The Enchanted City
A study of the creative potential of the ‘incidental’ in the urban environment

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Abstract

Taking the form of drawing, text-based works and sculptural installation, my research seeks to re-inscribe the urban environment with fresh layers of meaning. In drawing focus upon overlooked aspects of the city’s material, textural and physical qualities, I encourage the viewer to consider alternative vistas within the fabric of their everyday surrounds.

This project explores how, via a focus on ‘detail’ and an articulation of the decorative, we may invest the ‘incidental’ with symbolic significance. In providing a mechanism of connectivity that transforms our habitual relationship with the urban landscape, urban nature becomes a springboard for reflection and poetic association, with the potential to affect our perception of public space.

Structured in line with the changing light of a single day, the written component of my research offers differing perspectives from which the practical work may be seen to imaginatively transform familiar, yet overlooked, aspects of the urban environment.

Tracing a history developing from the psychogeographical practices of the Situationist’s, I examine the work of artists and writers seeking ways to both critique and creatively engage with the city. In this way I situate myself within an emerging field, tentatively termed, ‘Post Industrial Romanticism’.

Through reference to J.R.R. Tolkien and Ernst Bloch’s theories on daydreaming and fairy tales, I identify ways in which our perception of the urban environment may be mediated through the employment of poetic constructs. I also explore how a detailed and obsessional working model, as well as a focus on ‘the decorative,’ might facilitate an emotive or sensorial connection between the subject, maker and viewer. This aspect of the research is contextualised with reference to the feminist theories
of Rosalind Galt, in addition to a study of the potential for craft techniques to convey an emotive quality.

Within this project I seek to ‘bring the outside in’ in such a way that might expand the resonance of the artwork beyond the gallery and back into the viewer’s experience at street level. The resolution I have arrived at is presented in the final exhibition and weaves together the themes explored throughout my research.

In summary, in examining the micro-life that may exist in cracks, unobserved corners and discarded debris (amongst other source material) I argue that it is possible to experience an alternative form of reality on a simple walk around the city. Through a process of ‘re-enchantment’ the work offers the possibility of participating in a more expansive form of everyday experience.
Declaration

This is to certify that: Helen Nodding

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters except where indicated in the Preface*,

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

(iii) the thesis is 14,932 words in length, exclusive of the list of illustrations, acknowledgements, preface, bibliographies and appendices. Inclusive of footnotes and captions.

Helen Nodding
5/11/12
Preface

Before embarking upon the MFA programme at the Victorian College of Arts (VCA) my practice largely operated within the field of Street Art and Urban Intervention. The experience of working at street level has enabled me to establish a solid grounding from which to approach my current course of studies. In Chapter One (p8-9) I make reference to the activities of London-based activists the Spacehijackers with whom I worked closely from 2001-7. Later in the same chapter (p22) I footnote a quote by Richard Reynolds’s *On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening without Boundaries* regarding my perception of nature in the city, published prior to the commencement of this course. I acknowledge these references in fulfillment of the examination requirement to provide a statement of declaration of any work carried out prior to the Masters candidature enrollment.
Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to have received the generous support of many individuals throughout the MFA programme at the VCA, both intellectually and pastorally. I would like to make special thanks to my endlessly kind, patient and inspirational supervisor, Dr Kate Daw, whose encouragement and sympathetic ear extended far beyond the call of duty. I would also like to thank Dr Tim Edwards, Dr Stephen Haley and Dr Bernhard Sachs for their guidance and sound advice throughout the course of my studies.

I am indebted to all of the technical and library staff at VCA from whose knowledge and skills I have greatly benefitted. Outside of the VCA I am thankful to Roger Cousens and Adam Grubb for so generously sharing their knowledge and expertise on the subject of urban weeds.

As a visitor to Melbourne I feel fortunate to have met so many incredibly fun, stimulating and supportive new friends and colleagues. Thanks to these people my memories of Melbourne will always be rich and warm, in spite of the changeable weather. In no particular order: Anna, Ben, Danica, Paul, Hayley, Nick, James, Radar, Maggie, Lisa, Hoges, Dan, Mark, Valley, Caroline, Julie, Kathrine, Sarah, Laura, Elizabeth, John, Elsbeth and the countless friendly faces that I have encountered along the way. I am especially grateful to Jessica Stanton for late night ‘encouragement chats’ that saw me through the writing and to Shannon Smiley, who shares equally in my enchantment with the aesthetics of overgrown and overlooked urban nature.

I would also like to thank the Endeavour Awards Team (DEEWR) and the Myer Foundation (Yulgilbar Award) for the generous financial support that enabled me to pursue my studies as an International Student at VCA. My thanks also go to Jan Murray for her advice and assistance with the latter award.

Finally, I would like to thank my father and brother for their unwavering encouragement and support of my decision to “up sticks” and study in Melbourne; I also wish to acknowledge my mother, whose memory and passion for nature resonate throughout the work that I have produced during this course of study.
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The story I tell is of a contemporary world sprinkled with natural and cultural sites that have the power to “enchant”… Enchantment is something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies… To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and everyday.¹

Jane Bennett, The Enchantment of Modern Life

Introduction

‘It all started on an ordinary day in the most ordinary place in the world’

Laura Jesson, Brief Encounter, 1946

David Lean’s 1946 film production Brief Encounter details a doomed love affair between a suburban housewife, Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson), and a married Doctor Alec Harvey (Trevor Howard). Drawn together by a series of coincidences, the two strangers fall in love within the unremarkable setting of their routine existences. As the affair draws to a close the crestfallen Laura reluctantly returns to the implied monotony of her family life. Set to the atmospheric score of Rachmaninoff, Laura recounts the story of her heart-breaking love affair in the form of an internal monologue.

As Laura reflects upon past events, amidst heightened emotional sensations, the banal atmosphere of a local train station is loaded with symbolic meaning. The emotionally charged setting reflects a repressed tension resonant throughout the film and described by John Russell Taylor as being situated:

... in the presence of Harold Pinter’s second silence: ‘below the words spoken, is the thing known and unspoken....’

The storyline of Brief Encounter draws together several of my own research concerns. Taking the theme of escapism from the everyday rituals associated with city dwelling, I embark upon a journey to inject symbolic meaning into the fabric of my familiar surroundings. Here, the romance of Brief Encounter becomes metaphoric for a search for fulfillment; projecting a desire to belong to a more exciting reality that runs parallel to the one in which we already exist. In this way, I explore the material surface of the urban environment as offering a site to expose repressed anxieties,

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manifest stories or associate with sensorial expression. As the writer Italo Calvino poetically reminds us:

The City does not tell its past, but contains the lines of a hand, written in corners of the streets, the gratings of windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightening rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls. 3

I assert that, if the fabric of the urban environment is viewed as a text, through the model of Barthes ‘reader’, a wealth of possible narratives and metanarratives becomes apparent within its seemingly fixed framework. In this way my approach to the research contains echoes of Walter Benjamin’s enchanted metropolis, wherein the surface of the city becomes a: “‘linguistic cosmos’ of puzzling hieroglyphs, strange inscriptions, obscure traces, magical names to be identified, read and interpreted.”

The written aspect of my project does not seek to explicate the work, but rather weave together its major themes; tracking their development across the course of the two-year MFA programme and presentation in the final examination exhibition. Structured in line with the changing light of a single day, each chapter offers a fresh perspective from which the artworks may be seen to imaginatively transform familiar, yet overlooked, aspects of the urban environment.

The first half of the written research lays down the contextual structure of my overall project and explores the themes behind a series of drawings entitled ‘The Road Home’. These works present isolated snapshots of seemingly unremarkable urban phenomena in a detailed, representational manner. As the artworks presented in the MFA final exhibition move from the purely representational and lean more towards an investigation of surface textures, the second half of the written project examines the decorative potential of urban nature to facilitate a form of psychological engagement within both the artist and viewer. In commencing the research, a key question has been how I might activate the artwork within a

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gallery context in a manner that enables the viewer to take the experience back out into the street.

Outlining a historical framework from which to ground the research Chapter One, Daybreak, discusses a habitual use of urban space that may be structured by underlying authoritarian myths. With reference to the Situationist’s experiments with psychogeography, amongst other comparable models, I investigate how artists, writers and activists seek new ways to creatively engage with the City. In refining the scope of my research I focus upon the association between urban nature and architecture and how, through its study, poetic expression might be generated. Drawing upon the work of historical and contemporary artists, such as Brasai, Hisaharu Motoda and Laura Oldfield Ford I situate myself within an artistic trend that may, tentatively, be termed ‘Post Industrial Romanticism’.

Chapter Two explores the symbolic potential of Twilight as opening a threshold that casts our everyday surroundings in a new light. Through reference to J.R.R. Tolkein and Ernst Bloch’s theories on daydreaming and fairy tales I identify ways in which aspects of our external environment might be mediated and imaginatively transformed through the employment of poetic constructs. Expanding this theme to encompass ‘the decorative’ I propose that, through a closer look at the details of our everyday surrounds, the surface of the city can be inscribed with layers of cultural and personal meaning. Citing Rosalind Galt’s feminist theory I introduce the idea that ‘the decorative’ may expose a cultural repression manifest in contemporary society. In short, this chapter outlines how a simple shift in focus can open up the experiential possibilities of our relationship to the built environment.

Traditionally associated with the enigmatic, the mysterious and the psychologically charged, the subject of darkness seems a fitting way to draw the themes of the research together. In the enchanted night the familiar features of daytime are transformed into curious patterns and anthropomorphic forms. Chapter Three, Nocturne, moves from investigating the symbolic aspects of darkness to focus upon it as a major theme within my own art practice; exploring the effects of working with a palette limited largely to black. This chapter deals with Victorian mourning ritual
and the notion of the obsessional, explicating how the constraints that the term implies might be inverted to create a freedom of expression. In developing themes from Chapter Two, I discuss artworks in terms of their ability to facilitate an emotive or sensorial connectedness between the subject, maker and viewer. Using examples of artists and writers, such as Martha McDonald and J.K. Huysmans, I expand upon the idea of artistically transforming familiar objects (both crafted and found) as a means to broaden our imaginative connection to our urban surrounds. The final chapter details the materials and techniques utilised during the MFA project as well as its mode of presentation.

