Place into Space

An exhibition of paintings and virtual photographs by Stephen Haley
“Words on Place, in Space” by Stephen Haley

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Words in Place, on Space

These works are visions of the contemporary world. They are landscapes too, but not traditional ones. Those other landscapes are little more than romanticized, nostalgic takes on a world that is foreign to most of us – the world of nature. Instead, these are the landscapes of our natural world, the constructed world, the one most of us inhabit everyday. The accompanying texts are not intended to explain the works, nor are the works meant to illustrate these words. They are further speculations and indeed grow out of the works. They are rambles really, wanderings across the same landscape as the paintings.
Paintings
In the past, there existed Places – localized, particular, unique. In the current era, these are transformed into Spaces – constructed, standardized and generic. Place into Space. Now, the map precedes the territory, the virtual becomes the real and the mirror no longer reflects, we live within it.

In 1961 Yuri Gagarin rocketed into orbit and the Space Age began. Really though, it started around the Renaissance with the invention of the flat glass mirror. This provided a startling new vision of space and a far more brilliant and ‘undistorted’ reflection than seen in metal or spherical glass ones that preceded them. Long story short – the mirror became the model for perspectival painting and this was eventually automated as photography and on to all the offshoots including cinema and 3d modelling. The mirror also became central to new concepts in Western reason, metaphors of thought, restructuring space and intervening into the new world. Guttenberg was a mirror maker before he invented printing. The planar mirror is central to the structures and metaphors of Western contemporary space and culture. It is really fascinating. Someone should write a thesis about it. Wait! Someone did – me. See: *Mirror as Metasign: Contemporary Culture as Mirror World*, University of Melbourne Library.

The Modernists stressed relativity and subjectivity, the post-modernists quotation and fragmentation. Now we have fragmentation and relativity but within the mesh of a strictly ordered, Newtonian/Cartesian space.
In the 1950s and 60s it was often thought that by the year 2000 we would all be living in space stations on the moon. It seems laughable now, but I think they were right. We do live in space stations, but here, on earth.

Living out in the burbs as a kid, Stanley Kubrick’s film 2001: A Space Odyssey was the closest thing to a great painting I ever saw. It is still great. What is really amazing is how all his predictions of the future were completely accurate. And even when they were completely wrong, they were so in poignant ways - like the bit where humans just keep getting smarter. Of course, all of science fiction is just a reflection of the present, set in the future. With a few funny clothes and a jet car or two, no-one seems to notice the similarities. Like in Blade Runner where the only people with human emotions and feelings are the worker replicants.

The planar glass mirror, its logic, its mode of representation, its metaphors, are the basis for contemporary space. We live in a mirror world - not a coherent, totalizing mirror dreamt of during the Enlightenment, but a shattered, fragmented mess pasted back together to resemble a mirror ball. Faceted as it is, it provides no unified vision but a shifting series of glimmering lights that illuminate the darkness only briefly. This mirror world is more prosaic than Alice’s looking-glass, but no less fabulous for that, and no less disembodied.
Text is a powerful device and I am a bit obsessed by it. The West has a tendency to see text as primary and as simple, unmediated embodiment of ideas. Ideas are generally regarded as fundamental, motivating forces that shape the material world. This then becomes, more or less, a reflection of them. Plato has a lot to answer for. In fact, most ideas arise from the material world, or from a dialectic between the two spheres. Moreover, text is essentially a form of image making but most people think text comes first and images just illustrate the ideas they contain. That happens, but when it does, it is not art, it is illustration.

Text and nature often seem at odds in the modern world. This has a literal truth too, since forests are mown down and transformed into texts. For ten years or so, all my work was based on the word Echo. This would appear in the form of houses or other structures and were so subtly incorporated into the picture that often people never saw it. This was kind of the point – since most of our ideologies and assumed ideas are so embedded in the everyday they are overlooked and transparent. Still, it was a bit irritating. Now the text is much more evident, but the signification no less uncertain.

