

Paul Coldwell, Picturing the Invisible

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INTRODUCTION

Paul Coldwell's recent exhibition at the Sir John Soane's Museum in London was an example of 'serious play' (the Renaissance concept of *serio ludere*, as Edgar Wind explained, involves the discovery of profound truths through a playful investigation of commonplace experience). Taking his cue from the show's setting – the basement kitchens of the famous architect's grand house in Lincoln's Inn Fields – Coldwell imagined how the unknown cooks and servants who laboured there, out of sight and beyond the pale of cultural history, might have perceived their master's lofty endeavours. The resulting, fascinating display of sculpture, 3D and digital prints, film and printed ceramics, can be described as an imaginative feat of ventriloquization. If Coldwell is correct, then the view from 'downstairs' encompassed affectionate irony, gentle parody, and a good dose of humane understanding. As someone whose ancestors were in service to the celebrity soprano Adelina Patti at the now 'haunted' Crag-y-Nos Castle in South Wales, the tone of possessive pride combined with subtle satire conveyed by Coldwell's proxy creations seems instinctively right to me.

SERIOUS PLAY

The parallel themes of the exhibition are introduced by a split-screen film of about 10 minutes playing on a loop: *First Orders*: scenes from the kitchen (2018-19), by Paul Coldwell made with the assistance of Kristina Pulejkova (Coldwell, 2019, pp. 16-19). In the upper section, filmed over 24 hours in the museum's model room, a cork model of the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli made in the 1770s by Giovanni Altieri remains the still focus of the camera while the light around it is altered by time passing and the weather changing. Here architecture plays a monumental role embodying the enduring values and classical rules endorsed by Soane; yet the model faithfully records the ruined state of the ancient temple suggesting that even the best-constructed and well-designed buildings

are subject to the ravages of time.

In the lower section of the screen we see the hands of the artist dicing vegetables, and then cobbling together structures from these wedge-like shapes, or arranging walls with sugar cubes. Literally 'playing with food', Coldwell's impromptu vernacular architecture provides a 'scherzo' in counterpoint to the stately theme unfolding above. It is a punning and subversive game where the 'first orders' of the film's title, could be either the origins of architectural form, or the starters



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Ghosts – Arch 2019 Nylon 48 x 20 x 40 cm

Figure 2: Four Orders – Essentials 2018 Bronze 15 x 50 x 36 cm

for that evening's meal. The soundtrack for the film is provided by the repetitive clock-like chopping of courgettes, carrots, leeks and aubergines (a slightly squeakier sound), punctuated by the collapse of the precarious edifices constructed by the artist. A wonderful aubergine arch is built around a carrot, which is then removed, leaving the spongy segments dangerously unsupported. Bottles serve as props for cylindrical structures assembled from sugar cubes. Three orders of column formed out of sections of leek give way, triggering a domino effect. The viewer is keenly aware of the destabilizing consequence of material irregularities, the force of gravity, and contingency: factors that architecture must master in order to succeed.

MODULAR COMPONENTS

The centre of the room is dominated by an arrangement of three-dimensional architectural models, based again on Soane's model room, where a number of these 'downstairs' constructions have achieved permanency through being cast in bronze or printed in nylon. Here everyday objects and commonplace ingredients make up the modular components of this improvised architecture. Scenes from the kitchens – Tomb (2018), painted bronze, plaster, wood and brass, 23 x 43 x 38 cm, deploys orange segments and strawberries to form a vault supported by columns of pasta; while Scenes from the kitchens – Temple (2018), painted bronze, wood and brass, 24 x 24 x 36 cm, makes use of a chocolate cake topped with a strawberry and flanked by colourful jelly babies to form a dome. In Scenes from the Kitchens – Columns (2018), bronze, wood and brass, 43 x 23 x 48 cm, pasta pillars cast in bronze hold up a frieze constructed from Bourbon biscuits and a scrubbing brush. Two other pieces of sculpture echo the exemplary designs of the Palladian orders of architecture – but in their titles, Four Orders – Essentials (2018), bronze, wood and brass, 15 x 50 x 36 cm, and Single Order – Basics (2019), painted bronze, wood and brass, 20 x 30 x 38 cm, they allude to 'supermarket lines of branded products' (Coldwell, 2019, p. 28). Perhaps a Hogarthian reference can also be discerned here, as Soane's favourite artist parodied the architectural orders in his 1761 engraving *The Five Orders of Perriwigs*. Contrasting with sculptural works in polychrome bronze are a number of pieces created by scanning Coldwell's models and using a 3D printer to copy them in nylon, a material whose spectral whiteness is reflected in the recurring title 'Ghosts': as in *Ghosts – Columns* (2018), printed nylon, plaster and wood, 30 x 13 x 32 cm, and *Ghosts – Arch* (2019), printed nylon, plaster and wood, 48 x 20 x 40 cm. The artist employs digital techniques of 3D scanning and printing associated with contemporary archaeological excavations to 'recover' the fleeting impressions of notionally lost works. Their effect of pale homogeneity rhymes with the plaster casts of antique fragments with which Soane filled his house.