In summary, in examining the micro-life that may exist in cracks, unobserved corners and discarded debris (amongst other source material) I propose that it is possible to experience an alternative form of reality on a simple walk around the city. As the written research creates a framework from which the final exhibition might be contextualised I argue that, through a process of ‘re-enchantment’, the project offers the possibility of participating in a more expansive form of everyday experience.
Chapter One: *Daybreak*

The Beach Beneath the Streets

The scene is set. It is May 1968 and the location is Paris. Outside the University of the Sorbonne we stand amidst a scene of chaos. The police approach wielding tear gas and batons as the students tear up the materials of the streets to use as barricades and weapons. As cobblestones are lobbed at the authorities to the rallying cries of “Sur les Pavé, la plage” the poetry and violence of this rebellion is simultaneously captured. In this instance the very fabric of urban construction is used as a weapon against the authorities that control its use.

Led by the ideologies of Guy Debord and The Situationist International these rioters sought to bring about the downfall of Capitalism’s bureaucratic administration.

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5 Translated from the Situationist’s slogan: “Beneath the paving stones, the beach!”
6 Forming in 1956-7 as an offshoot of the Lettrist International, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the London Psychogeographical Association, the movement reached its political pinnacle during the General Strike of 1968, Paris.
Ultimately failing in their cause, the aspirations of the movement still resonate. As artists, writers and activists continue to undermine the perceived authoritarian undertones of the language of urban structures; the Situationist’s pursuit for alternative and “authentic” experiences within the City is reflected. With the Situationist’s model in mind, Chapter One explores our habitual use of the urban landscape and how our connection to it might begin to be imaginatively transformed.

Fast forward into the year 2012. At daybreak, droves of commuters pour into the city to embark upon their working day. Squeezing onto a crowded tram, queuing in traffic or weaving around the streets on a bike, there is a familiar sense of dread that accompanies Monday morning’s alarm clock. In many instances our connection with the city is based on efficiency; interaction becomes the routine of following the same paths to, for example, work, the gym or the supermarket. In this way architecture can become a form of wallpaper or a backdrop where our everyday repetitive actions unfold. Order and structure is imposed onto city dwelling as a measure of control. By adding a cult of consumerism and the seduction of media saturation into the equation⁷ the everyday environment of the urban inhabitant is geared, seemingly, to promote uniformity whilst stifling individuality and creative expression.

The document known as The Athens Charter, which became a profound influence on urban planning after World War II... compartmentalizes human activity into three main spheres of action: dwelling, work and leisure. Circulation is assigned a crucial role in making the urban machinery run smoothly and efficiently.⁸

Decrying the ‘Spectacle’ of modern society, the Situationists alluded to a crisis of urbanism that relates to our movement through the city and the desired lifestyle that it promotes through advertising and the media. “The result” according to Debord, “is a dismal and sterile ambience in our surroundings⁹. As far back as 1903, German sociologist George Simmel, in his essay The Metropolis and Mental Life,

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identified that the over-stimulation of the senses that the city provides might induce its inhabitants to adopt a blasé outlook as a form of defence mechanism.

Just as an immoderately sensuous life makes one blasé because it stimulates the nerves to their utmost reactivity until they finally can no longer produce any reaction at all, so less harmful stimuli, through the rapidity and the contradictoriness of their shifts, force the nerves to make such violent responses, tear them about so brutally that they exhaust their last reserves of strength and, remaining in the same milieu, do not have the time for new reserves to form.  

Architectural theorist Neil Leach talks of the city as a site of intoxication through which we manoeuvre in a trance-like state. It is this sense of the ‘blasé’ that, perhaps, reduces our ability to engage with the city in a more creative way, thus making us more vulnerable to the underlying authoritarian tone that belies much corporate architecture and urban design.

However, within these established yet invisible authoritarian rules, a wealth of subculture and ‘incidental’ activity is also identifiable. It would seem that an imposed framework either acts as an oppressive force or as a springboard for inspiration. One may look to the example of urban sports that have often developed in response to the structural and material qualities of the city, such as skateboarding, urban climbing, urban exploration and le parkour. As Henri Lefebvre suggested in The Production of Space:

...space... also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence domination, of power... The social and political (state) forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely...
In the *Hieroglyphics of Space* Neil Leach goes on to argue that meaning is not inherent within the fabric of the built environment. As such, meanings can be disassociated and once politically loaded objects or architecture may be, to some extent, re-appropriated. This opens up a realm of creative possibilities for artists, writers and activists. Leach cites, as an example, Polish born Krzysztof Wodiczko’s controversial projection of a swastika onto South Africa House (London, 1985) following the donation of money by the British Government that would have helped to uphold the apartheid regime. The work contains echoes of the events that unfolded in May 1968, but on this occasion violence is replaced with a kind of poetry.

The Situationists model of thinking is also mirrored in the work of London-based activist group the Spacehijackers, an organization that I helped to establish and worked with between 2001-7. This group of urban activists question accepted uses of public space by tweaking the rules by which they are governed. Examples of subversive activities include parties on the London Underground, temporary galleries...
set up in the toilets of multi-national food chains as well as games of ‘Capitalist versus Anti-Capitalist’ cricket in public squares (fig.3). The philosophy of the group advocates an exposure and questioning of the real, or mythical laws that govern our relationship to urban architectural space.

The architectural language of places can be corrupted by merely spreading ideas about these places, within the communities that use them. It is a method of splitting apart architectural myths and creating space that is open to appropriation. A method of change as opposed to another revolutionary utopian ideal.13

In opposition to the, often, grandiose acts and large-scale organizational logistics demanded by the nature of the Spacehijackers practice, in 2001 I began experimenting with the idea of Urban Intervention. Within this field my interest lies more in small poetic gestures that can affect our perception of the urban environment, its structures and street architecture. Whilst maintaining this practice throughout the MFA course (see appendices) my current research expands the work into a gallery-based context. An opportunity to explore this transition occurred in December 2011 when I was asked to create work for an exhibition in a condemned house (figs. 4 and 5). I approached the fabric of the interior in the same way that I

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create site-specific installations on the street, working within existing structures and materiality as a means to generate a form of storytelling.

Playing with the existing narrative structures of the house I inserted miniature worlds that led the viewer on imaginary journeys catalyzed within familiar domestic surroundings.

fig.4 Helen Nodding, *Around the campfire (installation detail)*, 2011
fig.5 Helen Nodding, Site-specific installations, (Installation details) 2011
A key research concern has been to use the gallery as a site to present artworks in a manner that might re-connect the viewer with the urban environment at street level. In searching for a solution I wish to avoid a recent trend in street art to present documentation of street-based works in the gallery in a way that removes their contextual significance. In the following sections I investigate the work of a selection of artists and writers who creatively engage with the urban environment, as a means to inform and inspire my own approach to this field.

By example, the Space Invaders exhibition at RMIT in 2011 as well as Swoon’s 2009 exhibition: ‘Swoon Paintings’, Metro Gallery, Melbourne, 2010.
The Dérive

‘Question everything’ as a means to ‘escape from the rigidity of mental habits formed by contact with familiar experiences.’\(^{16}\)

Walter Benjamin identified, in the nineteenth century writer and poet Charles Baudelaire, the character of the flâneur: “the idle stroller free to daydream, observe, ponder, cruise.”\(^{17}\). The idea of the flâneur, exploring and ‘experiencing’ the metropolis through a process of observation and discrete interaction has remained a popular means to creatively engage with the city.\(^{18}\) The Situationists used the technique of the dérive as a method of re-assessing our routine relationship with the modern metropolis, identifying zoning systems and embracing psychogeography as a “tactic for finding out the relationship between experience and built form.”\(^{19}\)

The dérive as a practice of the city re-appropriated public space from the realm of myth, restoring it to its fullness, its richness, and its history... the dérive was an attempt to change the meaning of the city through changing the way it was inhabited.\(^{20}\)

Through the act of the dérive the Situationists promoted a way to engage with overlooked aspects of urban geography, enabling the individual to break away from their habitual activities and forms of journey making. Like the strolls of the flâneur, the dérive became a search for authentic experience; identifying a kind of parallel universe that may co-exist with more dominant myths that perpetuate the City’s architecture and fabric.

Walter Benjamin was, perhaps, the theoretical pioneer of finding multi-layered textual readings of the city, most famously manifested in his Arcades Project (1927-40). In approaching the fabric of the city as a form of urban detective, Benjamin uncovered endless strataums of meanings beneath what he termed as being the

\(^{16}\) G. Bachelard, The Poetics of Space (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994). p134  
\(^{17}\) W. Benjamin, One Way Street and Other Writings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979), p160  
\(^{18}\) Examples might include the romantic poets as well as the Surrealists and Dadaists. More recently groups like Melbourne’s ‘League of Resonance’ and writers and photographers such as Iain Sinclair and Stephen Gill have used the model of walking as a means to generate work based on observations of the city and its architecture, wildlife and nature.  
“ideological mask” of 19th century Paris. Through his imaginative experiences of the busy arcades he painted an alternative history of the city.

More recently, the genre of the postmodern detective novel developed this form of approach to reveal new layers of meaning within familiar aspects of the city. In one classic work, Paul Auster’s The New York Trilogy, the protagonist21 Peter Quinn becomes involved in a case that necessitates working outside of the boundaries of regulated urban living.22 In a notable episode the suspect, Peter Stillman (the elder), follows a bizarre set of rituals when travelling through the streets. Quinn saw Stillman’s movements as deliberate and a vital clue in solving the case. On daily walks he observed Stillman collect a random selection of objects; Stillman later explained that each resonate with symbolic significance for him.

