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Review: Low Tide Wandering, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester

Posted on 24th June 2015 by James Schofield

Text by Andy Broadey.

We all remember where we were when some world events happened. As news of them arrives we pause, listen, and then continue with our lives, knowing that the event will impact us, somehow. Images of the burning World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001 have become fixed in our collective memory in this way, and they have subsequently become the subject matter of several artworks, such as Hans Peter Feldman's '9/12 Frontpage' (2001), William Basinski's 'Disintegration Loops' (2002) and Gerhard Richter's 'September' (2005). Thomas Schütte's 'Low Tide Wandering' (2001) also addresses 9/11, though it does so obliquely, in series of prints that observe the artist's surroundings, domestic life, imaginings and exposure to the media.

The work is currently on display in Manchester's Whitworth Gallery, which re-opened this Spring after a major extension. It is part of an ambitious programme that includes installations by Sarah Lucas and Cai Quo-Qiang.

Throughout Schütte's oeuvre the activity of imagining has mingled with the notion of the proposal. These ideas inform the artist's architectural models that use archetypes of the built environment to propose fantastical buildings. The print series 'Architectural Models' (1980 – 2006) presents some of these proposals in the form of preparatory sketches, such as a 'Holiday Home for a Terrorist' and 'Hotel for the Birds'. Following on from these works 'Low Tide Wandering' merges the function of sketching with a democratic approach to observation. The set of 139 etchings, produced throughout 2001, take the form of visual notation, have a diaristic quality and operate as provisional reflections. This approach also informs the title, which suggests a state of mind at low ebb, where the onset of sleep washes up scattered imaginings. The arrangement of these etchings, crisscrossed at head height on steel wires in a first floor gallery, also promotes actual wandering.

The work addresses diverse and largely ephemeral subjects that are linked more by contextual association than an overarching theme. The etchings show views across the sands at Friesland in Germany, portraits of friends, pictures of home life, images captured from television and computer screens, imaginary animals, and porn, yet throughout the installation is haunted by references to 9/11. In one print two rectangles stand one behind the other on a horizon line, under which is written the words 'HOLY SHIT'. In another the words ground zero are carved into the visual noise of a television left running after hours. One print that features a roughly scribbled figure standing next to the word 'Geist', parodies visions of mankind produced by 19th Century German philosophy. Adjacent to this is a print of a nuclear explosion accompanied by the word 'Ghost'. Image and word plays intersect between prints and associations stack up. Wherever you look images interact. Different frames of interpretation are offered up by different navigational routes; though however it is encountered the work is consistent in its claim that everyday life and world events allegorise one another.

Individually the prints are slight. They largely address ephemeral situations and trivial subjects, offering only provisional observations. Yet when they are arranged into an

installation these observations pile up, one after another, and carry the weight of an unfolding pattern of experience interspersed by awareness that a disaster is happening elsewhere.

Andy Broadey is an artist based in Manchester.

Installation image courtesy of Whitworth Art Gallery.

Low Tide Wandering, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.

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