors, modern signs and graffiti and other contemporary details gradually become apparent as the eye travels around the created space. This is a trope drawn from the frontispiece of Piranesi’s work where the title is carved into the prison wall. In Allchurch’s interpretations, the viewer is drawn into the enclosing space by light, by perspective and by the desire to explore and make sense of the incongruities of structure. The scale of the pieces encourages us to enter within the frame and discover the depth and detail, to imagine the tactile qualities of the space.

Each of the photographic elements has an overt meaning; nothing is arbitrary. In one sense they are composite documentary records of the artist’s journey around a particular city in pursuit of the jigsaw pieces that will complete her mapped image. She compresses a journey around a city into a single scene. Allchurch works on one picture at a time, collecting the urban details and angles that will complete the puzzle, even dreaming about entering the spaces that Piranesi invented. But behind this manifest content, and the consciously chosen symbols, there are hints of latent fears, terror even. It is not far-fetched to say that Piranesi’s subject wasn’t so much architecture but the psyche. This is a theatre of the mind with its jumbled symbolic content. Archways, tunnels, pillars and bollards have obvious sexual connotations for the Freudian.
Detail Piranesi Carceri d'invenzione XVI (1st state) Urban Chiaroscuro 2: London (after Piranesi)
As well as having the quality of interpretable dreams – Piranesi’s and Allchurch’s - these imaginary prisons are also the stages on which a nightmare might unfold. At an autobiographical level, it is significant that in a previous series the artist also engaged with fear – there in a much more straightforward filmic mode she documented ominous urban landscapes, often at dusk, pedestrian spaces with only one way out. This fear was not an abstract one: some of the emotional charge of both series comes from a real memory of danger. Twilight for her is always both beautiful and menacing. She was understandably drawn to Piranesi’s etchings which provide visual metaphors for a state of mind that resonates with her own. She has to dare herself to enter some of the darker recesses of sites she wants to photograph to complete an image, challenging her own sense of danger. The power of these works, then, resides in their dreamlike construction of uncomfortable terrain as much as in the implied meanings of their elements.

Photographic illustrations only go so far in communicating the visual impact of the series. Each picture is mounted as a transparency on a lightbox. Where Piranesi’s sombre etchings seemed to be moving in the direction of pure blackness, Allchurch introduces colour and light. Each city - Rome, London, Paris - has peculiar qualities of luminosity for her that determine the palette for the images associated with that place. London, for instance, is characterised by the yellowish light from the bricks of the East End; but also the metallic bluish tones of the Jubilee Line’s harsh lighting from which parts of Urban Chiaroscuro 2: London is composed. Rome’s light is tinged with a warmer orange, or as in Urban Chiaroscuro 5: Rome, the white light reflected from Mussolini’s version of modernism. As a series, the seven palettes of the seven images complement each other in their tonal modulations. Light and colour provide a note of optimism that is lacking in Piranesi’s dark vision, but this optimism is tinged with contemporary uncertainty and a sense of foreboding.

Nigel Warburton
Urban Chiaroscuro 4: Rome (after Piranesi)
TUTTI GLI DEI SONO MORTI, TRATNE QUELLI CHE CI RENDONO FORTI!
Urban Chiaroscuro 6: Paris (after Piranesi)

Overleaf Detail Piranesi Carceri d’Invenzione XII (2nd state)
Urban Chiaroscuro 7: Paris (after Piranesi)

Previous page: Detail Piranesi Carceri d’Invenzione XV (2nd state)
Emily Allchurch

Born Jersey, Channel Islands 1974

Education

1997-99 Royal College of Art, MA Sculpture
1993-96 Kent Institute of Art & Design, BA (Hons) Fine Art

Solo exhibitions

2007 Urban Chiaroscuro, Frost & Reed Contemporary, London
2006 Emily Allchurch, A Retrospective, Frost & Reed Contemporary, London
   Model City, Galica Arte Contemporanea, Milan
   Model City, Alberta College of Art & Design, Calgary, Canada

2003 Setting, Galica Arte Contemporanea, Milan
2002 Light Sensitive, East73rdgallery, London

Selected exhibitions

2007 The Light Fantastic, Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, Canada
   Britain in Pictures, Museum of Film & Photography, Bradford (BBC Commission)

2006 Lumière, transparence, opacité, Nouveau Musée National de Monaco
   Metropoliscape, Palazzo Cavour, Olimpiadi Program of Culture, Turin
   Past, Present, Future, Frost & Reed Contemporary, London
   Celeste Art Prize, Old Truman Brewery, Brick Lane, London
   Making Space, Corporation of London, Spitalfields, London
   The Boundary, the Limit, a look at the City, Reggio Emilia, Italy

2005 The Wrong Map, Three Colts Gallery, London
   A Digital Picture of Britain, Museum of Film & Photography, Bradford (BBC Commission)

2003 Landscape, The Blue Gallery, London
   La Ciudad Radiante, Bancaja Foundation, Valencia, Spain
   Distopie Urbane, Change Studio d’Arte Contemporanea, Rome

2002 2 in uno, Galica Arte Contemporanea, Milan

2001 Visions of Arcadia, Britart.com Project Space, London
   And then there was the bad weather…LWF Projects, Memphis, USA

2000 And then there was the bad weather…LWF Projects, Hoxton, London
   Tunnel Vision, Alydwych tube station, London, Open House
   Route 12:36, South London Gallery, London

Each of the Urban Chiaroscuro series is available as a backlit transparency:
117 x 164 cm – Edition of 4
81.5 x 116.4 cm – Edition of 4

For the complete cv please refer to
www.emilyallchurch.com
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