

**PAINTING IDYLIC PLACES:
DISTORTIONS, DISRUPTIONS AND DEVIATIONS**

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis paper articulates the ideas, creative approach, and methodology with regard to the visual component of my thesis project.

As a painter, I explore the concept of the ‘public realm’ by appropriating and disrupting environmental designers’ two dimensional perspective sketches. These stylized sketches, typically used for marketing purposes within the design profession, are distorted and warped into unsettling places. Idyllic visions of parks, waterfront plazas, playgrounds, and other nostalgic public places are transformed into doomsday scenarios through the injection of fragmented media images and individual memory of catastrophic events. By making the familiar feel unfamiliar, I hope to generate a series of enigmatic and uneasy associations for the viewer. The designer’s intention to convert virgin space into a democratic, civic place becomes compromised and circumspect during these moments of danger. These places deny the viewer the comfort of representing any specific location, and yet seem uncannily familiar. Built form transgresses from a designer’s optimistic sketch for the future into glimpses of destruction and uncertainty.

The structure of the thesis begins with an introduction to the main themes of my research. Firstly, I explore a variety of approaches to the visualization of idealized public places. By discussion of the forms and intentions of Deconstructivist architecture and the notion of the architectural uncanny, I provide a theoretical backdrop toward the investigation of contemporary approaches to placemaking. I describe my background in environmental design and the impact of my Modernist training on my painting practice.

Secondly, I describe how the preceding ideas are addressed in my painting practice. By situating my work with regard to contemporary painters such as Peter Doig, Daniel Richter, Neo Rauch, and Matthias Weischer, I investigate common themes or points of departure with respect to the representation of place and space, mark making, colour and composition in their work. Lastly, I focus on six paintings from my thesis project work. I describe the creative process for generating images, discuss source material, painting techniques, the use of the figure, specific influences and the intentions of each piece.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
DEDICATION.....	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
SECTION ONE: Place and the Uncanny.....	3
SECTION TWO: Paintings	8
MOVING FORWARD.....	26
WORKS CITED	28
APPENDIX.....	30

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Michele Alborg, <i>Category One</i> , oil and marker on canvas, 2008	9
2. Michele Alborg, <i>Some Untidy Spot</i> , oil and marker on canvas, 2008	12
3. Michele Alborg, <i>Left Behind</i> , oil and marker on canvas, 2009	15
4. Michele Alborg, <i>It Was a Long, Hot Summer</i> , oil and marker on canvas, 2009.....	18
5. Michele Alborg, <i>Sunday</i> , oil and marker on canvas, 2009.....	21
6. Michele Alborg, <i>Night Picnic</i> , oil and marker on canvas, 2009	23

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DEDICATION

For Monica.

Viewing media coverage of global catastrophes is a daily experience, contributing to a gradual sense of paranoia and anxiety. News images frequently present our local surroundings or foreign places as strange, dangerous and frightening. The contemporary city is often the stage for such dramas – recent examples include, Galveston flooded by a hurricane, terrorist attacks in Mumbai, and riots in Johannesburg. These same images present the cities' spaces as places where bad things can happen. As a consumer of such images, I create personal and fragmented connections to each new disaster.

Contemporary painters such as Peter Doig, Daniel Richter and artists associated with the German 'Leipzig School' explore ideas of place, media, and social history in their work. As a painter, I, too, am interested in representations and constructions of public place, especially messy, urban space. I question the intentions and outcomes of 'placemaking' by exploring how places can be complicated by catastrophe. In my paintings I examine the connections between the individual's feeling of anxiety, the collective experience (either direct or mediated) of catastrophe, and the visualization of public space.

When one thinks of public places and catastrophic events, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City may immediately come to mind. An article written in late 2001 by David Rakoff of the New York Times discussed how Americans' psychological response, especially the emotional feeling of anxiety, was implicated in the collective ability to cope after seeing the Twin Towers fall (Rakoff). I am intrigued by such emotional connections to place, especially when the media is a culprit. Let me first draw a distinction between an individual and a collective experience. On the one hand, a catastrophic event is part of one's individual memory, and feelings of loss, despair, and sadness become associated with the event. For example, you may remember exactly where you were on the morning of September 11, 2001, and your immediate emotional reaction to the attack. These emotional reactions will vary in type and intensity from person to person. On the other hand, the media may broadcast images of a place beset by catastrophe to a large population and thereby manufacture a collective experience.

The mediated images may also be experienced slightly differently by all of the various viewers. However, such images, due to their varying points of view and the repetition of the most evocative of them, may impose a sense of distance, spectatorship and remoteness for viewers. I am interested in the interplay of two categories: the individual, direct experience or memory and the collective, mediated experience with respect to place.

Charles Jenks, a landscape architect and architectural critic, believes that architectural icons such as the World Trade Center can be fraught with emotional associations when repeatedly presented by the media in catastrophic circumstances. When discussing the attacks, he comments, “The event itself became etched in the collective memory in an unforgettable way, as a trauma. Monument, memorial, and icon are all connected by their prime place in our memory and nothing is so memorable [...] as a horrible, painful experience” (Jencks 68). In this thesis, I will examine the two categories of experience as they relate to catastrophe and placemaking, and how these themes are explored in my own practice and in the work contemporary, canonized painters.

This thesis is divided into two broad sections. Firstly, I will examine space and place with regard to environmental design and the theory of the architectural uncanny. This is a starting point for looking at the way catastrophe can be represented in the public realm, the impact of the media, and the association of individual memory.

