

*I can never sleep on Sundays*

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George Chapman

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Essay 'Latent Horizon' by Natasha Norman

Essay 'Cape Town, I love you but you're letting me down' by George Chapman

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# Latent Horizon

Natasha Norman

*The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of a lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet; the line strung from the lamppost to the railing opposite and the festoons that decorate the course of the queen's nuptial procession; the height of that railing and the leap of the adulterer who climbed over it at dawn; the tilt of the guttering and a cat's progress along it as he slips into the same window;*

-Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1972

The paintings are stacked a meter deep along the window wall in a cramped, shared studio. One drywall is accessible and on it is a new canvas, wet with oils. On the painted surface a landscape emerges, at once so familiar and yet it could be anywhere in the world. Shadows from buildings outside the picture plane foam like waves on a shore. It is a place I know well: an inner city derelict or a movie scene.

We seem to dream in film these days. Our minds walk impossible corridors behind the facades of our childhood memories. There is the gathering dislocation - as we revisit these spaces - between the deceptions of that front wall and its relationship to the activities inside; of all that a shop front, an illuminated sign, a welcome mat intends to convey and the echo of that intention within its interior spaces. For Chapman, that moment of disruption is revealed in the peeling paint, the cracked plaster, broken light bulbs and abandoned playgrounds of the places he catalogues in his sketchbooks.

Chapman has particular memories of houses. He recounts the experience of a childhood friend's home. It was built from the parts of an old theatre, the house an eccentric structure in central suburbia. Despite the fact that the occupants had no relationship to the original theatre, the façade generated a peculiar set of assumed identities on the part of the occupants that were indulged in on occasion. Svetlana Boym speaks of nostalgia as a sentiment of loss and displacement, but also as a romance with one's own fantasy. The malady of nostalgia, considered a curable disease in the seventeenth century, has been recognized as a characteristic of contemporary life in a globalised world. Whether one can confidently diagnose the artist with this condition is difficult to say for sure. His images do undergo a curious kind of dissolution in the articulation of a concrete beam as a light wash of pigment, a ray of light as a complex web of impasto strokes or the lip of a pavement as a line that evaporates into a wood veneer tar road. The façade is embodied as a permeable veil, in some instances, perhaps a melancholic frontage.

The implicit representational ambiguity in Chapman's work engenders a curious act of looking. There is the dislocation of memory from the specificity of place and yet a relocation at the same time – somewhere in the space of dreaming. Chapman's images situate the viewer firmly within the labyrinth of city streets with no names, evoking a tension with the potential to fantasize 'reading' the city from a vantage point on high. De Certeau remarks in *Walking in the City* (1984) that as city practitioners we live below the thresholds of a celestial visibility. We are the walkers, the writers, of the city. It is our movements, our memories and our fantasies that shape the lived experience of space. A single space can hold the potential for so many variants of fantasy. In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) Marco Polo regales an aging Kublai Khan with tales of the cities he has seen in his travels. It soon becomes clear that each of these fantastic places is really the same place. 'Desires are already memories,' Marco Polo remarks of Isidora, the dreamed-of city that contained him as a young man. He says of the city of Zaira that 'as this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands.'

Chapman's city is such a sponge, a limitless resource of re-imaginings in paint. It is the city where the artifice of memory simultaneously crumbles and is re-imagined.

# Cape Town, I love you but you're letting me down

George Chapman

*The imaginary is that which tends to become real.*

-André Breton, *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs*, 1932

*The ambiguity is as important as specificity. It becomes a beautiful dialogue, a tightrope walk, between abstraction and representation.*

-Wayne Thiebaud

Spaces function as revelations; they effect our imagination and place us in a state of reverie. They have the ability to evoke, capture and retain the memories and experiences of their occupants. They exert a variety of influences on our senses, affecting among other things our imagination, memory and perceptions. The effect of spaces is so profound that we tend to personify their qualities and compare them to people. Yet the evocations of spaces remain a subjective discussion. Primarily a phenomenological experience having little to do with logically explicable facts, it is not easy to understand how the evocations brought on by certain spaces affect us, and to what purpose. This body of work reflects my engagement with the spaces familiar to me, in a sense trying to understand their familiarity in an urban landscape that is constantly changing. In these surfaces an innocuous fairground sign becomes a progenitor, a desolate basketball court hints at some kind of sadness and the off-coloured wall of a supermarket forms an oneiric horizon.