Coldwell also filled the original wooden racks along one of the kitchen's walls with plates on which photographs of this 'downstairs' architecture are printed: *Scenes from the Kitchens 1-VI* (2019), digitally printed ceramic, series of 6 plates each 22 cm in diameter, and *Scenes from the Kitchens I-XX* (2019), digitally printed ceramic, series of 20 plates each



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Scenes from the Kitchens I-XX 2019 Digitally printed ceramic Series of 20 plates; each 22cm in diameter

Figure 4: Scenes from the Kitchens I-XX 2019 Digitally printed ceramic Series of 20 plates; each 22cm in diameter

Figure 5: Ruins II (gold) 2018 Woodcut 56 x 76 cm

22 cm in diameter. He thereby evoked an imagined world as remote in class terms as the Orient described in the willow pattern decoration on industrially produced English plates emulating Chinese 'blue and white' ceramics (Coldwell encloses some of his photographs within a decorative border taken from early nineteenth-century Staffordshire Blue and White plates). These plates prompt us to imagine Soane clearing his dish at dinner to discover through the grease stains glimpses of his servants' playful inventions. The plates are a channel of communication with the kitchen: messengers from the underworld, psychopomps of suitably hermetic and mercurial character. They are also, literally, translations: carrying the designs beyond their culinary origin, putting them into circulation in a more elevated sphere.

LAYERED PRACTICE

Unleashing the image from its moorings is something that the print medium achieves by producing 'exactly repeatable pictorial statements' that facilitate visual communication (Ivins, 1953). As such, prints are tools of analysis. But repetition leads also to detachment and distancing, the accumulation of translation errors, the blurring of contours and distortions of scale. Coldwell, in his 'layered practice', is an artist keenly alert to how prints compress stratified reality onto a surface, how they can be simultaneously deep and superficial. This point is made by *Ruins II – gold* (2018), woodcut, 56 x 76 cm, a framed print standing in the corner of the kitchen on an easel, which acts as a condensed summary in one still image of the dynamic forces at play in the film, sculpture and plates that make up the installation. In what is a signature trait of Coldwell's print works, the indexical pull of the photograph is blunted by the superimposition of a screen of dots that both references the ironically demotic allusions of Pop art and the pixelated components of our own information age. In what is a technical development for the artist, the digital file manipulated in layers on the computer was transferred to several woodblocks cut by lasers and then over-printed by hand to produce a richly textured surface. There is a poignant melancholy about this image of a ruined pyramid constructed from the ubiquitous sugar cubes – and reassembled through the equally ubiquitous printed dots – that has something to do with the impression of monumental scale endowed on it by the artist's framing and treatment of this fragile structure. There is also an implied criticism of the modes of mediation in our complacently digital present in the equation of the sugar cubes, and other fragile components of the imagined domestic architecture, with the dots making up the print that signal electronic communication. 'It was printmaking that first drew me to the Soane Museum as a student in the 1970s', Coldwell writes, and *Ruins* results from his absorption in Soane's collection of Piranesi prints that transform the ruins of Rome into romantic visions. This is the work in the exhibition that it is easiest to imagine standing on its own beyond its birthplace in the basement kitchen, continuing to signify as richly in a white cube space. So it is appropriate that the image emerges from the dense weave of the print's surface like a buried memory of loss.

