Emotional Landscapes Series

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Screen Space

All images of works courtesy of the artist

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Claire Robertson
For a millennium, the space for the hotel room existed, undefined. Mankind captured it, gave it shape and passed through. And sometimes, in passing through, they found themselves brushing up against the secret names of its truth.

— Opening narration from Hotel Room, 1993, directed by David Lynch

The gap of surprise that accompanies the experience of the usual becomes its name. It ties the transcendence of the unknown in relation to the known, and therefore to terror as a second reality.

— Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1944

‘Any big hotels have got scandals,’ he said. ‘Just like every big hotel has got a ghost. Why? Hell, people come and go.’

— Stephen King, The Shining, 1985

While travelling in Singapore in 2011, I happened to stay in a hotel room without any windows. It was a small room that engendered a strange cognitive mental and physical effect; as it withheld all natural signs of day or night and muted any hints of external sound and movement. It was a ‘box’ that contained the floor, ceiling, and the place. With few fixtures and little décor — other than a curtain covering the windowless wall — I began to unconsciously see myself as detached against the space and the place.

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The room and the traces left by its previous occupants. The limited floor space restricted spatial engagement to visual observation, which primarily took the expedient form of spatial engagement to visual observation, which primarily took the expedient form of visual investigations to create a productive friction between place, history and narrative investigations as part of her research into the psychological dimensions of built spaces and the emotions they evoke. Robertson begins by noticing the ‘architectural uncanny’ that is the central tenet of Robertson’s recent practice. The short and long term living spaces that she records are usually favoured sites of shifts in consciousness, psychic disturbances. In these spaces, the artist is就好像于 the residue of family history and nostalgia, and its role as ‘the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort’ any acts that disrupt this normalcy appear emotionally, mentally, somatically by the act of remapping the space. In the 2009 exhibition of the Spatial Landscapes Series (2009), this uncanny effect on the viewer is generated through a lack of orientation brought about through camera position, subdued lighting and editing. However, in her recent body of work, Emotional Landscapes Series (2012), Robertson responds more to the fragility and transience of the unseen, simultaneously intimate and private, and shared and public space of the hotel or motel room.

For Robertson, these rooms are in-between, temporary spaces loaded with connotations of hope and happiness, but also with an undercurrent of unease. These rooms function as a retreat for individuals, families, newlyweds, those on business or a hiding place for those engaging in more licentious activities. In her 2010 film The Leopard, she examines the cinematic afterlife. The camera follows actress Vanessa Hayle as she wanders through the rooms of Visconti’s palazzo, where the once opulent and luxurious interiors are now abandoned. It is perhaps Visconti’s lingering cinematic afterlife, influenced by his experience in documentary filmmaking that is most interesting in this discussion of Robertson’s practice. In The Leopard, Julias stages a series of vignettes in several locations, utilising dance and the movement of bodies to rearticulate these stories. Robertson’s work, however, divorce any narrative, presenting perceptions of the real. Robertson harnesses this potent pedagogy in her visual investigations to create a productive friction between place, history and narrative investigations as part of her research into the psychological dimensions of built spaces and the emotions they evoke. Robertson’s creative method is driven by meditative processes, during which she immerses herself in the details of an environment. These actions cause her perception to become finely attuned to subtleties such as shadows and shapes of light, surface textures, ripple, scuff marked, uneven walls, and other forms of historical residue. This observational rigor allows her to engage with the space and record her observations in the video work. Robertson presents an installation comprised of a multi-channel video work, depicting the interior and exterior of an unnamed modern seaside hotel, projected onto large temporary projections screens to form a set into which the viewer can take the place of the absent performer.

In David Lynch’s 1993 mini series, Hotel Room, we briefly follow the story of the occupants of room 603 of the Railroad Hotel. The room is the stage for sinister, small scale stories of interior drama where the only consistent characters are the staff who serve the guests. People check in, something dramatic happens, they check out, leaving the story open-ended. Robertson explores the notion of the hotel room as a moment of pause between places, where nothing or anything can happen. She frames the room as an in-between space, and then the narrative continues in the space of the installation. Robertson’s work ensures that locations lose their specificity and associations, allowing narratives to remain unfixed.

An engagement with the history of filmic codes allows Robertson to explore her interest in capturing residues of life lived in architecture. British artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien’s installations, films and documentaries examine the symbolism of cultural places and venues as sites for storytelling. In his 2010 film the Leopard, he examines the cinematic afterlife. The camera follows actress Vanessa Hayle as she wanders through the rooms of Visconti’s palazzo, where the once opulent and luxurious interiors are now abandoned. It is perhaps Visconti’s lingering cinematic afterlife, influenced by his experience in documentary filmmaking that is most interesting in this discussion of Robertson’s practice. In The Leopard, Julias stages a series of vignettes in several locations, utilising dance and the movement of bodies to rearticulate these stories. Robertson’s work, however, divorce any narrative, presenting perceptions of the real. Robertson harnesses this potent pedagogy in her visual investigations to create a productive friction between place, history and narrative investigations as part of her research into the psychological dimensions of built spaces and the emotions they evoke. Robertson’s technique has much in common with experimental feature filmmaking, which is often not so concerned with ‘shooting’ as it is with ‘capturing’ it becomes less about creating highly orchestrated and tightly composed events and more about collecting a body of material that will then be manipulated extensively during post-production. New media theorist Lev Manovich comments that digital filmmakers work with elastic reality, crafting new space stories through advances in post-production technologies.

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For Melbourne-based artist Claire Robertson, the hotel and home are potent sites of transitory nature amplifies the particularities of interior and exterior space. Robertson’s creative method is driven by meditative processes, during which she immerses herself in the details of an environment. These actions cause her perception to become finely attuned to subtleties such as shadows and shapes of light, surface textures, ripple, scuff marked, uneven walls, and other forms of historical residue. This observational rigor allows her to engage with the space and record her observations in the video work. Robertson presents an installation comprised of a multi-channel video work, depicting the interior and exterior of an unnamed modern seaside hotel, projected onto large temporary projections screens to form a set into which the viewer can take the place of the absent performer.

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