The theoretical springboard for most of my practice originated from movements, works and theorists all at their apex during the middle of the twentieth century. At this point in time, the modern world had set its sights on new horizons. Within the same year that witnessed the launch of the first man-made object in space, initiating an era of exploration within an entirely new and potentially limitless expanse, new theories regarding the experience of spaces began to manifest through the establishment of the Situationist International as well as in the writings of the Sorbonne philosopher Gaston Bachelard. The excitement of travel was epitomised in Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, Kerouac's seminal account of his experiences exploring the vast open stretches of the American highway. During this time Abstract Expressionism had already reached its apogee in illustrating Clement Greenberg's notion of formalism: the celebration of the two-dimensional medium and removal of "the space that recognisable objects could inhabit." (Berman 2010:22). Three years later Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void* would pre-empt Yuri Gagarin by six months. The representation of space as we understood it had changed drastically. It was without doubt a daydream epoch for the oneiric imagination; our experiences may only have seemed limited to the extent of these new latent horizons.

I was influenced by the Situationist idea of the *dérive* in obtaining my source material: random 'drifts' through ambient spaces, documented through photography and later altered by reducing the images in terms of colour and form to effectively capture the evocations I experienced of spaces. This process provided me with a wealth of information that I gradually began to sift through by translating them to canvas. The Situationist theories of Guy Debord and Asger Jorn became increasingly relevant to my work, not only in terms of the individual's engagement with an urban geography but also with regards to the 'construction' of ambiances and 'situations', and how these could potentially lead to a new understanding and experience of these spaces. The Situationist International was established as a revolutionary collective hoping to combat, among other issues, what Debord called "a state of decomposition". Similar to how the Abstract Expressionists sought the transcendental metaphysical realm to replace the atrocities and antagonisms of their post-war reality Debord argued that "one must seek a higher organisation of the means of action in this period of our culture." (Debord, 1997: 85).



Oil on canvas, 2010  
75 x 75cm



Oil on canvas, 2010  
51 x 60cm

However, the Situationists did not look to art as the medium to achieve their “higher organisation”. Instead the medium would be their ability to create environmental ambiances: “Our central idea is the construction of situations... the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.” (Knabb, 2006: 38). The French socialist and geographer Elisée Reclus argued that space was the product of social behaviour, possessing the ability to reproduce social relations (McDonough, 1994: 66). The construction of situations relied on two factors: the environment and the knowledge of its effects on the occupants, dubbed ‘psychogeography’. The Situationists theorised that through the successful transformation of the environment into a space that is conducive to the construction of situations, the participating proletariat would become stimulated and in turn produce new and more advanced forms of culture. The Situationists sought to differentiate from the objective aesthetic notions of movements such as Abstract Expressionism, which championed that the artwork was the embodiment of an eternal truth or reality (an idea viewed by the Situationists as yet another manifestation of ‘the spectacle’). I was also interested in how the Situationists rejected the notion of nostalgia: more often than not we tend to reduce our experiences of places into sentimental memories. The ambiances sought by the Situationists were not those of sentimentality but of poetic experience, and were intended to be celebrated along with the present while resisting the psychological culture of permanence or nostalgia: “The entire socioeconomic structure tends to make the past dominate the present, to freeze living persons, to reify them as commodities... The taste for false novelty reflects its unhappy nostalgia” (Knabb, 2006: 80), further adding: “Eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts.” (Knabb, 2006: 41). Gaston Bachelard reiterated this sentiment, stating: “It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality.” (Bachelard, 1994: 61). Through the successful creation and implementation of the group’s strategies, the Situationists had hoped to multiply the poetic qualities of space resulting in an enrichment of meaningful experiences not cheapened by spectacular reproductions (Knabb, 2006: 41).

The theories of Gaston Bachelard became a relevant step forward once I had become interested in the subjective experience of space. Bachelard’s phenomenological writings on the imagination and reverie have led academics of numerous fields including art, aesthetics, architecture and science to reconsider ideas of consciousness and cognitive experience. The Poetics of Space, originally published in 1957, focuses on the effects of spaces with regard to the imagination. His phenomenological approach allows his readers to follow these subjective experiences offered by the home. Rather than methodically attempt to explain the effects of intimate spaces in an analytical manner Bachelard’s observations are instead substantiated by quotes of Romantic era poets such as Charles Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke and Jules Verne. Rilke’s work, in particular, becomes highly relevant in its struggle to communicate with the ineffable. In the text Bachelard distinguishes between what he calls the formal and material imagination: “The formal axis draws its impetus from the novel, the varied, and the unexpected; the material axis roots itself in the primitive and the eternal.” He asserts the material imagination over the formal since it receives our immediate and intimate contact with images (in other words, our perceptions) later conceptualised by the formal imagination (Picart, 1997: 64).



