

Postmodern Places

Jodi Lightner*

School of Art and Design, College of Fine Arts

Abstract. Art is able to communicate and transport the viewer to a different place in their mind's eye. The representation of places also connects the artist and viewer in a shared experience and understanding of space. The challenge for postmodern painters is to understand how an experienced place can be represented effectively. They must consider the objects and structures that occupy the place, as well as the purpose for the environment, the experience, and how that experience relates to self and others. With many contemporary artists utilizing installation and three-dimensional formats to create a dialog about place, two-dimensional artists must consider stepping away from traditional formats and contrive alternative ways to represent place. Examination of contemporary two-dimensional works has shown the popularity of four distinct artistic elements that address place: linearity and mark making, process, associations, and altered perspective and representation.

1. Introduction

“A house is a relatively simple building. It is a place for many reasons. It provides shelter; its hierarchy of spaces answers social needs; it is a field of care, a repository of memories and dreams” [1]. As individuals we all have a place called house. Our memories of our childhood homes, as well as the goals and the dreams for the future, are carried into our present dwelling. It's the memories, as well as the present living, that make the place of house significant. This is the experience of place. It is not limited to our house, but extends to all spheres of our interactions. Yi-Fu Tuan defines experience as the modes for which we construct our reality [2]. Gaston Bachelard writes that our experience of the location is created into meaning when we make a place our own by connecting to it in a physical, emotional or spiritual manner [3]. Therefore place is where connections within physical locations have occurred, which are meaningful enough for us to incorporate into our personal history. Artists interested in depicting this connection to place have a challenge to represent the physical world and the experience of phenomenology. Throughout art history, place was documented through direct observation and emphasized an accuracy of reporting. In contemporary art, place is no longer simply a recording of objects as objects, but a translation of the artist's experience in the given place. As a two-dimensional artist, I am interested in knowing how an experienced place is visually represented in contemporary, two-dimensional art. Examining current practices of painting and drawing will provide the answers to how artists in a postmodern or post-postmodern practice communicate a sense of place.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

I used a sampling of international and national two-dimensional artists active in today's art scene who indicate place as key concept through personal statements or articles written about their work. Four elements of communicating place on a two-dimensional picture plane emerged through my research: linearity and mark making, process, association, and altered perspective and representation.

The use of linear marks and specific mark making were the most common elements used when depicting place. These elements were found most commonly when the work included modes of drawing. The lines or marks, whether gestural or calculated, indicated atmosphere, emotion, or form. Subject matter and intent determined the characteristics of those marks. Experiences of architectural places tended to be geometric and calculated while places of experience tended more toward the expressive and gestural marks. Key examples of the use of line are found in Julie Mehretu's work. Her drawings and paintings are based on cities, monuments, systems, and infrastructures that are man made and then depicted as vistas of memorial experience, the experience of day-to-day life (Fig. 1). Her focus mirrors that of other artists who are interested in presenting place as more than just the buildings that exist there, but of the transitions that occur through the use of expressive lines or marks.

The process of making the work is another popular element in depicting place. An artist can come to understand or re-experience location by utilizing a predetermined process. Tracing the floor and everything found there, Ingrid Calame discovers stain by stain the identity of a place and the memories of those who witnessed and created the

marks. In recently tracing the skid marks on the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, she continued her endeavor to document and present a portrait of a cultural site through its ground level marks (Fig. 2). The work goes through many stages before the final paintings are completed, and in tracing and retracing the stains, her portrait emerges.

Associations with objects or other events give artists another approach to incorporate place into their work. Objects are frequently used as symbols or metaphors for the experience of the place and portray the artist's emotions about a particular place by associating it with another component. Toba Khedoori pushes this element to the extreme by removing all tangible evidence of the environment from her works and relying solely on isolated objects to carry the message (Fig. 3). By isolating a given object, such as chairs, from their natural interior environment and leaves them floating on the picture plane, giving viewers a chance to bring their own memories and associations to the meaning of the work.

Another element consistently detected is altered perspective and representation. As stated by artist Guillermo Kuitca, his work, "Transports viewers from interiors to exteriors, shaking up perspective and pushing beyond the confines of their expectations...[and] changing our orientation to the social spaces we inhabit"[4]. The subject of his current work is the interiors of famous opera houses and concert halls in the world. However, instead of depicting the scene from the concert-goer's vantage, he reverses the perspective and uses the performer's view from the stage instead [Fig. 4].

3. Conclusions

The findings of my research indicated that there are some prevalent elements connecting the works of two-dimensional artists who are focused on place and the experience of place. Those main elements include linearity and mark making, process, association, and altered perspective and representation.

[1] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1977, p.164.

[2] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1977, p.8.

[3] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, p.65.

[4] Jonathan Gilmore, Guillermo Kuitca at Gallery Met, *Art in America*, April 2008, p.167.



Fig. 1.
Julie Mehretu, *Untitled*, 2001,
ink and acrylic on canvas, 60" x 84"



Fig. 2.
Ingrid Calame, *From #258 Drawing (Tracings from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and the L.A. River)*, 2007, enamel paint on aluminum, 72" x 120"

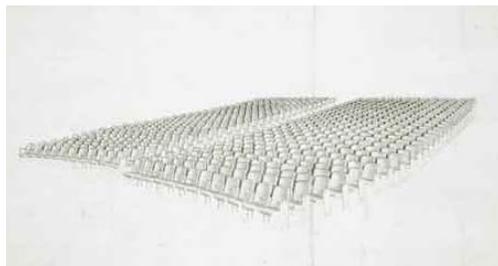


Fig 3.
Toba Khedoori, *Untitled (Seats)* detail, 1996,
oil and wax on paper, 11'6" x 25'



Fig. 4.
Guillermo Kuitca, *Carnegie Hall*, 2002,
mixed media on paper, 15 1/8" x 12 5/8"