As far as Quinn could tell, the objects Stillman collected were valueless. They seemed to be no more than broken things, discarded things, stray bits of junk. Over the days that passed, Quinn noted a collapsible umbrella shorn of its material, the severed head of a rubber doll, a black glove, the bottom of a shattered light bulb, several pieces of printed matter (soggy magazines, shredded newspapers), a torn photograph, anonymous machinery parts, and sundry other clumps of flotsam he could not identify. The fact that Stillman took this scavenging seriously intrigued Quinn…23

As Quinn strives to identify the significance of Stillman’s walking patterns he ascertains that the movements allude to a form of mapping that spells out the words: “The Tower of Babel”. Just as the detective believes that he is nearing a solution, however, he reaches another dead end and we are left wondering how much of the case is a manifestation of his own growing delusions and hopeful projections. Of relevance to my own research concerns this episode of the book succinctly describes a growing desire by artists and writers to seek meaning in banal aspects of the urban environment and the detritus of discarded objects that punctuate the streets of our consumerist society. The agency of ‘walking’ has

21 Of the first book City of Glass.
22 Quinn is set on a case to track the father, recently released from prison, who is suspected of plotting to kill his son.
23 P. Auster, The New York Trilogy: City of Glass; Ghosts; the Locked Room (London: Faber & Faber, 1999). p77
become a popular form to generate alternate readings of familiar aspects of our everyday surrounds.

In November 2011, Lang Luscombe wrote an article in *Un* magazine dedicated to the artist Francis Alÿs’s idea that “*Walking is not a medium it’s an attitude*”. She cited contemporary Australian artists such as Garry Trinh, Charlie Sofo and Sarah Rodigari as being “amongst a number of artists taking up walking as a core part of their artistic practice.”[^24] The artwork generated by these practitioners constitutes a form of mapping or means of stimulating social connectivity within the metropolitan landscape. Examples of work include photographs recording rhythmical human traces in the city’s streets and waste grounds or collections of random ephemera, wherein aspects of the commonplace are injected with a poetic meaning via imaginative interaction.[^25] By example, we might examine Charlie Sofo’s ‘*Objects*’

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[^25]: Walking as a mode of engaging the body both mentally and physically with the city was an idea popularized in art practice during the 1960s. One of the earliest voices in this genre might be found in Vito Acconci’s Street Works project of 1969. In *Psychogeography: The Landscape of Memory* (a roundtable discussion at the Philoctetes Center, 2008), Acconci describes that
found in my shoe, March to May 2011', shown at Neon Park gallery in 2011 as part of the exhibition Three Imaginary Boys. The work’s title is self-explanatory and it is displayed on the floor beneath a perspex hood. The simplicity of the piece ‘brings the outside in’ in such a way that might extend the resonance of the artwork beyond the gallery and back into our experience at street level. In this way Sofo’s work reflects one of my own goals as walking becomes a means to both generate work and re-live the experience of it outside of the gallery.

The idea of ‘walking as agency’ was theorized by Michelle de Certeau in his 1970s essay Walking in the City. De Certeau suggested that although urban planning defines the city it can be transformed by the act of walking:

> Linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second poetic geography on top of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning. They insinuate other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement.

Although much contemporary theory attributes this manner of generating art to the popularization of the Situationist dérive and the writings of Michel de Certeau it might, instead, be argued they merely theorized an activity that has a wider historical heritage. As Iain Sinclair bluntly summarizes:

> I’ve been doing what everybody else has been doing for years, but now there’s a convenient label, a franchise: ‘psychogeography.’ It goes back to De Quincey, the Romantics. You wander this landscape without necessarily having preconceived notions, follow your impulses and drift into the street.

the project was a simple a way to escape his office and re-engage with the community of New York. Sophie Calle uses the agency of walking in a comparable manner and has been described by the writer David Morley as a “self-styled ethnographer” of the everyday.

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26 The hood acts as an under-stated nod to museological exhibition design, as much as acting as a framing device.
My own approach to ‘walking as a means to creatively engage with the urban environment’ owes much to French literature of the late 19th and 20th century, including the writings of Huysman’s, Maupassant, Perec and Sartre. Seeking inspiration in the winding streets, cafés, parks and graveyards of Paris, the city became, for these writers, a sort of framework from which to generate stories of the everyday.


*I like walking in Paris. Sometimes for a whole afternoon, without any precise goal, not really haphazardly, or at random, but trying to let myself be carried along. Sometimes by taking the first bus that stops (you can no longer get on buses when they’re moving). Or else by preparing a careful, systematic itinerary. If I had the time I’d like to think up and solve problems... for example, find a route that would cross Paris from one side to the other taking only the streets beginning with the letter C.*

Whilst the notion of creatively engaging with the fabric of the urban environment via the agency of walking has a well-established historical framework, its role in contemporary cultural critique is still of great relevance. In the following sections I aim to situate my own place within this model of working.

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Nature’s Quiet Revolution: *The Art of the Street*

Narrowing the field of my investigations within contemporary art discourse I tentatively adopt the use of the term *Post-Industrial Romanticism*. Discovering the definition in a review of the work of artist Laura Oldfield Ford\(^3\) it describes an artistic practice that draws focus upon aspects of urban nature and decay as a means to critique or imaginatively engage with the city. Using examples of three artists, Brasai, Hisaharu Motoda and Laura Oldfield Ford I situate my own practice within this still emerging field.

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In the 1930s the celebrated street photographer, Brassai, reflected an idea of Walter Benjamin’s that the graffiti of the city forms a sort of hieroglyphics of signs or codes, figures and symbols. In *The Wall of Proposition* Brassai muses upon the latent imagery that may be contained in a city wall and how the phenomenon has been drawn upon artistically:

'Botticelli, who loathed landscapes, said one day that “by merely throwing a sponge soaked in a variety of colors at a wall it would leave a stain in which could be seen a beautiful landscape.” Leonardo da Vinci quoted this quip of Botticelli’s without showing the least misgivings. And why can’t a stain evoke a landscape? In his Treatise on Painting, Leonardo very often returns to this “almost ridiculous” idea, but which “is none the less of great utility in arousing the mind to various inventions.” He repeatedly recommends the study of clouds and old, stained walls. “In such stains various inventions can be seen. I say that a man may seek out in such a stain heads of men, various animals, battles, rocks, seas, clouds, woods, and other similar things. It is like the sound of bells which can mean whatever you want it to.”

Elaborating upon the richness that can be experienced through contemplation of a concrete wall Brassai discusses the effects of time and chance, noting the aesthetic impact of environmental, mechanical and chemical actions. Brassai relates the ways in which there is a childish desire to anthropomorphise and find similarities in the details of a wall; we begin to endow meaning into cracks and holes by imaginatively transforming them into faces or figures in a search for “fragments of narrative”. He also notes that the materials used to build the wall itself may already be rich in geological or historical association. Additionally, we must not forget the symbolism of the wall as a geographical boundary; revolutionary messages scrawled on its surface may be in direct contradiction to its embodiment of a political division.

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33 This meeting of symbolism, materiality, politics and geography strongly manifests itself in the famous walls of Berlin and Palestine. Having visited Berlin shortly before embarking upon this MFA project, even in its absence the wall still resonates as one of the most powerfully symbolic physical features of modern Western politics.
Indeed, the white plaster slapped on our capital’s walls is none other than calcified gypsum from the Paris Basin, and the surface that undergoes the aforementioned metamorphosis is part of the bed of some prehistoric lagoon! It is hardly surprising that our imagination is sometimes forcibly struck by the resemblance of an old wall to an imaginary landscape.34

The imaginative potential that lies within the aesthetic of urban decay has led it to become a major theme within my own practice. Contemporary theorist, Gil Doron, expands upon Foucault’s (1967) introduction of the idea of ‘heterotopia’ into architectural discourse. He uses the term ‘dead zone’ to encompass urban spaces outside the realm of planned urban architectural space, for example: wasteland, derelict areas and the terrain vague.

Ordering, separating and segmenting the urban landscape leaves gaps between the zones of activity. These gaps have no planned function, and are often of irregular form – for example the spaces between the industrial park and the residential neighbourhood, empty car parks, edges of shopping malls, spaces between tower blocks, between lines of transportation (highways and railways), at the edge of highways, under bridges and at river banks, and parks at night, pavements and so on.35

Doron refers to spaces that urban planning has somehow overlooked, devoid of utilitarian purpose, “places of resistance”, where nature creeps back and an urban wilderness proliferates. Richard Reynolds, in his handbook on guerrilla gardening, details how: “Neglected land, even when covered in concrete, will eventually bloom as plants find a foothold in cracks and windswept dirt.”36

Contemporary Australian artist, Shannon Smiley, celebrates the enchantment of these overlooked aspects of urban nature in paint, finding that: “In the overlooked

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34 Brassai, Brassai Graffiti. p12
and undefined spaces without purpose or function, a wilderness grows with an urgent will to live.”

Interestingly, the botanical writer and weed enthusiast, Richard Mabey, describes how the subject of urban weeds can open up a whole vista relating to the imaginative potential of these “plants in the wrong place” to act as repositories of meaning in relation to myth-making, sociology and history.