Concerning these conceptualisations of the formal imagination Edward Kaplan notes: “Traditionally imagination is thought of as the faculty of forming images. For Bachelard, however, imagination ‘is rather the faculty of deforming images provided by perception; it is above all the faculty of liberating us from the first images [here representations in perception], of changing images’.” (Kaplan, 1972: 2). That said, the aesthetic value Bachelard’s examination of effects on the imagination becomes clear: it links the perceptual with the conceptual through the transformation of images. Mnemonic and nostalgic images are encoded in the language of spaces, requiring the imagination to activate the experiences of the familiar. Memory, like the vague celluloid imagery of micro-film, requires the external light of our imagination to re-illuminate the scenery (Bachelard, 1994: 175). Bachelard also notes that “imagination, memory and perception exchange functions,” (Bachelard 1994: 59) mediated in the subject of this work through spatial experience. The value of abstraction is also noted as being fundamental to the existence of certain images: “Such images as these must be taken, at the least, in their existence as a reality of expression. For they owe their being to poetic expression, and this being would be diminished if we tried to refer them to a reality.” (Bachelard, 1994: 177). Thus it is necessary for these images to exist in a non-literal reality if they are to retain the most significance. This thought reiterates itself in the work of Abstract Expressionism, and would formally influence my practice once I had realised that the idea of ambiguity, of representation versus non-representation, was a useful way of communicating the effects of my locations.

Abstraction has often been attributed the ability to extract highly personalised reactions from its audiences: Robert Rosenblum recounted a stranger’s “religious experience” of Clyfford Still’s seventy-two canvases in his 1961 article, ‘The Abstract Sublime’ (Rosenblum, 1999: 72). Kandinsky spoke of his subjective experience of painting in his 1913 autobiography *Rückblicke*, indicating that he “experienced objects, events, even music primarily in terms of color, and did not conceive of colour in its physical and material aspects but rather in its emotional effect.” (Selz 1957: 128). In conversation with the poet and critic Selden Rodman, Mark Rothko pointed to the reactions his paintings solicited from their viewers: “...the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions. The people who weep before by pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.” (Rothko, 2006: 119–120). From its antecedents it became clear to me that abstraction has in its allusions of the ineffable sublime and metaphysical representations provoked successful (and often intentional) responses from its audiences, asserting the validity of the non-objective form over that of realism and direct representation. Formally my concerns lie between the fields of figuration and abstraction. While researching my subjects I realised that the viewer could obtain a more subjective and nostalgic interpretation if the scenes I chose to portray were not painted with the kind of objective realism most commonly associated with the genre of landscape painting. As I noted before, spaces also function as revelations. They ‘reveal’ experiences, memories and ambiances to us in ways that are difficult to concisely describe. During the era of Abstract Expressionism, artists, critics and audiences alike appear to have been entirely convinced by this mode of representation, of transcendental reality as an otherly experience of



Oil on canvas, 2010  
140 x 140cm



Oil on panel (detail), 2010  
100 x 100cm



Oil on panel, 2010  
60 x 60cm

space. This is no more evident than in Rosenblum's quote of Thomas Moore, recounting his experience of Niagra Falls, quoted to illustrate the effect of the abstract transcendental:

*I felt as if approaching the very residence of the De-ity; the tears start into my eyes; and I remained, for moments after we had lost sight of the scene, in that delicious absorbtion which pious enthusiasm alone can produce... Here all its awful sublimities rushed full upon me... My whole heart and soul ascended towards the Divinity in a swell of devout admiration, which I never before experienced.*

(Rosenblum, 1999: 72-3).

Through these texts I concluded that the phenomenological nature of memory and nostalgia induced by spaces is a poetic experience, and should thus be translated into poetic expression via the image. By this I mean the ambiguity of abstract and representational form, which allows the viewer to read enough into the 'revelatory' aspects of what they recognise in the image while referring to their own experience of the landscape through non-specificity, or abstraction of colour and form. However, when I look at my own work, I get no sense of divinity or spiritual satisfaction, but only a relentless bathos that reminds me of the situations and locations from which the images arose.



Oil on panel, 2010  
60 x 60cm

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Oil on canvas, 2010  
121 x 181cm



Oil on canvas, 2010  
110 x 140cm





Oil on canvas, 2010  
102.5 x 120cm



Oil on canvas, 2010  
110 x 140cm





Oil on panel, 2010  
60 x 60cm





Oil on canvas, 2010  
80 x 170cm



Oil on canvas, 2010  
120 x 180cm





Oil on panel, 2010  
60 x 60cm





Oil on canvas, 2010  
140 x 120cm