The effect of encountering Coldwell's work in the basement is that it transforms your subsequent visit to the house, providing cues for contemplation, and suggesting route maps for constellations of associations. A short distance away from the kitchens in the basement, for example, near Soane's Egyptian sarcophagus, two casts of the Medici Venus stand sentry opposite each other, like obedient if faintly embarrassed domestics, measuring their proportions against two Corinthian columns. This most elaborate of orders derives the ornamental form of its capital – as Vitruvius informs us – from the chance growth of acanthus stalks through a basket covered with a roof tile placed on the grave of a young woman from Corinth by her nurse. The basket contained – like the suitcases and charm-bracelets that recur in Coldwell's art – the 'few little things that used to give the girl pleasure when she was alive' (Vitruvius, IV, 9). Upstairs, Soane's Design for a monument to HRH Duke of York (1827) hangs above J. M. W. Turner's Admiral van Tromp's Barge at the entrance to the Texel, 1645 (1831): a storm-tossed sea epitomizing the violent forces of entropy that invariably defeat our attempts at monumentality, and our aspirations towards the eternal. Similarly, a drawing of Stonehenge, made as a visual aid for one of Soane's lectures, demonstrates that because they stand still in the landscape monuments can be employed to tell the time. There is something sepulchral about Soane's house, littered as it is with casts, fragments, and seals. Myriad impressions, both personal and historical, jostling for ascendancy in what might appear to be the architect's unconscious made material. Soane's collection of copies and multiples cast shadows of the fugitive essence of an antiquity that is celebrated as a source of inspiration in the temple, and whose absence is mourned in the silence of the tomb. Yet Soane also gave wall space to Hogarth, that unerring observer of human frailty, and to the Romantic fantasies of bandits of his contemporary Mortimer.

SITE RESPONSIVE

Coldwell is a past master of this type of 'site-responsive' exhibition (Mora in Coldwell, 2017, p. 12). He has described how 'over the last decade... much of my work has been made in response to archives and collections' (Coldwell, 2015, p. 9). Notable here are the projects I called when you were out (2008-09) at Kettles Yard in Cambridge, where Coldwell engaged with Jim Ede's collection of modern art in a domestic setting, and Re-Imagining Scott: Objects & Journeys (2013) at The Polar Museum, also in Cambridge. Rather than asserting its autonomy and existing on its own terms, as is the case in the standard 'white cube' setting for contemporary art, the art work here finds itself a guest in an environment with its own complex history and character, and to a certain extent must respect the 'house rules'. Creating, in this context, is not so much the expression of personality or the articulation of formal statements, but more a task of subtle reading and patient interpretation (at its worst the intervention of a contemporary artist can result in a collection or museum being utilised as a temporary frame for the celebration of their independently conceived oeuvre). However, Coldwell is not a chameleon who blends into each setting – he has his own recognizable approach and consistent concerns.

Rather he acts like a formidable literary critic whose own distinctive voice is forged through dialogue with revered texts. Or perhaps, given the poetic folding of space, time, memory, and imagination into each other in Coldwell's work, his art could be compared with a novel like W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* which deploys a similar blending of history and fiction. The artist has himself frequently acknowledged the inspiration of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, which so evocatively discovers in the corners of rooms, both real and imagined, stray lines of half-remembered verse.

The most relevant point of comparison for Coldwell's Soane Museum exhibition is his long-standing and enthralling engagement with the Freud Museum in Hampstead in London. Beginning in 1996 with *Freud's Coat*, an exploration of displacement and exile, Coldwell has more recently brought Freud's two houses in Vienna and London into sympathetic dialogue (Coldwell, 2017). While it is not possible to summarize adequately here this multi-faceted and moving project, it was notable for the artist's first use of 3D printing to replicate and return to Vienna in ghostly form the array of sculptural deities that cluttered the psychoanalyst's desk. The memories that cling to objects and the associative 'dream-work' that the intimate space that surrounds them fosters, the overlapping play of presence and absence that engaging with a collection involves, continues to inspire Coldwell's attempt to 'picture the invisible'. The Soane Museum exhibition is, therefore, a natural development from Coldwell's Freud projects, conveying a similarly bitter-sweet fusion of melancholy and humour – although this time the satirical prevails. In the process, he is not only expanding the potential of the print medium in an innovative and sensitive way, but he is also engaged on one of the most significant journeys in contemporary art.

Paul Coldwell, *Picturing the Invisible* was at the Sir John Soane's Museum, Kitchens (17 July – 15 September 2019)



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