*I wandered through this ragged Arcadia in my lunch hours, amazed at its triumphant luxuriance, and feeling, in a naively romantic way, that its regenerative powers echoed the work we were trying to do inside.*

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38 A common term used amongst weed ecologists.
39 Mabey highlights that weeds can embody a rich history. Such introduced species were often brought across with waves of immigrants colonizing the New World; some accidentally as seeds were embedded amongst the cargo, others intentionally as Europeans wanted to bring their gardens with them to remind them of home.
The plants felt like comrades in arms, vegetable guerrillas that had overcome the dereliction of the industrial age.\textsuperscript{40}

In this way, the weeds that flourish in the City’s back alleyways and cracks, offer an ideal springboard for a poetic contemplation that enables access to an alternative psychogeography of the city.\textsuperscript{41}

In the 2007 “eco thriller” The World Without Us Alan Weisman paints a picture of how the world might look if humans vanish and nature is left to take over. In one example he references an article in New Scientist Magazine wherein Laura Spinney:

...envisioned her city abandoned 250 years hence, turned back into the swamp it once was. The liberated Thames wandered among the waterlogged foundations of fallen buildings, Canary Wharf Tower having collapsed under and unbearable tonnage of dripping ivy. The following year, Ronald Wright’s novel ‘A scientific Romance’ jumped 250 years more, and imagined the same river with palms, flowing transparently past Canvey Island into a sweltering mangrove estuary, where it joined a warm North Sea.\textsuperscript{42}

If these apocalyptic futurescapes were to find their artistic voice, it might be within the lithographs of Japanese artist Hisaharu Motoda. In Motoda’s ‘Neo Ruins’ series he projects an apocalyptic eeriness onto familiar aspects of the modern metropolis; natural order breaks down the concrete jungle and the inhabitants have long-since departed. Within his haunting lithographs popular tourist sites crumble as native and introduced vegetation thrive amongst their ruins. Exploring the Japanese idea of “Wabisabi”, Motoda explains that his work refers to: “...the aesthetic beauty of anything aged, old or imperfect, the idea of dying.”\textsuperscript{43} The lithographic technique

\textsuperscript{41} This was a theme explored in ACCA’s 2006 exhibition Uncanny Nature. In addition, Reynolds comments upon my own celebrations of the urban weed in past works: “When Helen... walks around London she looks up and imagines a romantic alternative metropolis... She described to me her vision of a landscape of towering buildings covered with vegetation rather than glossy glass and steel.” Reynolds, On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening without Boundaries. p81
employed lends the work a sense of tradition, adding a weight of permanency to a subject matter that speaks of the ephemeral nature of our material surrounds.

*There is a Japanese saying 'anything is impermanent'. Perhaps, I want to send a message 'Anything is impermanent' through my work. And, I feel beauty on such fragile things, and would like to express it...*  

In a comparable manner London-based artist Laura Oldfield Ford uses a mixture of photorealistic illustration and collage to highlight the poetics of the dispossessed wastelands of late Capitalism in and around the City of London. Most recently she has focused on the gentrification of the East End; particularly the effects of structures imposed onto the land by the Olympic Games and the subsequent loss of community and nature reserves in which this has resulted. Whilst Motoda’s work deals with an unpeopled future, Oldfield Ford evokes an apocalyptic feel to Olympic construction sites through a layering of memories of the past and present or a form of heterotopia. With influences as far-reaching as psychogeography, a punk

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aesthetic, her experience of the early 90s rave scene and the urban wastelands depicted by Tarkosvsky, Oldfield Ford portrays a ruined landscape haunted by “the semiotic ghost of failed utopias”. Many of the works combine watercolour with ballpen to give a sense of immediacy; we can imagine the artist en plein air as she inspects these sites recording observations, memories and future projections.

![Figure 10. Laura Oldfield Ford, But the time may come sooner than people think, 2008/9](image)

In 2009, Oldfield Ford displayed more than one hundred ink drawings that accompanied a collection of her zines *Savage Messiah* at Hales Gallery: *London 2013, Drifting Through the Ruins*. Painting a thoroughly politicized aesthetics of urban architecture she stated:

> I regard my work as diaristic; the city can be read as a palimpsest, of layers of erasure and overwriting... The need to document the transient and ephemeral

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nature of the city is becoming increasingly urgent as the process of enclosure and privatization continues apace.\(^\text{46}\)

A series of drawings entitled ‘The Journey Home’, presented in my MFA final exhibition, share an interest with Oldfield Ford and Motoda’s work in relation to their focus on a kind of aesthetic of ruins conjured in a representational manner. In contrast, these works are intentionally less dramatic in both their choice of subject matter and delivery. Instead I celebrate unremarkable urban manifestations, for example the moss growing in front of a commission flat or an elm sapling that has taken root in a crack in the concrete. Each image details a discovery that held a poetic resonance as I encountered it on a walk across the city. Presented as isolated snapshots the drawings are created using pen and ink on layout paper, employing the use of dots and cross hatchings common to traditional illustration techniques. In a comparable manner to Motoda the technique invokes a sense of history, in this case adding a sense of weight or permanency to a modest subject matter. Originally framing the works in a museological fashion (fig. 11), I have opted to display the series framed without glass on a set of shelves. In this way the presentation might suggest a sequence of diaristic observations that capture a personal enchantment with the everyday.

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Whilst Brassaï drew focus upon a kind of anthropological aspect to the mark-making of wall-based graffiti, ‘The Journey Home’ operates on a symbolic level as each ‘snapshot’ seeks to create an imaginative connection with periphery phenomena of the everyday.

In contextualizing my practice within an established field of artists, writers and theorists, I have demonstrated a means in which the artwork might challenge a habitual reading of the familiar and begin to overcome what George Simmel termed as our ‘blasé’ outlook on the modern metropolis.

...to read the city is to read an urbanized self, to know the city from within. Once we lose a transcendental signifier, the totalizing process is called into question and the city turns into a place of mystery: chance and the unexpected dominate, a romantic sense of the uncanny becomes exaggerated, and the city takes on the meaning of pure text, to be created by each individual and read.47

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Chapter Two: *Twilight*

**The Gloaming**

*Twilight is a time when sensibilities change and potential-laden atmosphere emerges. Its onset seems to connect us with our primal roots. Throughout the world’s myths and folklore traditions, creatures of the night begin to stir at this hour. And evil spirits, especially vampires, begin their mischief. More prosaically, for most of us the close of day sees us returning to our homes and shelter, away perhaps from the threat of a changing world outside. There are tinges of poetry, too: in the summer this is the time when flowers are at their most fragrant. Twilight expresses the limit between the familiar and the unknown; the comfortable and the dangerous – an uncertain threshold between hope and fear.*

Symbolically the twilight occupies an in-between time, hovering between life and death, day and night. Shadows lengthen and the change in light offers a new perspectival view on the cityscape. It is a time for reflection, nostalgia, wistful longing, of connecting to the world removed from the burden of the day’s utilitarian responsibilities. This chapter seeks to explore the transformative potential of an artwork to cast familiar aspects of the street in a new light. To paraphrase the architectural theorist Neil Leach, the anthropomorphising potential of the gaze not only enabled Daedalus to bring statues to life but also allows us to develop a sense of connectivity with inanimate objects that furnish the outside world.

The magic hour approximates to a time before or after sunrise or sunset when the sun sinks below the horizon and the light becomes softer and more diffuse; tones warm up and shadows disappear. A time well known to photographers and filmmakers, the magic hour acts as a trigger to the imagination and contains the ability to alter our perspective on external reality. Inducing a daydream like effect, a psychological space is opened wherein the familiar may be transformed into

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something that the imagination finds magical, or enchanted. Contemporary photographer Gregory Crewdson talks of the “other-worldly” quality that twilight effects and the sense of “in-betweeness” that interests him.\(^5^0\) Whilst photographer Edward Steichen (1879-1973) also found inspiration in what he perceived to be this “haunted” hour of day:

> What a beautiful hour of the day is that of the twilight when things disappear and seem to melt into each other, and a great beautiful feeling of peace overshadows all.\(^5^1\)

In exploring the notion of the daydream and fairy tale I identify the ways in which such models might provide us with mechanisms to not only imaginatively relate to and transform our external environment, but also hold the potential to initiate social change through a process of active wish fulfillment. This theme is expanded upon in relation to the decorative in art and design and its potential to enrich our perception and psychological connection to the objects of the real world. I propose that, with or without the presentment of utopian idealism, through a closer look at the surface details of our everyday surrounds we can inscribe them with layers of cultural and personal meaning. In summary, Chapter Two explores the ways in which poetic constructions may be utilised to bring about a new experience of the real.

> You may be daydreaming in almost any situation, without breaking the front of normality, while at the same time making the present more fantastical. Now everything is possible, and in this fact lies its subversive and emancipatory power. In everyday life, where so much is planned and ruled by routines, the daydream operates as a wild card, slipping into cracks and forgotten corners, disappearing in all directions, and then returning to bring the present into new light.\(^5^2\)

\(^5^0\) Barnes, Twilight: Photography in the Magic Hour, p54
\(^5^1\) Ibid. p17
fig.13  Gregory Crewdson, Untitled from the series 'Twilight', 2001
Revolutionising the Fairy Tale

At a lecture delivered to the University of St Andrews on the subject of Fairy Stories, the writer J.R.R. Tolkein identified two layers of reality in operation within folklore and fairy tale. One lies in the primary, or ‘real’ world from which fantasy, the secondary, is derived. Tolkein described how an accomplished storyteller might transform the inanimate materials of the primary world into this secondary world of fantasy. In using fantasy as a tool, Tolkein believed that the reader could experience the world in a more consistent way removed from the, often irrational, rules that govern our habitual experience of the outside world:

*Fantasy is made out of the Primary World... For the story-maker who allows himself to be “free with” nature, nature can be her lover not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.*

In *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* Jack Zipes expands upon Tolkein’s theories. In explaining that fairy tales have, historically, reflected the impotent social position of the lower class he states that they also offered the opportunity to imagine a utopian ideal that might be actioned in some form in the real world. The Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch dedicated much of his work to a comparable exploration of the ‘Principle of Hope’. In a book of the same title his investigations extended to daydreams, the decorative and the fairy tale as models that facilitate the prospect of utopian potential.