Secondly, I will discuss my process and influence with regard to my thesis project paintings. I will examine how space and place are explored in my work and the work of contemporary painters, namely Peter Doig, Daniel Richter, Neo Rauch, Matthias Weischer, and David Schnell. These artists approach the idea of place in differing ways that are useful when examining direct and mediated relationships to the public realm.

My paintings depict moments either before or after an undisclosed, catastrophic event. I am curious as to how moments of loss can serve as a metaphor for conflicting representations of the public realm. On one hand, the spaces may appear comfortable, homely, nostalgic and

utopian. On the other hand, these spaces may simultaneously have an unhomely, dislocated and fragmented feeling – ideas associated with the uncanny. I also investigate the role of iconic architecture on public space during these tense situations. Recurring themes in my paintings include the depiction of public place, visions of iconic structures, figures that are either ghostlike or implied, a physical calamity and a tension between man-made edifice, memory, and imagination.

SECTION ONE: Place and the Uncanny

I will begin this discussion by distinguishing between the terms “place” and “space.” The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines these terms as follows, (Merriam-Webster)

Place: 1. a particular position or location; 2. a portion of space occupied by or set aside for someone or something

Space: a continuous area or expanse that is free, available, or unoccupied

In my experience, environmental designers view space as something that could be transformed into place. Thus, with respect to the definition above, a public area is occupied by users and set aside for civic uses. Terms such as “placemaking” and “sense of place” describe the process and the desired outcome, respectively. To the environmental designer, the term “place” implies an idealized notion – the most successful arrangement of features in a park, waterfront, public plaza or street. Space, in contrast, is the ‘wild’ area, leftover zone, unsuccessful no-mans’ land, and the in-between (e.g., a parking lot or an abandoned building site.)

The concept of public place (or the environmental design term “public realm”) is wrought with difficulties and contradictions. Walter Grasskamp, a writer and researcher on cultural institutions, defines the public realm as "a condition - one of intensifying and ramifying functions," and he offers urban town centers as an example of an area that is open to everyone and incorporates a political domain (Grasskamp, Walter 11). Perhaps, following on this

definition, painting can allow us to take a closer look at the multiple and contradictory representations of the public realm.

Rosalyn Deutsch argues that public space is the product of conflict and is a reflection of the uncertainty of democracy (Deutsche 272). She speculates that in contemporary urban planning circles there exists a type of nostalgia for a “lost” communal and consensual public space. She questions for whom this nostalgic space is envisioned, and postulates that the public realm may not always be designed for the full spectrum of the population. For example, vagrants may be purposefully overlooked, and the needs of women, non-white races and seniors may not be acknowledged (Deutsche 286). She believes that mass media plays a critical role in eroding the idealized, nostalgic concept of the public realm – the media being an institution that helps separate society from the Bourgeois-controlled state (Deutsche 287). This is an important point with regard to my painting practice – I look at how catastrophe may be a metaphor for these types of ‘democratic’ conflicts in the public realm. Deutsche’s notions call into question the responses by the public, both individual and collective, to the intentions of the “placemakers” and the subsequent construction of the concept of an ideal public realm.

This interest in place is due, in part, to my career as a landscape architect - a subset of environmental design that addresses the function and composition of elements in the public realm. In my paintings I explore the ideas and assumptions inherent to my profession and my training as a Modernist designer. One example is the standardized visualization of urban design schemes. In university (some fifteen years ago) our graphics instructors emphasized two-dimensional hand-drawn perspective sketches as a means to visualize our designs. Such sketches contain many stylized components including contented Caucasian people, a plethora of modern vehicles, lush plant material, one- and two-point eye level perspectives, and a ‘loose’ hand-drawn rendering style. Today these sketches are often made using computer software and have a tighter, more ‘realistic’ look. I am interested in how these sketches are used for marketing purposes and as a way of expressing ideal placemaking concepts for the public realm. In my painting practice I

subvert many of the stylized standards of the sketches, and threaten them with moments of danger. I explore what paintings can do – how images can dissolve and morph the stylized design sketches. A painting can contain information external to design intention – moments that are fleeting, imagined and disquieting. A painting can embrace an individual memory and a collective experience. By distorting and corrupting the idealization of such images, I hope to examine the modes in which we think about environmental design and the representations we make of idealized places.

When discussing the vast subject of “placemaking,” I would like to focus on a particular group of environmental designers – architects who envision contemporary, iconic buildings. These architects are sometimes referred to as ‘Deconstructivist’ and include Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Frank Gehry, Peter Eisenman and Bernard Tschumi. They explore a darker side of built form by focusing on discomfort, unease, and fragmentation – ideas that evoke the uncanny (a term I will discuss and define soon.) Practitioners often construct jagged and non-geometric forms, purposely distort and confuse interior and exterior space, and expose the structure of the building (Van der Straeten). Deconstructivist architecture is not considered a ‘style.’ Instead, it is “a confluence of architects working to produce similar forms [...] it exposes the unfamiliar hidden within the traditional. It is the shock of the old” (Johnson & Wigley 18). It harks back to Russian Constructivism from the 1920s with forms expressing a warped appearance, i.e., diagonal overlapping of rectangular or trapezoidal bars (Johnson & Wigley 7). If Modernist architecture represents clarity, perfection, and purity, then Deconstructivist architecture is disquieting, dislocated and mysterious. The space within the building is deformed - it is a violated perfection. (Johnson & Wigley 8). Clearly, these architects are willing to venture into psychologically difficult terrain and consider ideas that would be unacceptable, or simply irrelevant, to Modernist designers.

