Pulp Fictions and Interior Life:

Pulp Fictions: The Art of Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Andrew McLeod: Interior Life: A Wall Drawing

Adam Art Gallery Te Pataka Toi
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Review by Sarah Treadwell

Filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein wrote of the pleasure he felt in acquiring two Piranesi prints and, as he analyzed their internal turbulence, he also described them hanging on a yellow wall in his house; a strange relationship between the terrifying and the everyday (Eisenstein, 1977: 85). There is a similarly disturbing and illuminating conjunction in the two exhibitions held at the Adam Art Gallery at the end of 2007.

The surface evidence of the two exhibitions might suggest that they were disjunctive – that the work of an artist from the eighteenth century who etched new understandings of interiority and individualism, who was seen to make a world that would fly apart, might be at odds with a twenty-first-century delineator who works with hybrid constructions shaped by digital drafting and the everyday, with precision and gentle, sometimes comic, effects.

Filmmakers and architects have repeatedly evoked the spatial constructions of Piranesi, and it seems that every volume of architectural history refers to his astonishing and virtuoso prints. The Piranesi exhibition, *Pulp Fictions*, consisted of a fine selection of prints from four series: *Prima Parte di architetture e prospettivo* (nine of the twenty prints published in 1750); the *Grotteschi* (four prints from early 1760s to late 1770s); the *Carceri d'invenzione* (thirteen of sixteen prints from mid 1760s to early 1770s) and the *Vedute di Roma* (24 of 135 views of Rome from ca. 1748-1760). Lent for exhibition by the Alexander Turnbull Library, the prints were bequeathed by a New Zealand architect, Percy Watts Rule (1889-1953; Barton & Maskill, 2007: 3).

The exhibition by Andrew McLeod consisted of a commissioned drawing on three walls of a gallery executed over three days in October 2007 in chalk and white conté. The drawings were made, as it states in the catalogue, to "accompany an exhibition of Piranesi prints" (*Andrew McLeod*, 2007). Andrew McLeod's work accompanied Piranesi as a shadow, a companion, and a tracker. There are certain obvious connections between the exhibitions: both have a graphic linearity that is associated with architecture and both have a somewhat marginal relationship to architecture. On other occasions, McLeod has directly utilized the methods and matter of contemporary representation of architecture, the clean and seemingly neutral language of ArchiCAD, etc. McLeod uses computer software as Piranesi worked etchings, to imagine constructions for (and as a critique of) human occupancy of architecture: small figures and furniture balance on abstracted architectural constructions.[1]

Piranesi was a critical figure in the architectural debates of the eighteenth century, producing what writer Jennifer Müller calls "visual architectural treatises."[2] Utilitarian commentaries endlessly deploy Piranesi as an exemplar of the irrational, the cruel and the unstable even as they insist that he offers a legitimate account of passing history. Piranesi described himself as an architect but felt it necessary to draw the *Collegio* plan to demonstrate his propriety (Maskill, 2007: 33). Both McLeod and Piranesi seem to engage architecture from a peripheral position with an undecided relationship to the discipline of architecture.

Christina Barton and David Maskill, director and curator, named the Piranesi exhibition *Pulp Fictions…*, suggesting a sliding between genre in the two exhibitions as in the popular and disturbing film of that name directed by Quentin Tarantino (1994); a coalescing of comic drawing, violence and filmic movement. Pulp fiction is also a term for everyday reading, like Piranesi's tourist images shaped with knowledge of the market, for both public consumption and a mass audience. In his etchings of Rome, a recurrent carriage, drawn up on the periphery of the architecture, ornate and low slung, transports the tourist from site to site.

Pulp fiction is associated with graphic violence in both the paperbacks and film, and violence is evident in Piranesi's *Carceri* torture scenes and his grotesque remnants of sacrificial feasts. In the benign but black atmosphere of McLeod's drawings, tucked behind an angular (and testingly uncomfortable) chair, a small figure is pierced through with a side-line flag. The implicit and displaced violence in Tarantino's film, Piranesi's etchings and McLeod's drawings is associated with interior space, perspectival constructions and darkness.