*In opposition to plain wishful thinking, Bloch maintained that there are concrete utopias which await their human fulfillment through the action of conscious individuals who learn through their conscious.*

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53 Scotland, 1939.
55 Zipes states that the ontological situations in the tales generally deal with the exploitation, hunger and injustice familiar to the lower-classes in pre-capitalist societies.
It was Bloch’s belief that, through such utopian illusions, we might understand and overcome the banal conditions of contemporary life. In imagining and harnessing the potential for creating a better world he envisioned “these qualities as constituting a principle of hope and illuminating the possibility for human beings to change and become makers of their own history.”57 Zipes clarifies that Bloch was not talking about retreating into fantasy, but rather his goal was to:

...make greater contact with reality. The escape is estrangement or separation from a defeating situation which induces a feeling of possible liberation under capitalism... The placing of objects from our everyday world in a luminous, estranged setting compels us to perceive and cherish them in a new way. The creative fantasy embodied in the fairy tale can help us see new connections between past and present. These connections must be made if we are to move forward in time more in keeping with our subjective concerns.58

In relation to the work of Hitaru Motoda and Laura Oldfield Ford (explored in Chapter One), we see how an envisioned utopia might also become a kind of pre-apocalyptic projection of the future, reflecting current cultural fears. In a post-industrial age fuelled by the threat of climate change and the alienation of globalisation the modern day fairy tale easily slides into a dystopic vision or kind of futuristic romantic fantasy. Whilst still retaining the potential to offer a cultural critique, the fairy tale of ‘Post-Industrial Romanticism’ begins reflect upon the delicate balance between nature and the man-made.

57 Ibid. p146
58 J. Zipes, Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2002). pp 159-162
Lost in the Detail

Ernst Bloch and J.R.R. Tolkein suggest that the fairy tale and daydream offer a means to transform our perception of external reality via the imaginative impulse. They argue that such constructs might reflect both a sociological environment as well as containing the seeds for active change in the guise of wish fulfillment. In contrast, I ask the question “what if”, in “[t]he placing of objects from our everyday world in a luminous, estranged setting” we dwell a little in the detail rather than see the story as a whole. As a child I was clearly taught the rules of creative writing. A story should have a start, middle and end; a fairy tale should always conclude with a moral lesson. By Bloch and Tolkein’s interpretation this lesson might relate to a utopian projection of the future. I was never good at writing by these standards as my rambling fictions became caught up in the details of a pretty dress, or the description of a fantastical castle that “glistened” in the distance. Repeatedly I was criticised for losing myself in details without a thought to the overall point that I was trying to make. My listening abilities were equally challenged; I could, for example, never remember what became of Hansel and Gretel as the vision of the incredible
gingerbread house would absorb me fully. I now indulge this aestheticizing tendency in re-interpreting surface aspects of the urban environment, arguing for its potential to open a new form of critical engagement with external reality. If, according to Merleau Ponty, our understanding of the external world is facilitated in terms of likenesses, associations, familiarity and memories, a re-examination of the familiar at macro level may enable us:

...to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us... to re-awaken perception and foil its trick as allowing us to forget it as a fact and as a perception in the interest of the object which it presents to us and of the rational tradition to which it gives rise.\footnote{M. Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} (New York: Routledge, 2005). p66}

I propose that in negating the wider narrative framework and concentrating rather upon isolated perceptual details we might begin to find new meanings in ‘the detail’.\footnote{A theory propounded by Naomi Schor in \textit{Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine}, Routledge, 2006.} It is an approach to creating art that might find its literary association in a short story by Jorge Luis Borges entitled \textit{Funes the Memorious}. The tale recounts the story of Ireneo Funes, an extraordinary character whom, having suffered a head injury as a result of an accident develops acute perceptual abilities to recall the world in miniscule detail:

\begin{quote}
We, in a glance, perceive three wine glasses on the table; Funes saw all the shoots, clusters, and grapes of the vine. He remembered the shapes of the clouds in the south at dawn on the 30th of April of 1882, and he could compare them in his recollection with the marbled grain in the design of a leather-bound book which he had seen only once...\footnote{J. Luis Borges, \textit{Funes the Memorious}, in Anthony Kerrigan (ed.), \textit{Ficciones} (New York: Grove Press, 1994). p112}
\end{quote}

In Funes’ world the bigger picture has been entirely replaced by the detail and he expands upon a familiar experience of the landscape in macro vision. In a somewhat allegorical comparison I am drawn towards the attention to detail that can be found in many of Albrecht Dürer’s prints, etchings and woodcuts\footnote{I found a number of examples of this attention to foreground detail amongst the comprehensive collection of Dürer’s woodcuts and etchings in the exhibition: \textit{The Four Horsemen}, currently on show at the NGV.}. Although his overall
compositions are, often, dominated by characters from mythological or biblical stories, intricate details of wild nature are notable in the foreground of their settings.

Dürer’s study entitled *Large Piece of Turf* (1503) is, perhaps, evidence of the care he took to render the urban context of his artworks. In this way, a poetics of the urban
wilderness is celebrated in a manner reflected in the works of writers from Shakespeare through to John Clare and DH Lawrence. With a little poetic license we might see the foreground details of ‘incidental’ nature in a Dürer as the ancestor to Motoda’s more dramatic renditions of nature in the urban environment; once the historical figures have long since passed away and the industrialised landscape has been built and since fallen into ruins. In my own artwork, in contrast, I zoom in on the textured details of Dürer’s foregrounds making the pebbles, weeds and cracks the focal points of the composition.

It is important to stress that a focus on ‘the detail’ is not at odds with Bloch or Tolkein’s analytic approach to the utopian potential of folk and fairy tales. Instead I would argue that it introduces another angle from which their theories might be engaged. At the beginning of this section I describe Tolkein’s conception of a secondary world of fantasy that is created out of the primary world from a process of being ‘free’ with nature. I will go on to explore how, in approaching the city as a form of decorative surface, we might not only access a means to transform and re-experience our familiar surroundings, but also engage in a level of psychological connectivity. Here, I look to the example of John Paul Sartre’s first novel Nausea. As the protagonist Antoine Roquentin’s habitual understanding of the physical world breaks down he is lead to a series of overwhelming experiences described in the book as ‘The Nausea’. In one such episode Roquentin encounters a chestnut tree whose appearance causes him to question the nature of reality:

The root of the chestnut tree plunged into the ground just underneath my bench. I no longer remembered that it was a root. Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things, the methods of using them, the feeble landmarks which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, slightly bent, my head bowed, alone in front of that black, knotty mass, which was utterly crude and frightened me.

In this way Roquentin breaks down his received views of the objects of external reality and enters into a perceptual analysis of the shapes and forms that the natural

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63 As celebrated in Naomi Schor’s Reading in Detail.
world present to him. He has entered an in-between space of experiencing; a space that D.W. Winnicott might relate to a form of transitional phenomena. At this point we observe the fragile balance between fantasy and reality and the very real psychological impact that a creative engagement with familiar aspects of the urban surrounds may ignite if viewed through a detailed lens. It is with this in mind that I explore the second stage of my research project. As the artwork moves from the purely representational and leans more towards an investigation of surface textures, I examine the decorative potential of the everyday to facilitate a form of psychological engagement within both the artist and viewer.

fig.18 Helen Nodding, Hole in the wall, 2012

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fig.19 Helen Nodding, Defiant Beauty, 2011
Flights of Fancy: The Decorative Imagination

In Gustave Moreau’s *Salomé Dancing Before Herod* (1876), we are presented with the portrait of a temptress dripping in jewels and ornament as she performs the dance of the seven veils. In an act of pure seduction Salomé persuades Herod to present her embittered mother the head of John the Baptist. The king, engulfed by her charms, is powerless to say no. Here Moreau introduces us to the idea that ‘the decorative’ can act as a form of expression; his use of it enhances the idea of a dangerous and exotic femme fatale.

![Fig. 20 Gustave Moreau, Salome Dancing Before Herod (detail), 1876](image)

Whilst Moreau’s work betrays a love of the exotic and ornate its connotations may reveal a pejorative quality if placed within a wider cultural critique. In expanding this notion Rosalind Galt, in *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image*, argues that the decorative in art is linked to a cultural fear manifest in a misogynistic Western
society. Galt proposes that the decorative is historically associated with the exotic, sexual perversity, orientalism, primitivism, the feminine, the surface and the superficial and, as such, has been relegated to the status of a low art form.

*Ornament, clearly is one word for the excessive investment in the cosmetic that classical aesthetics associates with the feminine. Like the woman, ornament is a supplement, secondary and maybe surplus to masculine requirements. It likewise connotes the geopolitical outsider... In European aesthetics, non-Europeans and women are projected as loving ornament because these groups are viewed as a decorative supplement to that aesthetics. Thus the political quality of the ornament: it may be tolerated but only if it knows its place.*

Galt goes on to explain that The Modernists overtly rejected the decorative form in declaring it to be both oppressive and stifling. The architect Adolf Loos was one of its fiercest opponents writing vehemently against its excesses in essays such as “Ornament and Crime” and “The Luxury Vehicle”:

> To see decoration as a sign of superiority is to stand at the level of the Indians... To seek beauty in form and not ornament is the goal to which all humanity is striving.

It is this rejection of ornament, however, that Galt asserts underpins its political power. By example, she cites the work of literary critic Rae Beth Gordon in her claim that ornament can: “express meanings that have been excluded from the central field and hence can comment on what is missing from those central meanings.”

Contemporary cultural theory, then, celebrates the power of ‘the decorative’ to expose a political prejudice. In the following section I examine how repressed anxiety might find form in ‘the decorative’, within both the viewer and those who employ decorative features in their work. In this way, we might compare a study of ‘the decorative’ to a reading of ‘the detail’ (described in the previous section) in

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67 Ibid. p122
68 Ibid. p98
identifying how it might facilitate a psychological aspect that expands beyond its superficial appearance.
Making Fantasy Reality

Using two examples I wish to describe the way in which a combination of architecture and the decorative in art and design might elicit or reflect emotional expression. The examples chosen demonstrate the difference between what might be considered an unhealthy imaginative connection that results in internal fantasy and psychic dislocation towards reality, in opposition to an active engagement that might effect an enriched experience of the outside world.