Psychology, my undergraduate degree, also influences my approach to the subject matter of my paintings. I studied psychology through the lens of cognitive behavioralism. This

paradigm investigates people's thoughts, feelings and intentions by observing their outward (i.e., measurable) behavior in response to specific stimuli or situations. This training may explain, at least in part, my fascination with emotions, trauma and people's reactions to particular events. However, I would rather leave the CAT scans, t-tests and variable-controlled experiments to the scientific community. For me, laboratory experimentation focuses the dialogue away from the more poetic, lyrical side of human experience, which is the place where artistic inquiry is able to probe. The notion of the uncanny may provide a bridge between the idealist design intentions of landscape architecture, to an 'other' place - a place that is unknowable, unremembered, and unverifiable.

The uncanny is frequently associated with Sigmund Freud, who wrote an essay on the topic in 1919 (Royle 2-3). It is an expansive term that can have many facets,

It is a crisis of the natural [...] it is a particular commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar. It may come from curious coincidences [...] it can come in the fear of losing one's eyes or genitals [...] It can be felt in response to dolls and other lifelike or mechanical objects [...] It can be a matter of something strangely beautiful [...] or eerily reminding us of something, as in the figure of the double [...] The feeling of the uncanny may be bound up with the most extreme nostalgia or 'homesickness' [...] At the same time, the uncanny is never far from something comic [...] It is different (yet strangely the same) every time: its happening is always a kind of un-happening. Its 'un-' unsettles time and space, order and sense. (Royle 2-3)

For the purpose of this thesis, and with regard to my painting practice, I will define the uncanny as events and objects that feel uncomfortably familiar. The emphasis on feeling is significant because it roots the term in a psychological context. Nostalgia becomes a kind of mirror image of the uncanny – it is an event or object that feels comfortably familiar (Royle 2). This definition borrows from Freud's description of fear and emotional associations, "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long

familiar” (Freud). According to Freud, the uncanny can be present in latent or repressed memories, “for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud). I am interested in the genesis of alienation and its impact on the representation of place. Can viewing media images of catastrophe increase the sense of alienation toward place? Did watching the second tower of the World Trade Center fall feel uncanny to television viewers,? Or the experience of seeing the towers fall over and over again in newsreel footage?

Wigley, an architectural writer, draws many parallels between Deconstructivist architecture and the uncanny. He comments that Deconstructivist architecture is “a slippery architecture that slides uncontrollably from the familiar into the unfamiliar, toward an uncanny realization of its own alien nature: an architecture, finally, in which form distorts itself in order to reveal itself anew” (Johnson & Wigley 20). Wigley explains that Deconstructivist architects attempt to show the impurity and distortions within Modernism by corrupting it from within – internal to the form itself. The resulting buildings attempt to subvert the surrounding context (i.e., the public realm), and thereby reveal the inherent flaws of the overall space (Johnson & Wigley 17). Similarly, I examine the distortions of the context in my paintings – although I focus on disruptions that are external to place - as opposed to internal to the form of a building. I explore how a myriad of influences - media, individual memory, design intention and iconic buildings can warp the representation of placemaking.

Regarding the term “iconic” – it is a general term that does not necessarily encompass the specific formal intentions of Deconstructivism. The term is useful, however, because it addresses the ‘why’ of using such strange and unusual forms. Jenks believes that iconic buildings “provide a new and condensed image, are high in figural shape or gestalt, and stand out from the city. On the other hand, to become powerful it must be reminiscent in some ways of unlikely but important metaphors and be a symbol fit to be worshipped, a hard task in a secular society”

(Jencks 28). Jencks also references the uncanny when describing iconic buildings, stating that “uncanny connotations work as a small, internal world” (Jencks 21). He coins the phrase “enigmatic signifiers” as the ultimate intention of such buildings (Jencks 33). This term may also be useful for painting, and I will return to it later in this thesis.

There is another side to the uncanny, one that is not specific to architecture, but to the individual. Nicolas Royle, the editor of an anthology of essays on the uncanny, writes, “it is impossible to think about the uncanny without this involving a sense of what is autobiographical, self-centred, based in one’s own experience. But it is also impossible to conceive of the uncanny without a sense of ghostliness, a sense of strangeness given to dissolving all assurances about the identity of a self” (Royle 16). This autobiographical aspect, in addition to aspects of the architectural uncanny, is a notion I am keen to investigate in my paintings – specifically with regard to memories of catastrophic events. Royle further describes the uncanny as involving “feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced” (Royle 1). In the following section I will look at how my work and the work of contemporary painters address these enigmatic ideas of place and the uncanny.

SECTION TWO: Paintings

In this section I will focus on my painting practice – the painting process, creative influences and relevant ideas for six of my thesis project paintings.

Category One

Category One (Fig. 1) is a collection of borrowed images that loosely represent an individual memory of a catastrophic event. Using found source material allows me to maintain an emotional distance from a personal memory, and opens up the dialogue to focus on the implication of the event. The scene in this painting unifies a series of fragments brought together from a variety of sources: photojournalism of Hurricane Ike, images of children from an on-line

image bank, and a photograph of a contemporary building from an architecture magazine. By combining these seemingly disparate images, I hope to evoke something else, something beyond the content of the original sources. The painting is inspired by my own experience of fleeing a hurricane as a child – although the specifics of that event are entirely invisible to the viewer. The only clue may be the title of the piece. Instead, he or she is left to interpret the events using his or her own associations.



Fig. 1 Alborg, Michele. Category One (2008). Oil and marker on canvas.

