

Moriana

Solo Exhibition SACI Gallery, Florence, Italy 4th – 29th July 2016

“Perhaps all that is left of the world is a wasteland covered with rubbish heaps, and the hanging garden of the Great Khan’s palace. It is our eyelids that separate them, but we cannot know which is inside and which is outside.” (Calvino, I, 1974 P.104)

I visited Florence in March and had decided whilst I was here, to consider the writings of Italo Calvino, in particular *Invisible Cities* (Calvino I, (1974) *Invisible Cities*, Vintage Classics, London). Although Calvino was writing principally about his home city of Venice, many visiting other cities in Italy would find words that resonate, and so it was with me. Having visited Florence many times each time it appears different, the city itself changes little. Faces still tilt upwards to the sky in wonder at the way the light wraps itself around a sculpture or reflects a divine light from the marble of the Duomo to proclaim the glory of Brunelleschi and di Cambio’s achievement. As I wandered the tall, shadowed streets I was always aware that Florence like many cities does not give up its secrets easily. The walls of the streets are high and the windows dark, giving nothing away. It is a city of contrasts from cool, dark, shady streets that spill into vivid sunlit squares to the imposing scale of the doors, that do not encourage the caller to enter.

When Florence was built by Julius Caesar around 59BC he intended it to be a garrison, however, in the 14th Century, by contrast, it became the birthplace of the Renaissance and a hub of artistic and intellectual thought for the next three hundred years.

Calvino writes in ‘Cities and Desire 3’, of how he imagines Marco Polo, the merchant explorer, in a conversation to Kublai Khan, the Mongol Emperor, describing the city of Despina as presenting two “faces” to travelers who arrive by land or sea. Each sees the city as an embodiment of the *other*. The camel driver sees a ship, and the sailor sees a camel as Calvino plays with the idea of multiple ways of seeing when confronted with the same materiality. The city thus becomes an object of desire for the traveler, always seen at a distance on the horizon. The boundary between one existence and another is separated by both environment and desire. When taking a photograph one often does not look directly at the subject but sees its corrected form in a mirror, separating the photographer from the material form in front of him or her. This division or fracture is something I examined in this work boundaries which are on one hand porous appearing to be solid or solid appearing to be porous “*like a sheet of paper, with a figure on either side, which can neither be separated nor look at each other.*” P.105

In the opening image from the series *Despina* on the horizon appears a boat but in the foreground are waves of darkness appearing in the calm. *Despina* is the city as possibility, but these possibilities are dependent on which face of the city you see. If your ways of seeing enable you subtly shift your perspective, you can cross the border between two deserts, and see the other face of the city and the opportunities it provides.

Calvino tells us that it is the people who are the ones able to move around and through cities, in doing so creating different perspectives for themselves. I split the series into two and considered the relationship to space that each offered both outside and inside and one might also go on to say public and private.

Horizons

Horizons represent the limits of our vision, our knowledge of the visible world. Photographs have this too; they expand knowledge or limit it within their strange confined spaces. Perspective gives the appearance expanding or limiting our vision and understanding. These lines in an image can direct, coerce tease and frustrate and, like the city of *Moriana* whose beauty depends entirely on which way one approaches the city the image too can have a surface beauty however the beauty or ugliness resides in the experience and memory of the viewer.

Horizons show up inherent flaws in both two dimensional representations and a monocular viewpoint. Horizons appear hard and fixed within the frame but the division is illusory just as the representation of past and present convenes within the image, this too is an illusion. The duration of the exposure has a beginning and an end and therefore, two distinct points which are temporally separated. This becomes most apparent when light from two sources (ambient light and flash) combine to produce the appearance of a singular point which may itself be layered, each layer whose visibility, like the surface of a lake, is sometimes is transparent, sometimes opaque. Each vision therefore is fractured by another, none complete but, like the image itself it provides a border between the visible and the imaginary between the material and the dematerialized offering hope, but a partial vision of that future corrupted by the construction of others. In the San Salvi series the boundary between inside and out is located in the borders between confinement and freedom. These boundaries are no different than the horizon in the earlier series. The windows mark the boundary of the visible and mark the border of physical confinement, mental confinement as in the metaphor of the horizon, folds in on itself at the boundary of vision, one has then to image the space beyond as the inmates of the hospital must imagine the world beyond their confinement. A world that is part reality and part fantasy just as the border of any vision as Calvino reminds us, one can only image the drawing on the reverse of the paper as one can only see one side at a time and must imagine or rely on memory for the reverse.

San Salvi

At the former asylum of San Salvi which closed its doors finally in 1998 there are many borders, some are physical, doors, windows, fences and walls some are virtual, like the limits of our understanding of mental illness in all of its forms. The inmates are long gone and some of the buildings have undergone a transformation, but the borders still remain. I wandered around the building and was reminded of the boundaries that we impose on thought and vision and how light penetrates this space, through windows and through eyes and through our skin.

Windows, like eyelids, can be opened or closed to allow the passage of light to enter a room. Its perpendicular flight can be contorted, twisted and reflected in its passage to hushed corners or steeped into horrifying shapes by the mind. As Marco Polo reminds us it is the eye that chooses to see either ugliness or beauty *“Perhaps all that is left of the world is a wasteland covered with rubbish heaps, and the hanging garden of the Great Khan’s palace. It is our eyelids that separate them, but we cannot know which is inside and which is outside.”* (Calvino, I, 1974 P.104)

This work shown here at the Gallery is part of a wider research theme which explores the limits of vision in regard to photography and in particular light and dark. Some of these are reflected in the writings of Calvino, and one might add Walter Benjamin. The technical and artistic vision often has lofty aims to show ‘us’ something but that something is always shown at the expense of something else, a priori of the intellect or the soul. The work is shown in two groups clustered around themes related loosely to the parts of the city they represented.