Firstly, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s novel *The Yellow Wallpaper*, we uncomfortably witness a woman’s descent into madness following a bout of ‘hysteria’. The room that Jane, who is both the narrator and patient, is given to recuperate in is described as bearing the hallmarks of a former mental asylum. As part of her ‘treatment’ Jane is ordered to undertake complete rest and is denied the opportunity to engage in any form of mentally stimulating activity. She then turns to the fabric of her surroundings as a release from her boredom. In Jane’s mind’s eye the decoration of the wallpaper is divided into two levels: the first, the pattern, acts as a form of prison cell to the second layer in which she imagines an animated woman crawls around behind the patterns and shakes them in a desperate bid to escape. As the delusion progresses Jane believes that it is her duty to set the woman behind the wallpaper free, culminating in a dramatic final scene in which her husband discovers her triumphantly tearing down the paper. At this point we realise that the wallpaper has become symbolic of Jane’s feelings of entrapment and that she has come to identify herself as being the imaginary prisoner behind it. Sadly for Jane she is, by this stage, beyond the scope of rehabilitation and her perceived escape is yet an additional figment of her imagination.

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Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!

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69 Since diagnosed as probable “post-partum depression” following the birth of her child.
70 See *The Yellow Wallpaper: an analysis* by Verena Schörkhuber.
“I’ve got out at last,” said I, “inspite of you and Jane, and I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!”

Clearly, Jane’s eventual psychosis is an extreme form of an ability to engage the imagination creatively with the forms and pattern of external reality, namely the yellow wallpaper. Whilst displaying a capacity to fantasise in relation to the decorative wallpaper, she internalizes the experience in such a way that renders her unable to function productively within the real world. It is, perhaps, the difference between what Tolkein might term fantasying culminating in a dead end and a dream productively relating to the past, present and future. On another level, the order conferred on the natural world by the repetitive and obsessive pattern of the wallpaper itself emphasizes Jane’s desire to make sense of a situation that is beyond her control. As the wallpaper becomes a surface onto which to manifest her repressed anxiety we might relate to Jerome Singer’s summation that:

... when man is denied stimulation from the outside, he either produces more inner stimulation or perforce attends more actively to the ever-present stream of his own imagery or fantasy... When one’s environment is grossly limited either in material available or in variety of content, one may shift attention inward.

In my second example I recall a personal experience with a rococo chimneypiece and overmantel (in pine, marble and mirror, circa, 1750 – fig.21). The object is on permanent display in London’s Victoria and Albert Museum’s British Galleries where I once spent two years based as a Gallery Assistant. At the expense of the museum (and, perhaps the security of its other objects) I spent hours staring into the curves, labyrinths, twists and wiry folds of the foliage of the fireplace; captivatingly they seemed to follow the structure of the framework before getting lost on an asymmetrical course. Self-conscious of its own fantasy element the object seemed to allude to the way in which nature playfully engages with architectural form in the

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outside world. The effect provokes a high impact imaginative engagement with the potential to absorb the viewer into another world. Interestingly, this world co-exists with physical reality acknowledging its own artifice by its sheer decadence.

The cumulative effect of this light, delicate, and playful style is nothing less than the creation – of a second structure – one is tempted to say a second world – made of ornament that partially conceals or masks the actual structure on which it depends...Always we encounter masterfully rendered natural objects that insist upon their artifice.

The Neoclassicists rejected Rococo design for its “feminizing rhetoric that associates the expressive and exuberance of these styles with female frivolity.” They criticized the style for lacking masculine constraint and being too passionate and uncontrolled. In contrast we might identify here the anti-rationalising tendency of the decorative and re-evaluate Rococo design for its expressive merits. Within my own research, I have been greatly inspired by the rococo aesthetic and its expressive connotations in exploring the decorative play between burgeoning nature and street architecture, framed by the context of the city (fig.22).

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73 This is an idea that might echo from medieval manuscript design wherein the architecture of the letter interacts with flourishing foliage and we are taken upon an imaginary journey framed within the confines of the page.
75 Galt, Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image. p242
In summarising Chapter Two, structures such as the fairy tale, the daydream, ‘the detail’ and ‘the decorative’ facilitate and enhance an expressive potential via the engagement of imaginative connectivity. As such, the psychological aspect of twilight in the city has offered us a means to approach a new form of aesthetic engagement within the context of material qualities of the city.

... the imagination, by virtue of its freshness and its own peculiar activity, can make what is familiar into what is strange. With a single poetic detail, the imagination confronts us with a new world.76

fig.23 Helen Nodding, In the Dark Places 1, 2012

76 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space. p134
Chapter Three: Nocturne

Darkness Visible

*For it is at night that he really lived, believing that you were more completely at home, more truly alone, that the mind was only aroused and kindled into life as darkness drew near.*

As children, plunged into darkness as the bedroom light is flicked, we knew very well that the toys came to life the minute that our eyes closed. Try as we might to catch them out, those wily puppets were always one step ahead of the game. The darkness of the night would also bring us the occasional unwelcome nightmare visitor; for witches, ghosts, goblins and monsters are given free reign under the cloak of the night. In the magic of the fairy tale the night transforms the forest into an enchanted landscape rendering it unsafe to set foot outdoors after dark. Years later our rational senses tend to over-rule the ‘magical’ possibility of things, but the notion of darkness still brims with foreboding. Taking a late night stroll through the city the streetlamps create anthropomorphic shadows reminiscent of the ghosts and ghouls of childhood; drunks trip out from bars shouting obscenities at invisible foes, forbidden lovers take advantage of the dim light of a laneway and share an illicit kiss. For many perfectly logical adults the idea of darkness still conjures thoughts of the funereal, melancholia, the forbidden, the enigmatic or the occult.

*The uneasiness that we experience when pitched into a field of complete blackness is echoed in the disquiet of a dimly lit scene. Concrete forms take on an ambiguous transparency, and we are alerted to a spectral quality of light that, again, haunts our imagination with the power of evocation. In each case – darkness or disquiet – the empirical becomes supernatural. Senses become heightened and we can no longer trust our eyes. We must*

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intuit an instinctive approach to these works, and allow our navigation to be
guided by feelings as much as intellect.\textsuperscript{78}

It may, then, be argued that the concept of darkness offers a chance to lose oneself
in its symbolic mystique. From Goya’s \textit{Sleep Demons}, the fairytales of the Brother’s
Grimm, Hopper’s \textit{Nighthawks} to contemporary artist Martha McDonald’s
employment of Victorian mourning symbolism, black and the shadows of the night
lend themselves to forms of psychological narrative. In tracing a history of this
connection, according to the natural philosopher Pliny, the birth of art was inspired
by a tale of longing and a shadow wherein the physical and metaphysical became
entwined in the form of a crafted object:

\begin{quote}
It was through the service of that same earth that modeling portraits from
clay was first invented by Butades, a potter of Sicyon, at Corinth. He did this
owing to his daughter, who was in love with a young man; and she, when he
was going abroad, drew in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown
by the lamp. Her father pressed clay on this and made a relief, which he
hardened by exposure to fire with the rest of his pottery; and it is said that his
likeness was preserved in the shrine of the Nymphs...

\textit{Pliny, Natural History, xxxv}\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

In this story the tracing of a lover’s shadow becomes a method to preserve memory,
or ‘capture’ a lost love and art becomes a way of facilitating this phenomenon. In a
comparable manner Victorian housewives obsessively wove their lover’s hair into
intricate designs to preserve a memory or create a keepsake, relic or souvenir. Here,
the art object becomes a means to embed materiality with emotion, of animating
and transforming the inanimate through the imagination.

In Chapter Three I move from investigating the symbolic aspects of darkness to focus
upon it as a major theme within my own art practice: exploring the effects of
working with a palette limited largely to black. This chapter deals with the notion of
the obsessional and how the constraints that the term implies might be inverted to

\textsuperscript{78} S. Gregg, \textit{New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art} (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, 2011). p190
create a freedom of expression. In developing themes from Chapter Two, I discuss artworks in terms of their ability to facilitate an emotive or sensorial connectedness. Here, I look to the idea of transforming familiar objects (both crafted and found) as a means to broaden our imaginative connection to the urban environment. The final chapter details the materials and techniques utilised during the Masters project as well as its mode of presentation.

_Dark space envelops me on all sides and penetrates me much deeper than light space, the distinction between inside and outside and consequently the sense organs as well, in so far as they are designed for external perception, here play only a totally modest role._

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Leach, _Camouflage_. Quote from E. Minkowski. p69-70
Of Decadence and Humility

Walking through the streets at night I re-examine the same over-looked aspects that catch my attention during daytime. In darkness, poles of differing heights and thicknesses punctuate the pavement flanked by silhouettes of unfurling organic growth. A dimly lit telephone cross-box has been left slightly ajar to reveal a twisted series of wires, inside of which a hundred invisible late evening exchanges must echo. Bins left out for collection fade into the luminescence of the night sky whilst their street-lit shadows stretch out across the paving stones long and menacingly; mystical butterflies appear in a curious symmetry occurring between backlit porch railings and their shadows. In fact, it is the shadows of the city that strike me most potently, transforming the familiar features of the everyday into curious patterns and anthropomorphic forms that might be from another world. The stage is set for a kind of fairy tale, but not one of times gone by, a fairy tale of the here and now. The soundtrack is of cars swishing by in the rain, the click of traffic lights and the distant giggles and hollers of late night revellers. A tram rattles by and pauses a moment before the guffaws fade away. There is something unnerving in this shift in realities, something brooding or bordering on a sense of the pre-apocalyptic, a warning of
things to come. A passing car highlights the retro-reflective green domes of a cat sitting in my path. A figure steps out from beneath a streetlamp and I shudder then pick up my pace. I have a sudden urge to capture these moments, to freeze them in ink or transform them into sculptural form. My intuition suggests that they are mark-makers of the funereal. The death of the day gives rise to the spirits of the night.

