

USER- PERMUTATIONS: SPACE, PLACE AND MEANING IN THE PAINTINGS OF JAKE WALKER

Felix Ratcliff

Globalisation – despite its seemingly all-encompassing nomenclature – may be more properly understood as a series of local effects played out and experienced on a range of socio-cultural levels. Evidence of this challenging process and dynamic is, arguably, perhaps nowhere more plainly visible than in the sphere of the contemporary visual arts.

At this current historical juncture, that sphere appears predominated by a process-heavy, academically informed conceptualism that privileges text-book identity-politics over form, and cerebral processes over material strategies. In almost all 'corners of the globe', a research-driven orthodoxy which begrudgingly privileges visual skill and breadth of vision dominates the trans-national circulation and exchange of images, ideas and ideologies.

Within this contemporary cultural climate and marketplace, the very practice of painting arguably becomes a palpable form of identity-politics itself. This becomes particularly apparent when such a purportedly obsolete medium is employed as an archaeological tool to assist the excavation and exploration of the traces of one's formative years, family history and broader cultural sources – art history and personal narratives alike.

Such is the current project of expatriate New Zealand painter Jake Walker, whose recent works find him revisiting and referencing his own generative sources and pivotal periods of personal and artistic development on both sides of the Tasman Sea.

Over recent years Walker has focused broadly on painted works based on the architecture produced by his father, Roger Walker, but has more recently and intensely re-explored the interiors of another architect's work. In particular, Walker has focused on *Athfield House* – a fascinating structure situated in Wellington on New Zealand's North Island – at one time physically inhabited by Walker as a child, and psychologically inhabited by him thereafter. Designed and built several decades ago by once reviled and now revered New Zealand architect Ian Athfield, *Athfield House* – like Walker's contemporary painting oeuvre – is a highly nuanced series of spatial arrangements and configurations that has developed via the vigorous exploration, reformulation and mining of rich veins of source material.

Like Athfield's approach to the built environment, Walker doesn't simply layer the physical supports upon which he builds his curious and beguiling images so much as he *customises* his surfaces, source materials, cultural expectations and extant artistic conventions. By this I mean that historically emergent genres and traditionally accepted symbol systems alike are materially reshaped, re-combined and fluidly melded to suit each artist's own conceptual designs and intentions.

Structures such as *Athfield House* represent Athfield's idiosyncratic synthesis of the functional requirements of Wellington's meteorological specificities and the generational struggles between traditional and experimental architectural practices extant still in the New Zealand capital. His early domestic works in that city graphically constitute a bold regional response to local conditions with their muscular functionalism being playfully softened and rounded with visual humour as well as through the twin lenses of modernism and vernacular tradition.

Similarly, Walker's paintings share integrated lexicons rich in allusion and illusion, with spatial exploration also being his forte. For one enthusiastic commentator, Athfield houses: "surprise close-to, they surprise inside and they continue to surprise as you poke around exploring all the nooks and crannies."¹ So too the painted works of



Figure 1: Jake Walker, *Athfield Interior 1, Version 2*, watercolour on paper, 42 x 59.5cm, 2008 (courtesy of the artist).



Figure 2: Jake Walker, *NZ*, watercolour on paper, 42cm x 59.5cm, 2007(courtesy of the artist).

Walker, irrespective of their ostensible subject matter.

In one sense, the work of both Walker and Athfield – in particular the earnest manner in which the former engages with the latter – may be fairly regarded as proof of Juhani Pallasmaa's contention in *The Eyes of the Skin* (2005) that: "Our domicile is the refuge of our body, memory and identity." We cannot separate, – Pallasmaa insists – "the image of the Self from its spatial and situational existence."²

Here Pallasmaa echoes Gaston Bachelard (1964/1994) who wrote that: "Our soul is an abode. And by remembering 'houses' and 'rooms', we learn to abide within ourselves."³ Nostalgia for our early generative and formative environments – contended Bachelard – is a crucial and continuing shaper of identity throughout the life journey and strongly impacts on our choice of shelter and home and our psychological responses to the same.