I use found photographs to explore place, although I limit the sources to news images, environmental design publications, and on-line image banks. News sources often depict places under conditions of intense conflict or natural disaster. These images can impart a sense of jeopardy and may make the viewer feel suspicious of public places (such as the waterfront depicted in *Category One*.) Environmental design publications such as Architectural Record, Landscape Architecture, Landscape Australia, Urban Land Institute Magazine and countless books on contemporary architecture, planning and landscape provide an endless supply of examples of built form, including Deconstructivist buildings. Lastly, I use online graphic design

image banks as source material for the figures. Using an image bank appropriates the process for developing a design perspective sketch. The source photographs lend the paintings an undertone of marketing and idealism because the image banks employ models and mostly ‘upbeat’ postures and situations.

Peter Doig (1959 -), a contemporary painter based in Trinidad, also relies heavily on found photographs as subjects for retrieving memories of people and places from his childhood. Doig describes how he uses photographic sources,

In many ways these images refer back to memories or particular experiences. Some paintings make references to real people and events, but not so much that I think that I am making a psychological portrait of someone. I never want to be too specific about memory. I want to use it in a more general way – sometimes it is autobiographical, but not explicitly so. I use photographs simply as a way of imagining memory. (qtd. in (Searle, Scott, & Grenier 132)

According to the editor of the anthology *Ideal Worlds*, Doig’s artistic process uses “historical photographs, films, or record jackets that, going beyond merely superficial citation, he causes to fuse in his imagination in a strategy of deferred action and displacement and, stripping them of their specificity, he turns them into painted dream images with an open associative structure” (Weinhart 38). I am particularly attracted to his use of ‘remembered’ childhood imagery. There seems to be a hint of idealism and nostalgia in such subject matter, and yet his paintings maintain a subtle, menacing undercurrent. Tim Adams of the Observer describes Doig’s intention as an effort “to make paintings that were resolutely ‘homely’, often literally so: a recurring obsession in his work were colloquial suburban and rural houses, glimpsed from across roads or through trees, domestic images so singular that they shift, like David Lynch scenes, into the territory of uncanny” (Adams). Doig’s translation of an individually remembered experience of place into a two-dimensional, painted existence, creates a tension that osculates between nostalgic idealism and strange alienation.

In *Category One*, the water, the buildings in the background, and the distant horizon combine to represent a place of loss and imply an overwhelming feeling of absence. Nostalgia, from its Greek origins, means *to return home*, and stresses the ‘homesickness’ or pain associated with remembering and missing that place (Merriam-Webster). This painting mixes painful memories of my childhood home under threat from a hurricane with my adult associations of mediated catastrophe and environmental design.

I believe my relationship to images of contemporary architecture is influenced by the tasks I perform as a landscape architect. One typical task entails generating visioning booklets that include principles for New Urbanist communities. These booklets are supported by dozens of photographs of international architecture and urban spaces that represent positive or desirable precedents. In support of a specific design principle for any given project, I sort through hundreds of images to find just the right one. For example, if the design principle is to have ‘detailed and fine-grained building edges,’ then I scour my image resources looking for photos that illustrate that concept. It is both an intuitive and rational process – selecting images that fit the criteria of building height, use, character, materials, etc., and also selecting for the ‘feel’ of the image. For me undesirable photographs are bleak depictions of stylized buildings and vacant, imposing spaces (one might argue, uncanny spaces.) This selection is a challenging endeavor as many photographs of contemporary architecture are deliberately devoid of people and have diminished surroundings – ostensibly to highlight the genius of the architecture. The hours spent scrutinizing such images has led to a more intimate relationship with the components of the photographs. I often wonder about the tacit emotional messages embedded in these New Urbanist booklets – utopian places where people are happy, where social interactions are positive, and where outcomes are optimistic.

In contrast, a contradictory representation of the public realm emerges when reading the newspaper – one that bears little resemblance to the idealized images from the architectural magazines. News images show the city succumbing to riots, natural catastrophes and

environmental devastation. The interstitial territory between the idealism of designed urban places, and destroyed and degraded space fascinates me. In *Category One* I attempt to precariously balance the two representations.

Some Untidy Spot

In *Some Untidy Spot*, (Fig. 2) the viewer is presented with a moment before or after a catastrophic event. Eric Fischl said that painting should take you to “the point at which the scene is most pregnant with meaning. It takes place before something happens or just after something happened and you’re trying to pull it together using all of your emotional and psychological resources” (Inner Tube Video). This is the moment I am interested in – the instant before or after the loss occurs.



Fig. 2 Alborg, Michele. Some Untidy Spot (2008). Oil and marker on canvas.

The figures in *Some Untidy Spot* do not appear to be the direct subjects of the painting. Instead they are users, observers and spectators. The large format of the painting (80" x 60") further intensifies the sensation of spectatorship. Emotional distance is, ironically, supplied by these figures. Most of the figures are turned away, facing into the picture or are otherwise occupied – they are enjoying the banal pleasures of the urban park. The falling debris does not concern them, nor do they appear to be aware of the imminent danger.

In this painting I attempt to animate the inanimate – the rendered architecture takes on the role of a figure in the landscape. The fractured and deformed building stands alone in the background, caught in a half-drawn realm. The reference in my painting to an idealized marketing perspective sketch is juxtaposed with the calamity of an earthquake or a bridge collapse. The building, with its warped Deconstructivist form, echoes the jagged edges of the falling debris. The ‘visionary’ and the ‘reality’ sit uneasily side by side.