In a series of Saffron Newey’s oil paintings, entitled *Royal Avenue*, snapshots of non-descript shrubbery dominate the artificially lit foreground and are contrasted by the black obscurity of the night. In this way the images are loaded with not only depth but also a psychological tension that author of *New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art*, Simon Gregg, likens to a film still into which we might project a disquieting storyline. The choice of subject matter is relatively banal; the blades of grass or bowing fern leaves depicted could be growing on any familiar street corner. In an uncanny sense the familiarity of this subject matter, perhaps, heightens the work’s uneasy filmic quality. Newey’s paintings have a narrative quality, but one that
she intentionally leaves open-ended to be filled in by the psychological reaction of the viewer, stating:

“[M]y scenes are kind of ‘meanwhiles’, occurring parallel to human activity. I often think about the the ‘unseen’ parts of life and experience.”

In the course of interpreting my own comparably banal nocturnal observations my imagination weaves in a different level of fantasy from that of Newey. The process of metamorphosis from observation to rendition borders on the obsessional and my mind wanders during the repetitive act of rendering dots or applying artificial plants, beads and flock to objects. As part of this process the forms and textures give way to the decorative. Through the creation of this work familiar elements of my urban surroundings begin to allude to an otherness, a kind of parallel existence within the everyday. The shabby decadence that the subject matter deals with is reflected in the choice of materials and flock, for example, contains a long history that alternates between the opulence of Marie-Antoinette’s boudoir and the vulgar chic of a low-budget takeaway restaurant. Whilst flock possesses a velveteen allure it also attracts

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Gregg, New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art. p209
the build up of dust, connoting a grimy form of glamour. Reducing the colour palette to black seems a fitting way to frame the work, not only in drawing together arbitrary elements but also for its symbolic and transformative value.

In transforming the representational into the decorative the work dances between fantasy and reality. In its extreme this play might have echoes in the Rococo or the decadent aesthetic of J.K. Huysman’s eccentric dandy, Des Esseintes, in the 19th century novel Against Nature. A consummate aesthete, on a mission to escape the ennui of metropolitan living, Des Esseintes immerses himself in world of aesthetic indulgence. In a poignant example of his antics the symbolism of blackness meets with an epicurian taste and he organises a funereal themed dinner party to celebrate the temporary loss of his virility:

*The Black-draped dining-room where he gave his dinner opened onto the garden, which had been transformed overnight, its paths sprinkled with charcoal, its little pond now rimmed with basalt and filled with ink, its shrubbery planted with cypresses and pines. The meal was served on a black tablecloth decorated with baskets of scabies and violets, and lit by green-flaming candelabras and by chandeliers in which tapers burned. While a concealed orchestra played funeral marches, the guests were waited on by naked black women, wearing stockings and slippers of silver cloth sprinkled with tears.*

This highly aestheticized scene has acted as a source of inspiration for me to coat carefully selected objects with a velvety black flocked richness; reflecting the macabre of the funereal as well as resonating with the silken sensation of applying wet ink to the smooth surface of paper experienced through my drawing process. However, before the work disappears into a world of indulgence and excess the decadence subsides into the banal nature of the subject matter. Whilst immodestly celebrating aspects of the overlooked I in no way wish to negate or disguise the less opulent origins of the source material. The colour black acts as the ideal mediator between these two worlds as its inherent symbolic ability to embrace opposites

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82 Huysmans, *Against Nature*. p12
embodies my dialectical approach to creating artwork.
In Michel Pastoureau’s *Black: The History of a Color* we are taken on an exhaustive historical journey relating to the symbolism, historical and historiographical use of the colour black in art and design. We have established that black has long-standing associations with death, the night, the occult and the enigmatic. In Egyptian times it was perceived as the colour of the earth and symbolic of both death and re-birth. The Greek God, Hades, was master of the Underworld a place wrapped in *Erebos* (darkness) and the Goddess of the night, Nyx, was representative of “*sleep, dreams, anguish, secrets, discord, distress, old age, misfortune and death*”. Such associations have penetrated throughout history in both art and literature and the colour black has become synonymous with a kind of other worldliness that might act as a porthole from the familiar to the strange. Weaving this idea into the presentation of my work I gesture towards an underlying uneasiness made manifest by ‘incidental’ nature that creeps in through the crevices of our architectural surrounds.

*lovely oblivion*

![Image](image1)

![Image](image2)

![Image](image3)

![Image](image4)

**fig.29** Helen Nodding, *Shadows*, (installation details), 2012

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The Art of Death

Black as the colour of mourning is said to have originated in Roman times when it was thought that it would prevent the bereaved from being haunted by the ghosts of the deceased. The idea was transformed and popularized in the Victorian era when specific dress codes were adhered to for two-years as a sign of respect that reflected the somberness of death. The Victorian mourning period was steeped in elaborate codes, rituals and related paraphernalia that the artist Martha McDonald revisited at her exhibition at the Linden Centre for Contemporary Art in 2009, *The Further the Distance, the Tighter the Knot*. Filling the space with black *memento mori* and undertaking repetitious craft activities popular with Victorian women in mourning, Mcdonald interwove performance, craft, design and sculpture to explore her own sense of isolation and nostalgia when finding herself homesick and far away from her roots in America.

*Sing folk laments about lost loves and longing for home, I knit and unraveled love tokens for the audience as polite Victorian mourning customs gave way to more cathartic expressions of loss.*

Figure 30. Martha McDonald, *The Further the Distance, the Tighter the Knot*, 2009

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84 “The Further the Distance, the Tighter the Knot was a performance installation that used Victorian mourning rituals, Old Time American folk songs and knitting to explore my longing for home as a recent transplant to Australia.”


The material production of my own artwork tends to be involved, repetitive and labour intensive. Although firmly embedded in a Fine Art practice its fabrication is very much aligned with craft activity in this respect.\(^\text{86}\) The intimate and obsessive nature of craftwork is often associated with a form of female expression or, indeed, repression. It could be argued that the Victorian’s married together an idea of grief and obsessional duty that found artistic form in ritual and labour-intensive craft.

Over the ages countless women have buried their thoughts and minds in the repetition of, for example, the potentially Freudian action of threading a needle in and out of a canvas. By example, the tragic figure of Mary Queen of Scots, rival to the throne of Elizabeth I, was well known for undertaking needlework for its calming and meditative properties in the face of adversity:

*Mary herself was a clever needlewoman and worked much of her heartache, at the neglect of her Spanish husband, into her needlework... During her married life in France she learned the gentle arts of embroidery and lace-making, accomplishments which, as in many humbler women's lives, have served their owners in good stead in times of loneliness and trouble.*\(^\text{87}\)

In another way repetitive creative activity might be seen as a means to block, rather than dwell upon emotionally stressful situations. As professional knitter Aneeta Patel relates:

*When I'm knitting, I tend to blank out the world and my worries. There's something about the repetitive nature of the movements that I can liken to*

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\(^\text{86}\) Examples within this field include the emergence of feminist groups in the form of *Craftivity* and Turner Prize winning artists Grayson Perry and Tracey Emin: “Emin employs the lightness of traditional 'women's crafts', like sewing, to explore what Bourgeois classed as the 'volcanic unconscious' which we only ever encounter in parts: 'That's why I use a lot of embroidery,’ Emin explains. ‘I take this craft but I don't treat it like a craft, but like high art.’” A. Akbar, 'Tracy Emin: Craft Work', <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/tracey-emin-craft-work-2004036.html>, accessed 1/09 2012.

meditation. I used to only zone out like that when I was reading, but sometimes the feeling is the same when I'm knitting.  

Thus the conscious and unconscious might find a meeting place in the products of repetitive creative activity. We might, then, see such artworks as forms of transitional objects, in being a material product that forms a connection between internal and external reality via the agency of a sensorial motor activity. The creative output of my own art practice might also be considered as a form of souvenir, both of an invisible thought process through the time of observation and fabrication, as well as being a memento of the objects or scenes represented. In the manner of the souvenir there is a metaphorical space left for viewers to imbue an imaginative connectivity within the object. In effect, the artwork only operates successfully at the level of audience engagement: in this case the imaginative engagement would ideally be activated within the subject on a street-level.

The souvenir replica is an illusion and not a mode; it comes after the fact and remains both partial to and more expansive than the fact. It will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth with regard to those origins.

In The Hare with Amber Eyes, Edmund de Waal inherits a collection of Japanese netsuke that last belonged to his Uncle Iggie. Iggie had tantalised him with tales of the collections rich heritage via the diaspora of Edmund’s aristocratic family across Europe and to Japan. Setting out upon a mission to trace the objects’ journey, from their first acquisition by a distant relative, we experience the ways in which the impact of an inanimate object may extend far beyond its physical existence. De Waal’s discoveries illustrate the ways in which an artwork may become a repository for meaning, hidden histories and memories that become closely intertwined with their physical fabric. While the object exists it holds metaphysical imprints of the

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89 Wherein a body of knowledge is mediated by sensory motor activity and a material product/object acts as a meeting point for abstract and sensory thought.
past, present and future in the form of its physical surrounds as well as those whom have come into its contact.

I want to know what the relationship has been between this wooden object that I am rolling between my fingers – hard and tricky and Japanese – and where it has been. I want to be able to reach the handle of the door and turn it and feel it open. I want to walk into each room where this object has lived, to feel the volume of the space, to know what pictures were on the walls, how the light fell from the windows. And I want to know whose hands it had been in, and what they felt about it and thought about it – if they thought about it. I want to know what it has witnessed.

