

Tourist Interface - by Padraig Timoney

Eamon O'Kane's Tourist Interface looks set up as an examination of surroundings- both his own negotiation of particular surroundings, (a whistle-stop tour of fourteen states of America), and a supply of visual information relating to his journey which implicates viewers into a similar relationship with what is presented. Tourist Interface is certainly a lot to look at. The images are heaped up like ham and eggs, pancakes and syrup, free refills of coffee. O'Kane, having presented himself with America, presents us with series of photographic visuals culled from an enormous source of images taken there. His itinerary is planned, and therefore his surroundings at any minute are expected to be new, but then unfurl themselves in their particularity as constant stimulants. This is pretty much what we meet too. Encapsulated within someone else's voyage, some carefully selected particulars dislodge themselves from the generality of their framing and allow us to examine how they exemplify the difficulties of adequately representing an experience.

Our own version of the reality which surrounds us everyday is fictional- taking sensory processing as representation, as being fundamentally of a different order from what prompts it, then our idea of reality is based on this first operation. Which is always going to give an indication of surrounding as codified. Any notation of experienced reality is precisely that- notation, like a score in music, a symbolic shorthand allowing the reconstruction of an original, but no more than what the information is capable of. It is the exercise of the score which prompts additional impulses in whoever hears it. Complete in itself, the reconstructive information can be arranged to skim the gaps, approximating or offering standard navigational points or markers, across areas which it cannot describe. In this case, unable to fully reconstruct the whole passed experience of journeying in America, O'Kane indicates a score of general surroundings and particular perceptions, precisely within the symbolism of a representation as seemingly straightforward as photography. In reporting the experience of reality, of which the American trip is a forced example, this light-capturing lens-based photography is deployed in several different modes of formal organisation. There are large colour prints, carousels of projected slides, back-lit transparencies, video panorama, and images shrunken into the massive memory of cd roms.

The series of large prints is titled After Kafka's America. The reader of this unfinished tale, of the American debuts of its immigrant protagonist Karl Rossman, is immersed in descriptions of surrounding of which more always seems to be just over the horizon than present. Perhaps this is somehow more representative of the author, in that Kafka had never visited America, and his description of place and objects, and likely or unlikely situations seems to be wholly worked up from brochures, tales, and illustrations of the New World that made their way back to Europe; the authority of the piece comes from a writer with no first hand experience or truth of the place described, but a skill in making it fictionally tight, and sending young Rossman there in his place. Kafka uses the

character's mannered naiveté as a way of identifying surprise and suspicion of the arbitrary surroundings: this writer's typical territory is the impingement of situations upon the membranes of an identity, and the struggles to maintain that identity in the face of these effects, usually leading to a crisis. O'Kane's young man in tourist interface with real situations is examined as being both the description and the inner workings, the voracity of the eye and the constructiveness of the author. Fleshing out the young man and his experience with the back-stored capability of making the whole thing fully significant in a comfortable and familiar medium is at the core of O'Kane's project and results, and the work makes us aware of our need to be the in-experienced authors of our own stories about O'Kane as our adventuring stand-in. If we are not party to the original situation, can the potential fixedness of the presented fragments, an experience with supposedly less variables, elicit a directed or steered response?