The space of the exhibition mimics a descent into darkness. Piranesi's tour of Rome, his grotesque architectural fragments and the *Carceri* prints step in series down the cliff-like architecture of the Adam Art Gallery. Hanging on the ledges of the gallery, under strips of light, the engravings are displayed in an implicit and descending order. Full size, the *Carceri* seem disturbingly clear after years of viewing small reproductions. Bodies once indistinguishable from shadows are enlarged; the gaping mouth of a man entangled in ropes and chains (enlarged and stuck to the painted wall at entry level to the gallery) is precise, as is the pain of the man on the rack and the wretched postures of hunched figures rendered miniature in infinitely distorting space. The darkness that lodges in the cut lines of Piranesi's work, viewed as a series and at full size, is persistent.

The relentlessly black walls of the McLeod exhibition are matt and absorbent; blackness has leaked from the etched scorings of Piranesi to become an enveloping continuous surface that muffles and depresses. In Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, the prophet Ezekiel is (mis)quoted with a reference to the valley of darkness. Blackly interior, the McLeod drawings refigure the obsessive collections of childhood; the charming depictions seem apotropaic.

The exhibition of Andrew McLeod's work titled "Interior Life: A Wall Drawing", performs as a series of compilations: animal, furniture, pictures, objects, food, plants, etc. A collection of (chalk drawn) paintings hang at suitable intervals around the gallery space. Beneath the 'paintings' are pieces of furniture – another collection – a Mackintosh chair, an Elizabethan table, a Captain's chair, a leather chesterfield, an art deco chair, an Egyptian couch smudged with human use.

Other orders, in fainter lines, infiltrate the room. Animals in abundance suggest that the black room is an ark with promises of both collective death and

Fig. 1

new beginnings (Fig. 1). In a reseeding of a post-global world, McLeod drew a cow, a monkey, a bird, a cat and kitten, a bear and elephant (eyeing ice-cream). He inscribed a cat and cheese, cat and acorn, monkey up tree with camera and whirligig, kangaroo, goat, animal stack consisting of donkey, dog, cat, rooster, rabbit and escaping butterfly and fly (an escape from an interiorizing meal of animals laid within other animals), snake, lion, squirrel, rodent tail and lovesick bird. The architectural orders of Piranesi, that were also remnants or signs of a natural order (Corinthian baskets sprouting acanthus leaves), are multiplied in McLeod's aberrant domestic.

Piranesi also drew small forms of life amidst an enlarged architecture including tiny beggars and tourists (skirts like domes), sheep herders and their sheep. Dogs scratch and stand around the figures who admire the scenes. In the catalogue essay "Take a Closer Look: The Human Drama in the *Vedute di Roma*", Georgia Morgan suggests that the figures operate to not only provide scale and to direct attention to the architecture but also to situate the architecture in both theatrical and historical time (Morgan, 2007: 25-27).

In the interiors of McLeod's drawings, animals prevail over humans; they occupy the interior space of the gallery and they are also often outside the framed images. Animals proliferate; one child appears in a picture carefully writing
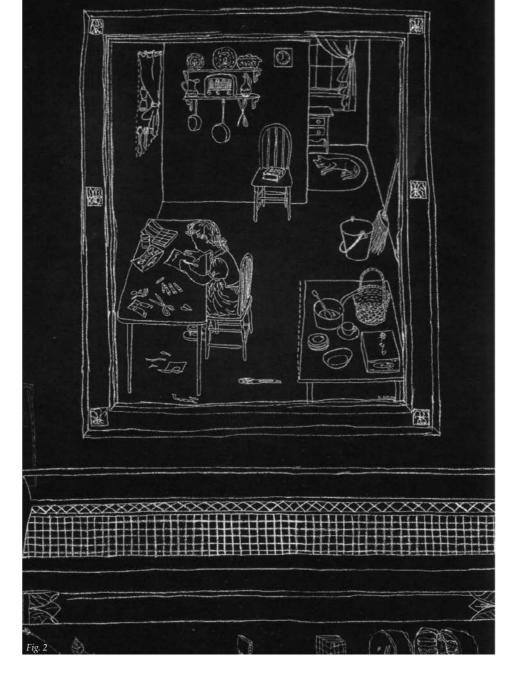
Fig. 2