Some Untidy Spot explores the tenuous intersections and the disconnections between painting and environmental design. On the one hand, space is lauded as a potential place for positive utopian narratives, while on the other hand, it is implicated and subverted as mysterious and dangerous. Matthias Weischer (1973 -), a leading representative of the Leipzig School also investigates architecture in his paintings. The artists of the Leipzig School, a group of painters trained in former East Germany, explore space and social anomie in their images. The artists employ jarring colours, warped perspectival space and dreamlike places (Lubow). Weischer is described on the Saatchi Gallery website using phrases that allude to his rigorous attention into place and space. A few of the phrases include, "...exploit illusion to its ultimate possibility"; "precarious space"; "a perceptual labyrinth"; "remove the boundary between internal and external space"; "grids and organic confusion;" and "impose its own sense of order" ("Matthias Weischer"). These fragments of descriptions capture the mood of his architecturally inspired subject matter. His paintings of Modernist architecture, set amid surrealist backdrops, are disorienting due to shifts in perspective, impossible combinations of elements, and unexpected

relationships between abstraction and representation. The website states that these paintings, “Explicitly show the falsification of their illusion [...] blocks and objects exist separately [...] dissolving the room into an obsessive hallucination [...] portal to a mystical landscape” (“Matthias Weischer”). Perhaps Weischer believes that placemaking is a plastic and malleable endeavor, subject to capricious dreams, chaotic structure and the imagination.

Although I do not dissolve space as resolutely as Weischer (I maintain a perspectival illusion in reference to architectural sketches), I am interested in the conceptual malleability of space. In *Some Untidy Spot*, I question how the uncanny can be understood in terms of placemaking. I hope that the everyday ‘place’ depicted in the painting, i.e., the public park, can act as an access point for the viewer. The park may feel familiar, perhaps in a nostalgic way. But there is also something uncanny about the situation. The sense of danger, the repetition of forms, a feeling of haunting, and how each of the objects represent, to borrow Charles Jenks’ terminology, an enigmatic signifier. In this sense, I too hope to show the falsification and illusion of the place.

Left Behind

Left Behind (Fig. 3) was initially conceived, like most of my paintings, in pencil in my sketchbook. I remembered something about Sydney, Australia, that I could not shake loose. In addition, I saw news photographs of terrorist bombings in Mumbai that were haunting me - a photo of a train station full of abandoned luggage. The study for the painting then evolved into a quick, painted sketch on paper. At this stage I made choices about colour, format, surface, spatial relationships, scale, perspective, and paint viscosity.

The colour palette was inspired by the memory of Sydney during the 2002 wildfires, augmented by an image of Circular Quay at sunset. Compared to the places I had lived in North America, the light is different in Sydney. It is heavy, palpable, with rich, intense warmth. Cool

tones such as aquamarine blue and verdant green are strangely absent. To intensify the emotional impact of the painting, I chose colours that embody an atmosphere of heat and energy. I had seen



Fig. 3 Alborg, Michele. Left Behind (2009). Oil and marker on canvas

Elizabeth Peyton's painting, *Piotr* (1996,) and loved the lushness and brilliance of her reds. For *Left Behind*, I selected a variety of warm and cool reds (cadmium red, alizarin, transparent red, burnt umber) and yellows (cadmium yellow, yellow ochre and lemon yellow) for the main stage of the painting. Then, to mix the shadows and darkness, I used Prussian blue, raw umber and quinadocine violet. This restricted palette was then built upon and intensified through a series of glazes, seen in the architecture and the 'glass' of the pedestrian arbour. For me, saturated tones are important, as are light and shadow. Eric Fischl observed after a visit to Rome,

Baroque paintings have wonderful darkness, shadows and mysteries. I was lamenting that modernism [...] had removed the shadows, had removed the shadow world. It had illuminated everything in our lives it seems, mostly out of fear. It's like a street. People

in cities are so afraid that there is danger in every dark alley. There is that same psychic fear in our fantasy world. (Fischl)

The transparency of the swooping, diagonal arbour in *Left Behind* is a small metaphor for Modernism and its impact on the public realm. Transparency and light were key ideas for Modernists such as Le Corbusier (Vidler, *Warped Space* 62). Perhaps light was attractive to them because it eradicates the darkness (human emotions such as fear, anxiety and phobia) from the metropolis. Transparency is a way of increasing and concentrating light in the built form. Personally, I prefer the waning light to complete illumination, and attempted to depict a particular time of day - the gloaming. I was reading and thinking about these connections between light and darkness, transparency and opacity with regard to place while making this painting.

On another note, *Left Behind* may represent a memorial for downtown Sydney – a place steeped in personal nostalgia and loss for me. Video artist Krzysztof Wodiczko states, “A memorial should be a vehicle through which the past and the future converge. [In the video installation project “Hiroshima Projection”] the river became the graveyard for both the people and buildings” (PBS Home Video & Art 21, Inc). Wodiczko is dealing with a collective catastrophic event (a war-time bombing), whereas I was reflecting on my individual experience. The challenge was how to visualize highly charged and emotional content and still create an image that is accessible to the viewer. This challenge led me to the notion of visually implying the absent body as a way of depicting loss and representing memorial.

Nancy Spector coined the term “the implied body” (Spector 1). She describes it as a way for artists to create dialogue around psychologically difficult content by alluding to the figure in absence. She argues that contemporary artists such as Rachel Whiteread (who has installed several public memorials in Europe) employ a new framework for expressing controversial imagery. Whiteread, for example, casts the ‘air’ beneath a chair to evoke the body in absence by highlighting the ‘emptiness’ of that space. The void is a metaphor for the body in pain, illness,

isolation or death (Spector 1). Spector argues that the latter approach allows for increased viewer access, and is generally more open in structure than direct depictions of trauma.