This photographic series initiates an awareness of the distinctive complexity with which this project is characterised. Their every reading is complicated in a series of relationships which set the artist against the nominal tourist, the special against the mundane, the artist's mundane against the tourist's special. At first glance, what settles these pictures into place as different to traveler's' snapshots is the lack of a confrontational human presence as the focus of the frame. The typical tourist photograph usually positions a person significant to the photographer in front of the 'site' or 'sight'. The meaning of the instant is person surrounded by place. Resultant photographs don't so much show the natural beauty of say, Yellowstone, but, our Doreen in the wonderfully beautiful but slightly obscured Yellowstone: obscured by presence. As if to make this change in meaning apparent, the type of place usually chosen by O'Kane is not exactly 'photo-opportunity'. Payphone with a concentration of cigarette butts, leaning out from the picture plane to disturbing effect. Quoting the words 'contemporary art', from a hyper-reflective museum sign. The grand admonishment to STAY, a poppy legacy from the sixties, just an advert for itself, and just as clearly, an address to the individual. What order of things are stood in for Doreen, as it were? Signs, brandnames, free newspaper stands- a subject always creeps its way into these selected prints- even if it ends up as the clouds over the Canyon. As there's nothing much else there, of differentiation, that must be what the photograph is of. We make it subject because we perhaps want a figure and ground, a perceptual taking of stance. If we are not getting the tourist eye, then are we looking for the artist's eye, to frame and reveal something special? It is not clear if O'Kane courts this meaning. However, it must be said that if you've just got a hammer, pretty soon everything begins to look like a nail. Are these images differentiated sufficiently as examples of something to warrant printing them up to exhibition size? Is there any thread to the images? Possible links include the focus on structured visibilities that make themselves prominent, as does the emphasis on surroundings- gas-tanks functioning as supports for massively painted Pepsi ads; the airy tunnel of a wire-covered walkway, the wire surrounding with an insistence and a patterned repetitiveness that has no truck with a natural versus artificial dialog, but is just a succinct method of signifying

enclosure. Given its formal tunnel-like shape, it implies progression forwards and also that vision may pass through it but the body cannot. This also implies that O'Kane, at any point on his journey, is located not only in space but in a duration of time, suspended there by the logic of carrying through the itinerary. Suddenly STAY makes more sense.

Then viewpoint and scale are manipulated to produce a confusing shot of the SKY sign, which makes the whole side of a building read as something attached to a lamppost. Immediately this illusion is steadied, you realise that its occurrence was due to a combination of viewpoint and the single-lens compression of space- a particular which the viewing eye is quick to corroborate. The flatness of these images carries its own warning- scale and space may be distorted, or the inspirational impulse to make a photograph may not translate so well when printed. It is the possibility of such loss of verisimilitude to the original, or failure to embody any of that reality that hints at the range of idea which Tourist Interface is dealing- images of expectation translated into concrete examples of how it is a failure, as well as being a valuable lesson. If these images are not modes of transport, then what else is there about them? They are failures only if we believe in some kind of approachable reconstruction, some way in, some virtuality. As they are, with fantasy pragmatically exposed, they are more real than anything.

There's a painted sign for water, attached to a pole in what looks like a desert truckstop. This would probably be snapped by anyone coming across it- a contextual irony everyone would enjoy- irresistible and pure pop because of that. A little irony for the future, a little amusement, but also something that would prioritise the picture-taker as recognising the combination of things that makes it slightly out of the ordinary. So O'Kane admits that this image is a container of some slight amusement, i.e., it would have a function which is transparent to all. But not everybody would take a photo of a convex security mirror at some bus station with themselves reflected in it, or a phone leaning towards us- the inevitable connection with our self-conscious subject, reporting back to the homeland or the parents, or simply making itineraries work.

The differing visual approaches, print, projection, lightbox, video, all identify presence in other ways. The artists' eye, as it frames the subject, is visually acute, educated; impossible to eradicate its trace in the images. Then the presence is implied, the eye, the why, the person behind the camera, the chooser and presenter. The image is caught between standard guidebook definition and a 'work of art'. A tourist making a guide book. And the images are held somewhere between an artist's project and a person as a tourist- responsibility to the project and to the self as slightly confused.

Take the many cityscapes, usual photo-opportunities from tall buildings. These are stores of visual information to pore over later, while the itinerary hurries on, like the slide projector. The height of the vantagepoint is noteworthy- somehow

definitively American. There are a lot of skyscrapers. Like the photographer, they are a great vantage point to see out from, but equally, and most deliberately, signifiers of presence, in that everything visible from them is also a position from where they are visible. They are presence epitomised, whatever way you read it along the straight lines that light travels.

But we are aware of America through mediation- something of its very nature has in one form or another become part of ourselves. We might still cling to our ideas of local beauty of the corner of the world we come from- but the American landscape is similarly packaged- Vermont, the deserts and monument Valley, the LA mountains, the flatlands of Nebraska, the swamps of Louisiana, and the small island of Manhattan. It is surprising how much information from these dripping mediations is stored in our heads, and how impossible to trace are the paths by which we can reason out a possible location from O'Kane's images, from the look of a city, its river and bridges, its weather. Or where we put the photographer from the aridity of what is a desert, or a national park, the Half-Dome rock of Yosemite still there in colour as familiar from black and white prints by Ansel Adams.