No simple renderings of an obsessed or disturbed fan however, Walker's paintings of familiar interiors – replete with multi-layered associations and hidden codes – function similarly to the canvases of the late Francis Bacon: prepared surfaces that Michel Leiris (1988) has defined as "a theatre of operations for the assertion of certain realities".⁴

Thus, in Walker's renderings of interiors from *Athfield House* such as *Athfield Interior 1, Version 2* (Figure 1), the curved interiors depicted and the composition itself operates as a proscenium arch functions in the theatre: as both a window to a stage and as a structural barrier and metaphorical threshold simultaneously separating the audience/viewer from the drama and/or action being physically and psychologically acted out.

This psychological element is heightened when, after closer examination of his painted interiors, subtle anthropomorphic elements become visible in Walker's compositional structures. A keen eye may thus recognise the subtle selection and arrangement of architectonic elements which, when taken collectively, suggest faces such as those one might variously identify or discover in knots of timber or the grain of finished wood. Given the history behind these interiors, it would not be stretching the metaphor to describe the various visages discernible as being redolent of theatrical masks used throughout history to represent conflicting human emotional states.

In these deliberately staged and re-costumed – yet no less authentic – compositions, Walker retreads the bricks and boards of his middle childhood and – in a revisionist mode – populates, decorates, and augments walls and interiors with miniature representations of his own recent works. Via a historically informed personal lexicon of painted marks, Walker both signals and affirms his ongoing presence in, and relationship with, such resonant spaces.

Given the photographic provenance of much of his source imagery, and via a tripartite process of revisitation, reinvestment and re-inscription, we as viewers are presented with multilayered and value-added mnemonics: images of images with additional images added – all intended to be regarded afresh.

In this and other recent works Walker places himself and his contemporary vision and practice into the very cultural and environmental contexts he physically inhabited and resided in many decades before. Literally 'making a name for himself', Walker re-writes himself into and onto the planes, spaces and structures that were home to childhood and adolescent pantheons of significant artists and architects – shapers, modifiers and alchemists of space, place and meaning alike.

Despite the ongoing importance of specifically New Zealand sources to his work, Walker wears his expatriate heart less overtly on his sleeve than some of his fellow artistic travellers. Rather than casting himself as a cultural nationalist, Walker continues to draw heavily on Pakehā and received traditions whilst remaining strongly interested in the manner in which mid-to-late twentieth-century modernism was and continues to be received in New Zealand and elsewhere.

Even *NZ* (Figure 2) – one of Walker's many text-based works – with its overt allusion to place and nation – similar states of mind – is a distillation and continuation of many earlier works that utilise a hand-drawn and multi-sized dot scheme to create overlapping graphic spheres that, when seen together, spell out all manner of phrases that bear a personal relationship to the artist or that have become important to him. Many of these, as in the given example,

are highly evocative even to those unfamiliar with their natural referents.

In a period of ceaseless circulation and seemingly rudderless navigation where firm understandings of personal and cultural identity become increasingly uncertain amidst the relentless process of globalisation, Walker's works are both personal and cultural anchors. Rich in elegiac qualities, they also simultaneously perform a dual function for both the artist and his audience as contemporary records of both 'then' and 'now'.

In keeping then with the temporal aspects of the current historical epoch, the dominant dynamic at work and omnipresent in Walker's work – like that of globalisation itself – is one of time and space telescoped, compressed and then re-released with subtle shifts and wilful distortions – not unlike the process of memory-retention and recall itself. Within such a context, Walker's images function personally and culturally as powerful sites of re-engagement with, and sublimation for, the loss of a now – in the temporal sense – fugitive past.

Rather than being elements of a romanticised backward-looking project of evasion however, Walker's recent works powerfully acknowledge loss and the inexorable pull of a present and future over which one can never have complete control. Faced with the increasingly contingent, anonymous, mono-cultural spaces of globalisation however, Walker offers up instead idiosyncratic memory-spaces built on a rich armature of historical specificity.

Felix Ratcliff is a Tasmanian-born, Sydney-based writer and curator with no institutional affiliations.

- 1 Melling, Gerald, *Joyful Architecture: The Genius of New Zealand's Ian Athfield* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Caveman Press, 1980), 30.
- 2 Pallasmaa Juhani, *The Eyes Of The Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 64.
- 3 Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964/1994), xxxvii.
- 4 Leiris, Michel, *Francis Bacon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 6.