

## The Generous Deceit

by Dr Greer Crawley

Among the array of models in Romantic visionary, architect and perspective artist Joseph Michael Gandy's (1771-1843) famous painting *Various Designs for Public and Private Buildings Executed by Sir John Soane between 1780 and 1815* there is one depiction of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, the space to which Mariele Neudecker's work responds. Architectural historian Robert Harbison writes how the models depicted in the painting 'invite imaginary perambulations [...] creating a phantasmagoric experience: the spatial arc, which requires travel, has been internalized.'<sup>1</sup>

A similar invitation is extended by the microcosmos of Neudecker's tank work. Both models project a constructed narrative of sublime continuity multiplied infinitely. 'Turn which way you will, the same object still seems to continue, and the imagination has no rest.'<sup>2</sup>

The conceptual starting point for Mariele Neudecker's *And Then The World Changed Colour: Breathing Yellow* is its position and framing within the Dulwich galleries. The type of environment in which Neudecker chooses to place her pieces is essential to their meaning. The tank work acts as a focus. It defines the space around as well as within it. It exists not only in itself but in its context. By opening up a dialogue with the mausoleum, Neudecker is exploring the perceptual instabilities inherent in staging the sublime.

Among the central elements of the sublime described by Edmund Burke in his 1747 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* are 'obscurity' and 'privation', silence and solitude, indistinctness, incompleteness, darkness and deprivation. However, while Burke believes that 'darkness is more productive of Sublime ideas than light' he suggests that '[e]xtreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness. After looking for some time at the sun, two black spots, the impression which it leaves, seem to dance before our eyes. Thus, are two ideas as opposite as can be imagined reconciled in the extremes of both; and both, in spite of their opposite nature, brought to concur in producing the sublime.'

These sublime effects are materialised at Dulwich. In the picture galleries and mausoleum, we see how, through the play of light, Sir John Soane used dramaturgical effects to create a transcendental sublimity - a 'Lumière Mystérieuse'<sup>3</sup> that is central to the visitor's

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Harbison, *Thirteen Ways* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), p.85.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* Part II, 1757, p. 150 [www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm) - A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

<sup>3</sup> Soane's use of hidden light sources and tinted glass was influenced by the experiments being made by French architects. In Lecture VII he noted that 'The lumière mystérieuse, so successfully practised by the French Artist, is a most powerful agent in the hands of a man of genius, and its power cannot be too fully understood, nor

experience. Author and architect Calum Storrie in *The Delirious Museum* describes how, as the visitor moves from one wing of the gallery to the other across the short axis through the mausoleum, 'there at the periphery of one's vision is the suffused yellow light of the tomb, creating a kind of persistent cerebral after-image'<sup>4</sup>

Neudecker's tank work is a concentrated, charged version of Soane's luminous effects that echoes the ambient atmospherics within the mausoleum. The artist like the architect has experimented with different filters and the optical effects of refraction, reflection and projection. While their media varies from tinted glass and masonry to chemicals and fluids, the emphasis remains on the materiality of light to produce sensations 'of wildness and even of surprise and wonder'.<sup>5</sup>

Both Soane and Neudecker manipulate visibility through physical and visual screening. They have created compositions formed of tightly controlled vistas and prospects. We view the galleries through Soane's sectional cuts and the scene within the tank through slices of an external landscape. Neudecker explains how her representations of vast landscapes are framed and cropped by lenses, or narrowed by cones of light. 'I have made work in the past where sightlines through architectural spaces, windows and doorframes crop images. I like to set up sculptural scenarios where the images are limited in access and thereby I'd emphasize the restricted view from the outset - the vast black space only gets partially revealed in shafts of artificial light.'

These allusions to the limitation and threshold of vision appear frequently in her installations. In *There are Unknown Unknowns* [2012], two images of the inside of the eye are placed side by side on the wall, and in *In 400 Thousand Generations* [2009] a reference to the evolutionary development of the photosensitive tissue of the human eye, there are two large liquid filled eye-like glass spherical tanks. Scientific and medical studies into the physical and perceptual operations of the eye also informed Soane's interest in optics which was both personal and aesthetic. He had become particularly sensitive to light and the lack of light as his eyesight was failing and he was to undergo eye surgery in 1825.