There are the slides, projected from two different projectors, one shows only vertical format, one only horizontal. Any old slides, repeating a familiar slide-show coda to the meaning of holiday? Some, if studied closely, reveal a grain which is not as wet and gelid as others- a grain which is made of printer's rosettes of cyan, magenta, yellow and black. These slides are photographs taken of images in books, the sort of books, usually also without people, which are a compendium of Christmas-gifty glosses to the American landscape. O'Kane's copied photos tend to be mainly of natural scenes, which gives them a petrified and airless sense, while the urban scenes actually photographed by him are wetter, more alive, from the world. So Tourist Interface photographs these things he hasn't seen, places he hasn't been. But might have been, what's the difference? If we're solely looking for authenticity, then it implies that our relationship to his experience negotiated through first-hand photos is somehow predetermined, and liable to disappointment when the play of images is doubled. It is as if the personal stake we have endowed O'Kane with has been compromised- we were following him, an assumed known quantity, through the journey. Now here we are, spun off from that intimacy by artificiality, as we realise he is not specifically in need of such attention, but an attention that will bear with him through each version of complicating representation. To look at our own expectations, and what the representations had already made us think. The voices of O'Kane and his girlfriend Anja reading their journey diaries seem endearingly naïve: almost as if something is hidden- something like a real response, beyond the probably totally accurate humdrumming of the diary: a counterpart to what is seen, as if the voice, writing to itself and to its own memory, is silenced by the experience, and that the went here...did this... is just a metonymic skeleton for the experience, sounding basically exhausted. When linked, non-synchronised, with the slide projections, the piece assumes the

familiarity of an end-of-holiday gathering, the telling of a story. But as it is from a diary, it presents as voice writing the mnemonics of an episode to itself, allowing itself to fly off on wings of memory at the mere reading of these words. Of course, this is a key to the project's dialog on representation- the original totality is denied to us, as it is to O'Kane, and the different diary accounts do not consolidate it too much, but introduce different responses even from the same original. All we have are images and arrangement, all he has are images, words, and memories. Neither of us have the full story present, but we have indications of it, and memory, like perception, is shown as a representation of something now historical, or passed.

To some extent, the trace of the biographical, with us this far, has set the standard by which we view these, and that biographical is revealed as necessarily complicated enough to become its own subject, suspicious even, and redefining a more familiar territory- how the complications of experience and experience transcribed and what it does to remembering is a completely fluid systematic, and how the notation results that an artist is also circumscribed by his or her own territory and history, their work a priori contextualised by something pre-existent. O'Kane alludes to this position by being careful to list, in his diary, artworks he sees in museums, of which he takes no photos- that for all their universal reproducibility, it takes physical work to go and see them, and they have a geographical location. This then feeds into the slides- once this kind of interest is admitted by O'Kane, every American flag seen in the corner of some slide becomes a quotation of Jasper Johns, etc.

The choice of format is clarified, by the expedient of horizontal or vertical projection, as a rectangular convention suiting the subject within terrific constraints. Representations seen as doing their best to significantly condense a totality. This leads onto the video work, which, try as it might, ends up doing the same thing, the same loss-in-excellence, ultimate scopic ability leaving out so much. The ghost of virtual reality is mentioned as one other way of duping ourselves with a possible total reconstruction. A reconstruction of a time spent looking- but isn't that what we been doing all along?

Video loops projected on the walls take the panoramic as their theme; 360 degree rotations showing city streets, rooftops, at night and day, quick and slow. Original painted panorama's, dating from the late 18th century, surrounded the central viewer with a huge cylindrical canvas, perhaps of landscape, cityscape, or historical event such as a battle. The size of the illusion and lack of referentiality (the painting being in total occupation of the gaze) was one of the first steps in total immersion of the viewer, an attempt to surround them with a seamless representation.

