Greer Honeywill: Everyday Utopia

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Greer Honeywill is an acclaimed artist whose career to date has addressed Australian social forms, with particular reference to the home and the material culture of the domestic. In Off the Plan, her gaze focuses sharply upon architecture: both as a utopic, aspirational paradigm for the home-maker; and, as the site of a psychological archive of the self. These two aspects or modes of the architecture of the home, representing the public and the personal, could be described as the house-as-desire, and the home-as-imaginary.

To consider the public perception of house-as-desire: Guy Debord describes the desire-driven nature of late capitalist culture in his seminal text The Society of the Spectacle (1967). The promulgation of so-called 'Mac-mansions' is the most recent architectural manifestation of this phenomenon: mass-produced micro-palaces of frightening homogeneity (the personal touches of optional extras are only available from the pre-selected palette of the builder). These inflated dreams of a home are described by Honeywill as 'massive, meaningless, gardenless, boxes for habitation… self-powered, oversized, children's toys, too large, too opulent, not green enough and too voracious in their need for land.' Such homes have a significant carbon footprint, and their obligatory high energy-efficiency rating is countered by the disproportional use of space they consume, and the short life-span of their design: most are deliberately built to be bull-dozer friendly, expected to last only 25 years. In Debord's terms, the house is 'spectacle': a status symbol generated not by the individual, but by the hollow projections of desire that consumerism generates in a cycle of self-perpetuation.

Shadowboxing verges upon this excess of desire, with its incorporation of an attenuated, multiplied facade of the Ponte Vedra modernist masterpiece by Paul Rudolph. Unwieldy, teetering, the humble scooter attempts to carry off an impossible load. Honeywill's critique is not without humour and there is a comic pathos to this particular work, evidence perhaps of wry self-parody on the part of the home-builder; and Greer sites the influence of absurdist theatre, 'to be found in the domain of human frailty and misunderstandings'. To look at the moon explores similar concerns, its composition reminiscent of both traditional Japanese architecture (now being reinvented by contemporary architects such as Shigeru Ban) and Mondrian, that great modernist painter who succeeded in a similar project to Honeywill, translating the blueprint of urban architecture (the street-plan of New York City) into an aesthetic mode.

On the other hand, the personal reading of specific homely architectures generates the home-as-imaginary: the psychologised, memory-laden house. This represents a rich vein of art practice, extending from sixteenth century still-life and interior paintings, via Gaston Bachelard's influential The Poetics of Space (1958), to the contemporary work of artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Gregor Schneider. The house as home is a repository for memory and consequently the psychology of the self is imprinted upon it, such that artists can draw upon and rearticulate the semiotics of the home. Honeywill is extraordinarily skilled in this.

The sculpture Off the plan from which the exhibition draws its name is perhaps the most haunting and arresting work of the series. Two towers dominate the assemblage, yet the lack of doors or windows as well as the disconcerting scale-shifts between the stairs and the tall edifice suggest they are inaccessible and remote – redolent of the eponymous, impossible castle of Franz Kafka's novel, The Castle (1922), a study in the embodied psychology of power and authority. The potential for movement by the scooter is arrested by the twin stairways which act as breaks; and most strangely of all, a plume of horse-hair descends from one of the towers. Suggesting some libidinal fetish, Honeywill refers to the story of Rapunzel, drawing upon the dark psychology embedded in many children's fairytales.

The motif of childhood vehicles for escape and play, such as the tricycle and the scooter, unifies this body of work. Somebody is having fun here. Similarly, Honeywill refers to a wish to 'make child's play of the power and influence of architecture' reading the desired mass-produced home as effectively a grown-up toy. However it is significant that the found toys she employs have been clearly pre-loved and are sometimes even nostalgic in terms of the era to which they refer. They wear the patina of use: they are remembered toys, the trigger or punctum for past reveries and fantasies, formulated during those most impressionable years of childhood. For at least this observer, they are reminiscent of a childhood-defining scene from the Steven Spielberg movie E.T. (1982), itself a narrative of the quest for home, when Eliott points his BMX (a close-cousin of the scooter) towards the sky and magically achieves flight, skimming tree-tops, silhouetted against the moon.

As well as being an engine of memory, these toy-machines also stand anthropomorphically for ourselves, as the dynamo of the home – or as Honeywill evocatively explains: 'placed at the heart of each work a miniature vehicle powering notions of memory, dreams of speed and the desire for independence.' A home cannot qualify as such if it does not house at least one person. Honeywill provides a powerful allegory for the interwoven synthesis or symbiosis of self and architecture, the body and the home. For as Frank Lloyd Wright suggests: 'Any house is… a complicated, clumsy, fussy, mechanical counterfeit of the human body.'

Yet alongside the social critique and psychological analysis there are moments of joy, hope and wonder in this work. Wrap and This housing estate is not to scale both employ geometric forms reminiscent of the perspectival devices (mazzocchio) of the Italian Renaissance, that were based upon Platonic ideal forms and the newly emerging optimism of Humanism. Both can be found in the Ideal City (c.1470) of Piero della Francesca, also pre-emptive of the idealistic modernist twentieth century designs for urban planning of Walter Burley-Griffin, amongst others. These utopic aspirations find form in Honeywill's mandala-like structures, that can be read as a spiritual portal, halo or even a monocular gaze of wide-eyed wonder.

Such visions of utopia we now acknowledge are inherently impossible, as is made apparent by the etymology of the word 'utopia' itself, which literally means 'no-place'. Yet the idea of utopia can be used to understand the interweaving of the social and the psychological, the personal and the private, in Honeywill's work. The 'ideal' home at the urban fringes is at best a mirage; while the remembered golden days of childhood domesticity as embodied in specific houses is equally intangible. There is no such place as heaven on earth. But this doesn't stop us dreaming such dreams.