Both building and tank work embody visual experience. The scenic perspectives constantly shift as perceptual and physical transitions are made between the space, the tank, and the light. This engagement with the tank and mausoleum is compelling. We come to understand each through the experience of the other. Our perception of the temperature, the sound, the smell inside the painting and tank is informed by our sensual and physical experience of the atmospherics in the mausoleum. In the Burkean sublime, the dramatic and dynamic conditions of climate and weather contributed to the architecture of sensations and at Dulwich, Soane used both artificial and natural means to create a 'poetics of weather' where 'the visitor passes from warm, quiet rooms with timber floors, rich red walls and an even light to echoes, pale stone surfaces, chilled air, defined shadows and an amber glow.'<sup>6</sup>

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too highly appreciated.' Arthur T. Bolton (ed.), *Sir John Soane Lectures on Architecture* (London: Sir John Soane's Museum, 1929), p.126.

<sup>4</sup> Calum Storrie, *The Delirious Museum* (London: I.B. Taurus, London, 2006), p.123.

<sup>5</sup> Bolton (ed.), *Sir John Soane, Lectures on Architecture*. p.114.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Hill, *Weather Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.139.

The scale of the mausoleum like that of the tank work is small but the dramatic play of light and shadow create the illusion of greater depth and perspective. Burke referred to this effect as the 'artificial infinite' observing that 'the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so'.<sup>7</sup> This 'generous deceit' was for Burke the sign of a true artistic imagination.

There are affinities between Dulwich, the tank work and the experiential dimensions and scenographic effects of the diorama. In Soane's mausoleum and picture gallery and Neudecker's tank work, the visitor wanders through a collection of images and impressions making an imaginative journey through a staged environment. Soane and Neudecker aim to create experience by means of the *mise en scène*. The tank work and the galleries are similar in their construction of reality and in their carefully choreographed and crafted presentations. Soane and Neudecker's works have been noted for their references to illusion, artificiality, and the simulacrum. Neither attempts to hide the mechanics of their illusions but wants us to see how they are created. Soane deliberately chose faux marble for the tombs and pillars in the mausoleum and designed external fake doors and, above them, small false sarcophagi. Subsequently, various extensions were made to Soane's original building and then most of the gallery and mausoleum were destroyed by a bomb in 1944 and have been reconstructed.

In both tank work and building, all possible scenic effects have been used to construct a convincing reality but at the same time offer both the illusion and the failure of such an illusion.

Neudecker's work questions the relationship between reality and representation, between what we see and what we want to believe. Her works are fictional, constructed and staged and like Soane, the artist is in control of the level of constructed authenticity. She has said how she seeks 'to penetrate the surface of expectation, to generate interference in our perception'.

Through suggestion, semblances, and simulacra, Neudecker and Soane remind us of the deficiencies in perception. They show us that everything is provisional, changeable and dependent on experience; that there is no single explanation, only interpretation. In the tank, as in nature, there is a continual temporal redefinition. This event-filled space is layered through with the physicality of time visualised by chemical processes. In her tank, things are happening; the landscape is in flux. The trees in the tank form a still life that is still alive, or rather slowly moving and kept in suspension between life and death.

Burke believed that sensory experience and perceptions could be derived from the 'great and sublime' in nature; 'the darkest woods', and 'the shade of the oldest and most spreading oaks' or 'any of the robust trees of the forest'.<sup>8</sup> These associations made between the qualities of landscape with architecture informed Soane's own aesthetics and in one of his lectures on architecture he noted that 'pious men of deep reflexion and superior

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<sup>7</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* Part II, 1757, p. 149 [www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm) - A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* Part III, 1757, p. 196 [www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15043/15043-h/15043-h.htm) - A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

science, warmed by the contemplation of awe-inspiring effects produced by the varied play of lights, and the deep tones of the various shadows in groves of trees, were tempted to realise these scenes of Nature in buildings of stone'.<sup>9</sup>

It has been remarked how Soane was able to synthesize in his work 'the notion of site as landscape [...] a field condition in which movement and flow are central and tied to a kinematic subject and a space of effects (atmospheres and moods)' the 'relationships between legacy and history' and 'the connections between history, theory and design practice'.<sup>10</sup>

Neudecker, like Soane, interrogates historic and contemporary political and cultural narratives through her work. Her landscapes, like his buildings, are charged with history and ideas that cut deep into our consciousness. We become implicit in identifying and generating meaning. As we surrender to the illusions we engage in something that is authentic and experiential. Readings that represent memories and experiences of landscapes both real and not real are activated.

The artist has described how underpinning her work is a desire to challenge and undermine predominantly Northern European Romantic preconceptions of landscape. It is a perspective on romanticism and the contemporary sublime that requires its aesthetics, authenticity and ambiguities to be continuously re-addressed and re-defined.

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<sup>9</sup> Bolton (ed.) *Sir John Soane, Lectures on Architecture*, p. 80

<sup>10</sup> Helene Furján, *Glorious Visions John Soane's Spectacular Theatre*, (London: Routledge, 2011)