In *Left Behind*, I experimented with this idea of the implied body by only showing the echoes of people - their abandoned bags. I am not sure if I were entirely successful at evoking loss through the depiction of the discarded luggage. For me it offered a new way of thinking about catastrophe.

It Was a Long, Hot Summer

It Was a Long, Hot Summer (Fig. 4), depicts a scene that may feel familiar to news readers – it is the time immediately following a wildfire. Two years ago, my uncle’s home in southern California burned down in such a fire. At the time he described the sadness of trying to get all of the important items out of the house – such as photo albums and personal mementos, and how he was unable to get everything. The most important thing was to get his dogs. He talked of how he played in those hills as a boy, and how he could never leave, even after losing most of his possessions. I was touched by his resolute connection to the land, his community, his desire to remain in the face of devastation, and his overall commitment to rebuild.

My uncle’s story prompted me to reflect on the measures taken by landscape architects to safeguard properties against such misfortunes. Fire resistance zones around single-family houses help create firebreaks and reduce the fuel load of flammable plant material. The prevention, destruction and subsequent rebuilding are a cyclical phenomenon of hope, loss and renewal. Imbedded in all of these behaviours to protect oneself is an underlying paranoia – of losing one’s optimism. There is an anxiety about the possibility of nature reclaiming the place you created for yourself and converting it back into a “wild” space. The contemporary building in the upper right hand corner of the painting speaks to a vague hope of architecture ultimately overcoming the ‘wildness’ of the terrain.



Fig. 4 Alborg, Michele. It Was a Long, Hot Summer (2009). Oil and marker on canvas.

I hope that the sensation of seeing depiction of a typically mediated image (the aftermath of a forest fire) might induce a feeling of the uncanny. An ordinary place, a rural suburb, has been transformed into a location of muted horror. The figures and objects in the foreground (an animal, a boy, and a charred tree trunk) give the image a dreamlike feeling, and increase the sense of discomfort. In this image I combined my uncle's stories of a nostalgic childhood roaming through the chaparral hills with his dog, with media images of a wildfire that was devastating Australia at the time I made the painting (February 2009.) This layering of an individual's memory with a found media image, adds that extra feeling of conflict, unease and uncertainty.

Daniel Richter (1962 -), often sets his figures in places that are steeped in conflict and tension. Richter, a German painter, creates public places that are imaginary (thus making them

somewhat similar to Doig's) and yet the places seem to be embroiled in political and/or social upheaval. The painter admits that images are often from news sources, sources that emphasize a darker side of human activity (Spears). The press release for an opening at the Den Haag Gemeentemuseum describes the social tone of the painting *Phienox*,

Phienox [...] was painted in the year 2000, just as the tenth anniversary of German reunification was being commemorated. A newspaper photograph documenting the events surrounding the terrorist attack on the American embassy in Nairobi, however, inspired the painting. Most of Richter's paintings are picture puzzles of this kind, which the viewer has to complete with the help of his own knowledge and ideas of politics and popular culture. ("Daniel Richter - A major survey")

Richter hints that, in addition to the social commentary, there is a psychological framework in his paintings, "I don't want to romanticize it, but I know the feeling of being alienated" (qtd. in Spears). This idea of alienation and claustrophobia as a backdrop to our daily experience is hardly new. Vidler, a cultural theorist who writes about the architectural uncanny, notes that the concept of estrangement is historically linked to city life. He explains that 19th century writers such as Friedrich Engel's and Charles Baudelaire believed that "the physical fabric of the city was identified as the instrument of a systematized and enforced alienation" (Vidler, *Warped Space* 65). Richter appears to be enlisting the city as a metaphor of social estrangement, personal isolation and psychological phobia in paintings.

Richter alludes to a past way of living, for example, the past of a divided Germany. I too am interested in how place is built, destroyed and resurrected. *It Was a Long, Hot Summer* moves its genus locus out of the city and into a rural suburb. The drama occurs in this interstitial place between nature and the city. These ideas link to Richter's tableaux, especially the concept of the place as an instrument of alienation. Similarly, I hope to evoke a range of responses to the loss and instability of place in my painting.

In addition to the content of the painting, I explored formal techniques to underscore the emotional impact of the subject matter. I looked closely at Richter's mark making – studying how he scatters paint on the surface of the canvas, thereby bringing the viewer's attention in and out of focus between the foreground and background. His gestural techniques lend his paintings an otherworldly, almost psychedelic quality, and also allude to anarchy, mayhem and disorder. The variety and diversity of brushstrokes and marker lines in *It Was a Long, Hot Summer* is also an exploration of how mark making contributes to the overall impact of a painting. Marks are disjointed, scattered and messy. The variety of marks keeps the eye engaged and the viewer uncomfortable.

Sunday

Sunday (Fig. 5) began as an exploration of phobia and place. Phobias are negative expressions or behaviors that are caused by internal fears. The fear triggers an intense avoidance of an unpleasant object or experience. I was reading about how phobias emerged as a concept in the nascent psychiatric community in the late 19th century. Psychiatric researchers of that period believed that the city was a culprit in two such space-related anxieties, agoraphobia and claustrophobia (Vidler, *Warped Space* 32). Georg Simmell noted in 1903 that the modern urban metropolis “was seen to shelter a nervous and feverish population, overexcited and enervated, whose mental life[...]was relentlessly antisocial, driven by money” (Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* 25). These ideas of phobia, place and the city caught my imagination.