New Landscape: Manifest Destiny, 2007, Oil on Linen, 1530 x 1570mm
Virtual space and actual space are becoming evermore continuous. It seems like there was always an internet. Additionally, we are now all cyborgs. You have a watch don’t you? Wear glasses? Well then... just because the things aren’t welded on.... Still, that is coming. Moore’s law – that processor speeds double around every two years and halves in price – was formulated in 1965 and has been accurate for all that time. This is not a leisurely, linear increase but an exponential one. It is an explosive acceleration and soon processing power will far outstrip human brain capacity. There are many projects currently underway to organically hardwire processors to our brain and soon googling will be an onboard, internal process - like thinking used to be. My current neck-top is pretty out of date, so I can’t wait for one of those new if leads to replace it. One tip though - don’t buy version one.
Shopping malls, suburbs, freeways, office buildings, railway stations, petrol stations, take away chain stores – all examples of modern space. Perhaps the one to which all others aspire though is the airport. Gradually all cities come to resemble their airport, and airports all resemble each other. Already it is possible to travel half way across the world to arrive in a space more or less the same as the one you left. Only the souvenir shops are different, each nostalgically offering up reliquaries of lost culture from the erased place that existed there before. Eventually airports will spread to such a degree they will practically join together. I look forward to the time when we don’t have to fly between countries but just board one of those moving walkways and travel to the next airport.
Spaces are particularly noticeable in the New World where vestiges of historical place were more easily swept away., For instances, despite Australia being one of the oldest continents on the planet, with the oldest living culture – the various tribes of the Australian Aborigines – most people here experience the place as a Space. Most of us live here as if we were camping - and we are. We bring in our supplies, eat exotic foods that never existed here and generally behave with a complete disregard for the actual conditions of the place. It is like we were somehow just waiting to go back home, even those of us who were born and bred here for generations. Australia - the bits where most people live - seems like a giant simulation of some other place. What place that is, I am not exactly sure, and neither is the country. What is certain though, is we don’t actually live here. Australia looks like an interesting place though, and one day, I would like to live there.
3d gaming is the best representation of contemporary life. You move through a constructed space acquiring objects to help you in your quest, move on to higher levels, solve difficult but arbitrary problems, work really hard at it, and then, you die. Or, alternatively, you win, but still feel strangely unsatisfied.
In the near future I imagine you will be able to sell the corporate naming rights of your child. Kid’s clothing is already covered with franchised advertising, so it is just the logical next step. The world will be full of little Pepsis, Fords and Burger Kings all happily running about. “Hey Nike! Hi Nissan! Stop that Exxon!” Sure, sounds a bit immoral now, but how are you going to pay for that privatised University education? There will be downsides though. For instance, it will be really embarrassing to have the name of a company that goes broke – like Pan Am. On the other hand, it will be really prestigious and cool to have a non-comm name – like John.
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Virtual Photographs
As actual space is increasingly made to resemble virtual constructions, so too does the virtual become more real. People go on about computer graphics and simulation programs achieving an ever greater degree of realism, but I think it is not because the programs are getting better at emulating the world but because the real world is increasingly based on these programs.
Photography was a chemical invention that mechanically fixed what painters had been up to for centuries – emulating the reflections seen in planar glass mirrors. But photos always bore a trace of what once stood before the camera, and was constructed in an indexical relationship of presence and representation. The photograph is a highly constructed thing though, and only a very particularized version of the ‘real’. Realism itself is just a style, not an actual condition. What is exciting now, is the ability to construct photographs entirely from 3d modelling programs that look just like the real thing. With Lightjet photographs, nothing but virtual space stands in front of a virtual camera, yet the results appear to be just like a ‘real’ photograph. Finally, photography can get away from the assumed ‘truth’ of the copy and revel in its vastly greater potential as a simulation – a simulation which is much closer to the veracity of contemporary life.
Space is one of the great modern inventions. One of its most startling aspects is the city. There were cities in the ancient world but they were pretty hopeless in comparison with the contemporary city. Cities now bloom exponentially, resembling bacteria in a Petri dish, spreading, spreading, threatening to devour all the available area. In 1900 only 10% of the world’s population lived in cities, now 50% do. In 2050 it is estimated 75% of all people will live in cities. Everyone loves cities and fair enough, they keep at bay the tedium and hostility of the natural world (not that the natural world was always so hostile.) However, cities, as they are currently configured, are simply machines for consuming the natural world, so, in 2050, where are the other 25% going to live?
This year they turn off analogue TV broadcasts for the clean on/off binary signal of digital broadcasting. It will mean an end to static. You might still pick some up on an old analogue machine but soon they too will stop working and static will be a quaint and distant memory, like 78 rpm LPs, tape hiss and unknown foreign places.

Stars make you feel really small. Vast, infinite space is really humiliating to look at. If you live in big city though, the light makes sure you never have to see them and you never have to feel small again.
It seems for all my life there has been an ongoing expectation of doomsday scenarios. In the 60’s there was the threat of a Cold War nuclear holocaust, in the 70’s petrol was set to run out and environmental collapse loomed, in the 80’s it was nuclear holocaust again, in the 90s no one seemed to care anymore and just got on with shopping until the millennium Y2K bug and various disease threats (remember Ebola?) Now, the end of petrol is back again, along with a new mode of environmental collapse - global warming. I am very glad that the end of the world keeps failing to eventuate, but even if the timing is off, it doesn’t look too rosy. But this recurring theme of imminent catastrophe is pretty interesting. It is as though there is an abiding sense in our culture that we are well stuffed, and we know it. Like some binging alcoholic who can’t believe their luck at surviving yet another excess, we stand momentarily admonished, then plunge back onto the sauce again, vainly hoping someone will organize an intervention and save us.