with her left hand, distinguished by literacy but, in the vulnerability of youth, still animal (Fig. 2). Around the edges of the gallery, collected with the animals and trees is a flow of loosened household items: a tape-deck, a miniature refrigerator, frying pan with eggs, a prong, a bottle, a broom, a basket, a nail brush and soap, a heater, etc.

Piranesi also etches rivers of matter in a flow of time that, in the *Grotteschi*, strips the bones and tumbles temples, plants, architecture and bodies together. Piranesi records detritus over centuries while McLeod records everyday matter in the present. The bones and skulls of Piranesi are remnants of life without form – biological life, bodies from armies, from battles, from prisons. While the worlds of the two exhibitions seem remote, there is one explicit reference to a Piranesi print in McLeod's drawing.

In the *Carceri* print, "The Arch with a Shell Ornament" (*Pulp Fictions*, 2007: 33), there is a series of projecting steps that climb up the sides of an enormous arch. Introduced in the second state of the print, the steps, on which miniature figures seem to be stranded, offer a different scale to the work. Oversized in terms of human anatomy, they project into the centre of the image over dark and ominous machines. The space is gargantuan, convoluted, and the steps, without ornament or edging, seem to be structurally uncertain; abstract markers of ascension and the possibility of the fall.

Fig. 3: Andrew McLeod, Interior Life: A Wall Drawing (detail).

Fig. 3

In Andrew McLeod's work a similar set of steps, without ornament or handrail, lies under a chesterfield, climbing from the floor (Fig. 3). Repeating the scale shifts of the prison, the couch has become the world to a miniature house, tree and chair. The chesterfield (encrusted with debris from small domestic rituals), beneath which the small world crouches, and from which the steps climb, is itself beneath a world beyond. Above the chesterfield is a framed scene inscribed on the gallery wall. It is a scene of marital nightmares: the double bed, which lodges in the warped perspectival space of the bedroom, is inhabited by one occupant who seems to be a small coffin with blankets drawn up to the 'head'.

The geometry of space in this scene is disturbing: it tends spatially towards one-point perspective, but planes slip and slide. Geometries are suggested and resisted – a rectangular trap door is poised over a dotted half circle and the sense of 'room' is barely held together by bed and fireplace. A small fire (or is it a plant?) breaks out beside the pillow and the bed itself is alight with a fire inserted into it and an outstretched figure depicted amidst the flames. Drawers under the bed eject a cash register drawer. On the floor beside the bed, a free-standing fire flowers – with the word 'sculpture' underneath and in the fireplace a third blaze consumes a hatchet.

The steps which reoccur in both exhibitions provide no escape for the tortured occupants: neither the bare life of Piranesi's inflicted inhabitants nor the occupants of the doubly interiorized domestic in McLeod's drawings. Bodies disciplined by mechanical and institutional apparatuses tell only tales of alienation and pain. In the surreal chalk drawings the shared steps are diminished and separated from architecture.

The slightness of life, the gentle, surreal nature of McLeod's world, when set against the monumental workings of statehood, seems salutary. The indefinite dark time of the Piranesi prints can be recognized in current representations of blindfolded prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, where life is

reduced to a system of painful humiliations. In contrast, McLeod has drawn a world in which the form of life is very present – removed from notions of a minimal, bare existence. He drew a world in which animals are domesticated (as they are in children's books, reproaches to categorical rigidity), but they are also inextricably part of everyday life. By putting these two exhibitions together, the director of the Adam Art Gallery and the curator of the exhibitions have demonstrated an optimism for life to be found in the imaginative openness of Andrew McLeod's architectural inventions, in a world shaped by the grandeur and pitiless projects of Giovanni Battista Piranesi.

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