

PENELOPE CAIN: SUPERDRY AND OTHER PANORAMAS



Penelope Cain's art is a long-term investigation of the complexities of urban spaces, and their cultural and psychological implications. Cain stops by to discuss drawing, landscape, the built environment, and her latest exhibition, *Superdry and Other Panoramas*

Jonathan McBurnie (JM): Your new work appears to be searching for a point of resolution between the natural and built environment. Is this resolution possible, or is the real sugar in the search for resolution, and in the tensions between the natural and the manufactured forms?

Penelope Cain (PC): Yeah- totally and absolutely! Its the tension created by the unresolvable that really interests me... I am proposing a potential for resolution between nature and culture, the wild and the city, but I'm pretty sure there can't ever be one. This then generates the implication of partial failure- which I hope reflects the condition of the modern urban project.

JM: Drawing seems an appropriate way to approach this discourse, as it has a long-standing history with commercial art that is composed for reproducibility, as well as descriptive drawing such as cartography and planning, and then life-based study. How do you approach these different strands of drawing?

PC: For me drawing is a propositional medium- it can be used to propose a certain perspective, story, thought or space. It can be to varying degrees sketchy, raw or incomplete, and still work. So I use drawing as a cartographic or planning tool, in terms of generating or mapping out something that may not exist but could- a proposition. In this I use both paper and the wall. If photography is inextricably linked with the documentary and real time/space, then I see drawing is its counter. I flip between drawing and photography and I'm interested in the terrain between the two, where the implied real of photography meets the propositional, sketchy and not-real of the drawing.

JM: Drawing seems very suited to investigating ideas for things that do not yet exist. It seems to be quite natural- we plan things before we make them, we draft them, investigate how these things might work. We draw our dreams and our nightmares. It is interesting that you bring up 'the implied real' of photography as a counter to drawing as propositional, because there is a kind of discord in these notions when discussed together. While photography can seem 'more real', it is an end result of things that are already constructed. We can't build a bridge using a photograph, but we can document its construction. Within drawing we see a kind of reversal of that- we can plan and plot the bridge and its construction. I have never really considered it before, the idea of the two disciplines as being opposites, or at least divergent to each other...

PC: I think you're right- they are somewhat oppositional- one mediated and technological and the other immediate and manual. I like your bridge analogy- it kind of introduces time into the discussion doesn't it.... With drawing as a future tense and photography a past tense, but then the reverse also? Now you've got me interested and I'll have to look into it!

JM: Landscape is a particularly rich vein of art history with which to strike up a

dialogue. Are there any artists in particular whose landscape works you have a strong connection?

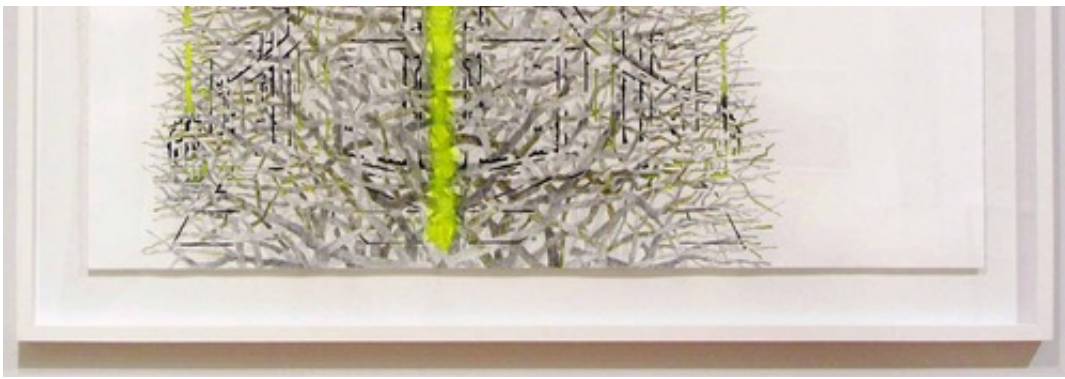
PC: The historian Simon Schama talks about landscape, as a genre, as really being a view through the window of culture, rather than being directly about nature or place, and says as much about the culture, dreams, ideals and history of the viewer than about the place shown. I like that point- that our understanding of landscape and more broadly of the spaces we see and inhabit are interpreted, relational and unique to each person, and I like to look for points of disruption or glitches in our reading of the landscape. I like the way Australian artist Jess MacNeil deals with this through video and painting- she talks about the uniqueness of each person's relationship with space and in trying to actively distort this. I also unconditionally love any of [deceased USA artist] Gordon Matta-Clark's interventions in the urban fabric. I know- it may be cheesy to totally love, but there you go.

JM: I think that is a very revealing way to look at landscape, actually. Yes, there is a study of physical surroundings, but it is filtered through the artist's own experience, and therefore is tempered by the experiences of the artist. Dürer drew many landscapes in his travels, and he was one of the first northern Europeans to draw landscapes that were not made for warfare, which is very much about control and information and description, rather than form or any kind of visual poetry. What kind of a place do you come to landscape from? How would you describe your dreams or ideologies in your approach?

PC: As part of my practice I walk around the city and urban environment and beyond, and look for sites of interest. I'm looking for places and spaces that I respond to intuitively and phenomenologically, partly because they seem to contain something unusual- a glitch or porosity in the overt narrative. So I guess I'm looking for a partially hidden potential, rather than anything more overt, and it's not really about a specific view or landscape, but probably more about the propositionally poetic or the imagined potential in that space, if that makes sense... Ideologically for me, looking and thinking about landscape occurs around the act of walking, looking and being actively alert to space and place. My favourite city philosophical guide in this is Walter Benjamin.

Penelope Cain's Superdry and Other Panoramas opens July 23, 6-8pm at MOP Projects, 2/39 Abercrombie Street, Chippendale, Sydney. The exhibition continues until August 17.





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