There is a great scope within overlooked aspects of the everyday to offer a comparable freedom to imply, invent and uncover new layers of meaning. In this way the sculptures and drawings presented for my MFA final exhibition might act as forms of souvenirs, albeit imaginary ones, to a parallel universe that has undergone a number of transformations: material, fantasy, decorative, physical and artificial. Animated through the creation process they remain static and frozen until re-populated and brought to life by the beholder for whom they might trigger or inspire new associations and memories.

The fabric of the artworks produced during this period of research also act as repositories of meanings for unspoken personal histories and memories embedded during their material production. While the sense of these stories may or may not become apparent to the viewer, the intensity involved in the artworks production should be clear. In investing such apparently banal subject matter with such care I hope to embed these representations of over-looked aspects of my urban surrounds in the mind of the viewer, in a way that might encourage him/her to engage with and view comparable phenomena on a street level in a new light.

The literary and artistic examples cited in this chapter demonstrate the potential of the materiality of objects to conjure an atmospheric quality in differing ways based in non-linear narrative structure. In characterizing the multitude of possibilities for

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provoking an imaginative connectivity to the everyday fabric and furnishings of our urban surrounds, I hope to have contextualised my own art practice within a rich framework and history.

and still, among it all, snatches of lovely oblivion

fig.30 Helen Nodding, Shadows, (installation view), 2012
Conclusion

Throughout the MFA project my aesthetic experience of the city has become embedded with personal narratives and symbolism. Just as the banal setting of David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* is injected with symbolic significance, so my work seeks to elevate the viewer’s experience of overlooked aspects of our everyday urban surrounds. In considering the city as a kind of stage set I propose that its fabric and textures offer a tangible surface to which we might emotively connect.

*Into all this complexity, Milford Junction enters as a poetic image. Its passing trains have the rush and power of passion, its platforms and subways the loneliness of waiting lovers, its local trains jerk and shunt with their faithful service of routine domesticity.*

Pastoreau describes how dark places such as caves and grottoes are often fecund with a life force; they are the birthplace of gods and goddesses, sites for metamorphoses and early human worship, as well as being the rest place of dark forces, dragons and evil spirits. My research deals with largely disregarded aspects of the city: its nooks and crannies, street architecture, dark corners, alleyways and the ‘incidental’ nature that decorates and proliferates around and within them. Such sites are less dramatic than those of Pastoureau’s historical mythmaking, but comparable in their ability to act as localities for imaginative potential and transformation.

Influenced by the psychological effects of the changing light of day, the research has sought to uncover an enchanted city that lies within, seemingly, mundane aspects of the everyday. In refining the scope of my practice I situate it within a field that draws focus upon aspects of urban nature and decay as a means to critique or imaginatively engage with the city. Within the landscape of the ‘Post Industrial Romantic’ I propose that urban nature becomes a springboard for reflection with the potential to effect our perception of public space.

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92 Coward, *Brief Encounter*. p8
The model of the Situationist’s dérive, as well as Benjamin’s textual reading of the city find strong influence within this project. In line with J.R.R. Tolkein and Ernst Bloch’s theories on fairy tales and daydreaming the research proposes that, in viewing the material of the urban environment as a visual language and seeing aesthetic potential in the unexpected, we might envisage a future utopia, dystopia or uncover a symbolically injected universe that exists in the minute detail of the city’s skin.

Referring to the feminist theory of Rosalind Galt I have established ways in which ‘the decorative’ might elicit or reflect emotional expression. Applying this notion to the aesthetic experience of the decorative qualities within ‘incidental’ urban nature facilitates, I suggest, the possibility of a level of psychological engagement. In this way we might inscribe the surface details of our everyday surrounds with layers of cultural and personal meaning.

In investigating the symbolic aspects of the colour black and its transformative qualities I have informed my choice to work with a monochromatic palette. Using the work of Martha McDonald as an example, I have also expanded upon the concept that the material production of an artwork might facilitate an emotive or sensorial connection between the subject, maker and viewer. In the manner of a souvenir an artwork might become a repository of meaning and, in this way, imaginatively extend beyond its physical presence in the gallery.

In commencing the project I sought to ‘bring the outside in’ in such a way that might expand the resonance of the artwork beyond the gallery and back into the viewer’s experience at street level. The resolution I have arrived at is presented in the final exhibition. Within this display the works are curated as a form of three-dimensional storybook, wherein the text suggests an organic transformation upon the walls.

Weaving together the themes explored throughout my research, the final exhibition takes the form of a journey through overlooked material and physical aspects of the city. Detailed observational drawings are brought to life in a sculptural installation that embraces andembellishes decorative aspects of urban nature and the fabric of the city. The theme of darkness, as well as ‘incidentally’ placed nature within the
architecture of the gallery space, hint at a form of manifest repression that is reflected in the material production of the works on display. Whilst an overall narrative remains inexplicit I seek, rather, to provide a mechanism of sensorial connectivity, promoting a level of engagement by which our habitual relationship to the urban environment may be reviewed.

In conclusion, the research undertaken during my MFA candidature at VCA demonstrates how a simple shift in perspective holds the potential to ‘re-enchant’ our everyday experience of the urban environment. The results of this two-year journey offer one unique viewpoint in a rich history of alternatives.
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Appendices

Building upon an existing practice in Urban Intervention established prior to the MFA project, during the course of my studies I have created a series of works in and about the city. These street-based works take the form of miniature installations, collected short stories as well as creating memory plaques that insert personalised experiences into otherwise non-descript spaces. In this way I create a series of poetic 'interruptions' that might puncture our habitual relationship with the urban environment and facilitate a more creative engagement for those passersby that happen to notice them. Presenting these site-specific works on a website (http://www.storiesfromspace.co.uk) I promote the idea that the cracks and crevices of urban decay are potential sites for storytelling.

Although the following examples are not presented for examination I feel that their inclusion in this paper is important in highlighting the broader context of my research over the two-year MFA programme.
An illustrated guide to the city

Ideas, interventions, observations and memories
Catching a tram to the city, my reading was disturbed by an elderly couple bickering. Upon realizing that the young man they had asked to move had a broken leg, they were taking it in turns to blame one another for the over-sight. The young man introduced himself as Paul. He told them not to worry as someone else more able would surely stand so that they all sit down – hint, hint, uncomfortable shuffle and two nearby seats reluctantly became available. Now the three all relaxed and Wilma introduced herself and Oliver (Olly) properly to Paul. Wilma quickly let Paul know that herself and Olly were not a couple, despite the way it may seem. In fact they had just been good friends for years (‘years and years’, she emphasized). Both Wilma and Olly had been born in Melbourne and Wilma was extremely proud that no-one believed her when she gave her age away as being 79:

‘I tell them, if you don’t believe me you can check my birth certificate. I don’t believe that my Mother made a mistake when she wrote down 1933 as the year that I was born! Mind you, you’d have trouble finding her to ask’.

Wilma went on to tell Paul that her family had come over to England where three of her siblings had been born. She had been born and raised in Melbourne though and she’d never been to the UK:

‘Who could afford that?!’.

At this point Olly interrupted and stated that, unlike Wilma, he had travelled - including a month in America where he’d been ‘all over’.

‘How did you afford that?’ asked an exasperated Wilma.

‘My family sent me a cheque didn’t they?’ Olly replied.

‘Lucky it didn’t bounce. I’d never accept a cheque as they often bounce. I tell them ‘cash only for me thank you’. Anyway, how did you break your leg?’ Wilma was clearly keen to turn the conversation away from her companion and back to the young man.

Paul told Wilma that he had jumped off a building to which she shrugged and responded:

‘Well that’s what you get for jumping off a building. I’ve broken my arm more times than you’d care to know. Haven’t I Olly? Haven’t I?’

‘She has.’ Olly acknowledged.

The discussion then turned to the Queen of England who, according to Wilma, had lost her father in her twenties. Then, she sadly told Paul that they had been to a friend’s funeral the day before. I didn’t catch the deceased gentleman’s name but there was some dispute as to whether he was 100 or 110. Apparently he had taken this tram into town each day before walking around the city for a couple of hours and then taking it back home again. He had followed this routine religiously until the day that he died. They both agreed that they would miss their friend terribly and that he had been a great chap, with friends everywhere.

Looking up, I realized that I had reached my stop but was reluctant to get off and miss any more stories. Then Wilma announced that it was their stop next anyway, so I gathered my things and alighted.
On a walk through the city my friend discovered that a swarm of bees had landed on the back of an expensive-looking motorbike:

‘It was as if the bees were attacking capitalism itself,’ she asserted with a smile, before adding ‘you would have felt quite inspired, I’m sure.’
Magnetic graffiti
The revolution is happening right beneath your feet.
Staring out of the my studio window across to the Botanical Gardens I became curious to learn the species of the trees that lined the road that stood between. On a whim I made a call to the city council and was transferred to one of their park keepers. ‘There are only two types of trees on St Kilda Road’, I was told confidently, ‘London Planes or Elm trees’.

‘But I’ve noticed a number of different types of leaves’, I probed, ‘what about the ones that are kind of pronged-like with little fingers?’

‘An Elm species’.

‘How about the smaller oval ones with the serrated edges?’

‘Elm, maybe an exotic Elm, I’d have to see them to be sure’.

‘And the...’

‘All Elm, except for the London Plane’.

I couldn’t help thinking of Monty Python’s Larch tree sketch. Surely a sneaky Larch sapling could have prized its way in amongst the Planes and the Elms? The park keeper wouldn’t think so.
Place rhinestones in cracks in the concrete
Miniature worlds in the city
I once sat on a bench next to a lake in the Botanical Gardens feeling the saddest and most homesick that I had ever felt. It was taking every bit of energy that I had to stare at the words on the page of my book, so as not to break down into a sobbing mess. Suddenly a huge splash distracted me. Looking up and across to the other side of the lake a very drunk man had jumped in fully clothed. His companions were falling about in hysterics. I laughed out loud. It felt good. I went home.
Please do NOT pick the weeds