Significantly for the development of illusion, towards the truly virtual, the next step was the diorama, which was usually set of rectangular scenes which rotated around the viewer. The critical difference between the panorama spectator

physically moving and the scene moving is something that has persisted through the history of illusion, to film and video. Tourist Interface's panoramic work remains, in essence, planar visual sequences, where the view is not literally scoped by the viewer; it is brought past them, through a set rectangular frame. Only with a total virtuality is the prospect of a physical orientation significantly altering the experience coming back to recognition. O'Kane's video camera stands in for the rotating eyes. Played back with a double projection and some text linking the panorama to virtuality and modernist theories of the gaze, these loops are forced to surround the viewer, at least on three sides- or maybe four, including the projecting apparatus as subject. The emphasis, as with original painted panoramas, is not the feeling of being in an actual place, but of being confronted by marvelous representation, which is a flatness, blocking the view. But also, by being representation, attracting the natural rove of the eye and its curiosity. The meaning seems to be not in the nutshell, but the shell itself. This time the curve of vision is convex, not concave. There's a clue to this 'inverse retinal' of the panorama on the photograph that was chosen for the invitation card. It shows O'Kane on the roof of some NY building, video camera on tripod pointed at the distant Empire State Building, with, in the foreground, a bag containing a globe. Globes spin- the examiner usually stays in the same place- all the information can be brought past them. In a geometrically inverse appropriation, O'Kane's video panoramas bring all the information past us, through a flat screen. At times, moving too fast to be much except a blur, a shorthand for surroundedness, located beginning and ending on the image of some fixture- the recognition of a full 360. But there is with each a deliberate starting and finishing to the sweep, a speeding and slowing, as if to make us recognise that we have come full circle. When not physically moving, we are quite helpless to make spatial sense of the length of panorama we have seen. The starting and stopping point is a coordinate of the plane, recognised through its reappearance. What we know to be a surrounding patently fails to feel like one. We are forced to see an attempt to locate us, through representation, as not even requiring the suspension of disbelief. As all the superb information passes us, with its intimation of unlimited capability for capture of visual treasure, it still looks like the totality of information necessary to totally recreate experience through a flat rectangle is exponentially incapable of catching up.

The levels of play are, as everywhere, overlapped, as when an existing painted panorama is itself taken as the subject of a centrally pivoting video recording- a massive 360 degree painting of Neo-Classical Europe in America. The curves of vision are flattened out to produce what seems like an impossible return to the beginning along a flat path. To muddy the waters further is effortless; a place for viewing included in the sweep; quoting Dan Graham's contemporary artwork, a rectangular glass viewing pavilion, set up on top of a New York arts building, (transparency caught in its necessity like a window pane at night) and you allude to conditions for seeing- for that as a sufficient subject in itself, that doesn't offer closure, but opens at least the process of particularised and circumscribed viewing as a potential subject to think about. The idea of the privileged

rectangular frame, as producer of a single authoritative place of meaning, is broken open and scattered by the implication of a limitless and non-hierarchical way of seeing, at once whimsical and also attentive, and popular enough to recognise an easily significant situation when it sees one. Like Karl Rossman's view of the streets of New York from a high balcony, as a dazzling glass surface being constantly smashed from one moment to the next.

O'Kane's project is an implication of the ubiquitous normalcy of representation, and how this display uses that but is aware of it; as being the first refuge of someone with their own story to tell. Very quickly, it becomes apparent that the story being told is as much about its own constructedness as anything that happened. Normal representation is not ridiculed, but it is set up as something that is worthwhile paying closer attention to. Is this normalcy protected, even though criticised, for its own benefit, inoculated against taking itself too seriously? Perhaps, within the maintenance of systems of representation as a continuity, as much as getting the surface content, we also desire to know the mechanics of it, the privilege of the inside story. O'Kane makes it impossible in a way to pass on, or to assume from that outlook that it is 'Just another examination', historically limited, with all the results expected found. The generosity of his display, and some of its personality-based whimsicality, is another way of just shifting the emphasis of a certain situation's obviousness- even the Statue of Liberty holds the torch of freedom above its head, i.e. where you cannot reach.

Padraig Timoney 2000