Sunday presents a scene that is both agoraphobic and claustrophobic. The limitless foreground of the overgrown grassy field may induce an agoraphobic fear due to its large, open expanse. This area may be an abandoned lot or undeveloped space on the periphery of the city. The wild grasses grow right up to the edge of the building, blurring property lines and parcel definitions. The colours are chaotic, rendered in a high key. Alternately, the building is a looming, claustrophobic presence - baring down on the canvas and threatening to crush the



Fig. 5 Alborg, Michele. Sunday (2009). Oil and marker on canvas.

figures. The dark violet walls are uninviting and unhomely. However, a transparent curtain wall sits on the outer façade of the building – formally connecting the building to its context. This architecturally imposed link to the building’s surroundings feels unsatisfying and unsettling – disrupting the space rather than unifying it.

There is no discernable entry or door to the building and the function is not immediately apparent (Is it a community centre? A library? A courthouse?) It is most likely a public building due to its size and configuration, but the people do not appear to be using it for any civic purpose. Thus, the happenstance grouping of the figures recalls the previous discussion about the ‘democratic’ intentions of placemaking. It does not appear as though this place is designed for the people in the painting. The iconic value of the architecture is apparent, although its use is unclear – a frustratingly common occurrence in contemporary civic architecture.

The figures, as previously discussed, are sourced from online image banks. The relationships between the figures are unclear – are they playing a game? Are they hiding? Are they lost? A central female figure runs toward the twin boys (a nod to the uncanny) that are partially hidden in the front lower left-hand corner of the canvas. The figures are incompletely rendered giving them a ghostly, transparent quality. This place is clearly not the “home” of the figures – they have been displaced and are homeless.

When making this painting I was looking at how Neo Rauch (1960 -), another artist associated with the Leipzig School, arranges and renders his figures. Rauch uses figures that are reminiscent of communist propaganda - heroic men and women engaged in important seeming activities. His figures are absorbed in strange narratives, thereby creating a tension between realistic representation and impossible places. In a 2006 interview, Rauch comments, “I like to use elements from commercial graphics and maybe also from comic strips” (Bruderlin & Rauch 98). His precise figure drawing skills may be a reflection and even a criticism of the propaganda imagery he was exposed to growing up in the German Democratic Republic (Lubow). Lynne Cooke describes his approach to the figure,

The protagonists feel like actors but actors of a special type: stand-ins, understudies or seconds, who are readily able to morph themselves into an required role or part [...] as well disciplined ventriloquists dummies, [...] this world evokes a place elsewhere or remembered, encountered at secondhand. Temporal dislocation, signaled by details of hairstyle, clothing, industrial models and body-types is matched by spatial disjuncture, as registered through erratic shifts in scale or uncanny fault-lines interrupting the spatial continuum. (Cooke 7)

In a similar way, I use ‘advertising graphics’ (the graphic sketches produced by environmental designers) to question a particular group’s assumptions about people and place. However, I keep the reference loose, and augment the paintings with memory and media imagery.

The associations with designer's perspective sketches may not necessarily be apparent to viewers, but the reference is available if they wish to investigate deeper into the subject matter.

Night Picnic



Fig. 6 Alborg, Michele. Night Picnic (2009). Oil and marker on canvas.

Night Picnic (Fig. 6) is the culmination of the ideas discussed in the previous paintings. It addresses mark making, colour, atmosphere, gestural paint handling, abstraction and representation and the exploration of place. It depicts a supposedly civic event – a fireworks show. Oddly, the boardwalk below the show is empty – a smattering of deck chairs being the only indication that this place is for people. In the distance a distinctive looking public building – perhaps a community centre or museum – is tightly rendered in marker. The painting has a melancholy feel, a sense that this is an occasion meant for celebration, and yet there is no one to witness the festivities. The idea of the implied body, discussed earlier, is again explored.

The mark making takes centre stage in this piece. In *Sunday*, the grasses appear to vibrate in the wind, and I wanted to push that visual allusion of movement even further. In *Night Picnic*, I express the moment of a repressed explosion of energy. The content of the painting is inspired by a memory of picnicking in front of the Sydney Harbour Bridge on New Years Eve of 2001, marveling at the lines of light shooting out from the bridge in every direction. I thought of the picnics I have enjoyed during the summer fireworks in Vancouver – the crush of people on the beach who are spellbound by the spectacle of the show. The power is in the volume and intensity of the crowd, more than the actual fireworks. Indeed, there is a menacing quality to such a volume of people, and this tension fuels the excitement of the situation. The fireworks merely provide a focal point, the dazzling swirl of colour that keeps everyone transfixed. I wondered how such a scene would look without the crowd - the absence of the energy and vitality of the people. It would be a desolate scene, one that hints at loss and abandonment.

The painting was created in a series of layers. For the first layer I chose a cool blue palette for a nighttime atmosphere of darkness and stillness. The subtle variations on the hue evoke a sensation that something has occurred out in that void, something mysterious and far away. For the next layer I added texture and dissolved the literalness of representation. I dusted off my circle template and went to work painting disc after disc of colour on the sky. The circles could be many things: blurry stars, sly references to Modernist abstract paintings, distant city lights or glowing fireflies. I painted the circles directly on the canvas using the template, varying the circles only slightly to maintain a harmony of shape.

The next several layers include the gestural fireworks display, buildings drawn in marker using a T-square (a reference to the drafting materials used in the earlier days of architectural sketches), the empty expanse of boardwalk and the eerie, green deck chairs. The building provided another opportunity for me to address the phenomenon of iconic buildings and their impact on place. The Sydney Opera House is an icon of Australia, and is often photographed with fireworks and the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the background. The soaring roofs and the

vivid white tiles of the Opera House call to mind all sorts of ‘enigmatic’ associations. Looking through my stacks of architecture books and magazines I came across a church in Brooklyn that also employs these ‘soaring’ roof/wall structures. They too have an open, associate form that could elicit comparisons to all sorts of things: fish scales, feathers, tents, etc. Their open association, in my opinion, makes them appear unfamiliar and strange. Although there is a sense that you may know or understand the allusions, they fall beyond your mental grasp, thus disorienting the viewer.

The painting uses single point perspective in the ground plane to augment the feeling of speed and energy in the overall composition. Single point perspective is used extensively in the work of German artist David Schnell, yet another artist associated with the Leipzig School. His landscapes are typically devoid of people - instead contain objects such as hay bales that appear to be speeding toward a single vanishing point. Blake Gopnik of the Washington Post comments,

Every form is chosen for its easy disposition and rotation through Schnell's manufactured, calculated space [...] I'm told that the ground Schnell's hay bales rest on in fact depicts a former Luftwaffe landing strip now commandeered by local farmers, and that the crumbling barn on view in *Planks* (2006) was once a military hangar. Schnell's perspective paintings convey the unnatural order that the German state once attempted to impose on things. And, in the very fact that Schnell's orderings fail, may act as a rebuttal to the state's attempts. (Gopnik)

The critic above stresses a social interpretation of the reliance on a rigidly structured one-point perspectival view. In addition, I argue that the purposeful unsettling of space can lend an uncanny quality to the image. I am attracted to the artificial order of one-point perspectives and because it is used extensively in design sketches. This structure creates a sense of dynamism, in an otherwise static scene. In a way, it ‘cheats’ a feeling of movement - I like that subtle sense of deception – it causes the viewer to feel suspicious, perhaps even anxious, leaving him or her to distrust the representation. If you were standing on that boardwalk in *Night Picnic*, you may be

overcome by a sense of stillness on the ground plane – quite dissimilar to the illusion that is presented in the painting. This tension is important as it may seduce the viewer, and thereby lure him or her into the narrative and emotion of the piece.

Moving Forward

When I paint, the Modernist design and psychological training form a strong edifice that I must acknowledge, confront, and reconsider all at once. An explanation of my work could be that I seek a dialogue between the intentions of design and the possibilities of painting. Somehow, that statement fails to explain my compulsion and desire to paint. Dialogue is certainly important. And the filtering of my previous constructs through a visual arts sieve may be another. But there is also something else – perhaps a search for a subjective understanding of the public realm. I view my painting practice and artistic research as an opportunity to reframe the questions that I’ve been pondering for the past fifteen years. Factors such as comfort and familiarity can be overturned in my paintings, and New Urbanist vistas can take on the appearance of strange and uncanny non-places.

I hope to evoke the uncanny as it relates to place by examining personal memory and mediated experience. I look at memory through the lens of personal narratives (e.g., a childhood memory of a hurricane) that are related to catastrophic events from my past, as well as “borrowing” catastrophes from news photographs (e.g., the terrorist bombings in Mumbai.) These depictions of catastrophic events are mixed with visions of idealized public spaces, calling into question the conflicts associated with the concept of the public realm.

My methodology is a combination of formal visual arts explorations, scholarly research into environmental design and art theory, reflections on my background as a landscape architect, and investigations into contemporary approaches to placemaking. The next steps are to travel, document, paint and exhibit. I will continue researching different ways of visualizing and

depicting the public realm. I intend to explore electronic software, such as Sketchup and Google Street View, to help create my own architectural and spatial source images.

My desire is to visit and experience Deconstructionist architecture firsthand - to feel the warped spaces within the buildings, record my impressions, and photograph the hidden recesses. A compilation of reference materials that include observations of my feelings and impressions, notes on colour, light, size, and scale would be an invaluable asset for my studio practice.

I believe that scenes of calamity can generate an uncanny association with place, especially since such scenes are part of our daily consumption of media images. As an artist, I hope to excavate meaning in remembered place, deconstruct and then reconstruct the places using the visual medium of painting. I yearn to delve into that interstitial emotive area – between the heightened sense of anxiety, grieving and fear that relates to deeply unpleasant events, and more optimistic visions for the future. My paintings uncover and question the conflicting ideas of place and placemaking in the public realm and suggest that possibility can emerge from, or at least coexist with, catastrophe.

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APPENDIX

Documentation of Thesis Project Visual Component – Paintings on CD

1. *Category One*
Oil and marker on canvas, 2008, 48" x 72"
2. *Some Untidy Spot*
Oil, marker and graphite on canvas, 2008, 60" x 80"
3. *It Was a Long, Hot Summer*
Oil and marker on canvas, 2009, 72" x 48"
4. *Left Behind*
Oil and marker on canvas, 2009, 48" x 72"
5. *City Park*
Oil and charcoal on canvas, 2008, 48" x 72"
6. *Waiting to Cross*
Oil on canvas, 2009, 36" x 48"
7. *Sunday*
Oil and marker on canvas, 2009, 60" x 80"
8. *Collision*
Oil and graphite on cardboard, 2008, 8-1/2" x 11"
9. *Pitch the Baby*
Oil and marker on canvas, 2009, 48" x 60"
10. *Empty Lot*
Oil on panel, 2009, 48" x 32"
11. *City Studies*
(5 paintings) Oil on panel, 2008, 8" x 8"
12. *Night Picnic*
Oil and marker on canvas, 2009, 60" x 80"