

## Concrete Knowledge

[The artist] is bending over his table, darting on to a sheet of paper the same glance that a moment ago he was directing towards external things, skirmishing with his pencil, his pen, his brush, ... He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call modernity ... it is much easier to decide outright that everything about the garb of an age is absolutely ugly than to devote oneself to the task of distilling from it the mysterious element of beauty that it may contain, however slight or minimal that element may be. By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.

Charles Baudelaire (1863)<sup>1</sup>

Looking at these drawings, Baudelaire's words come to mind because it is immediately apparent that these works, drawn from the gritty urban environment, are a distillation, a refining. The drawings have the kind of formal quality that often characterises the best kind of 'realist' interpretation. Take *Made and Considered*, a drawing of a "large derelict plywood sign on an empty plot, part of the Mater Hospital site".<sup>2</sup> The precision of this large drawing and its evident intricate methodology, is not at the service of a mere rendering of surface texture, rather it is a translation of this multi-layered, ad hoc structure into a refined formal language of repeated graphite lines. This language is also employed in works like *Underpinning* and *Come and Go*. So that rather than a simply mimetic response, we encounter interpretation, re-presentation, invention.

Looking at these drawings we recognise the "garb of an age", or more precisely its under-garb. Smith's subject is the messy, fugitive, contingent, stuff she describes as an "almost invisible part of our infrastructure",<sup>3</sup> disregarded but nevertheless the stuff that literally underpins our built environment, something to which *Underpinning*, a highly formalised intricate drawing of 'rebars' also attests.

Smith's interpretations make us look at these familiar yet ephemeral things and spaces differently, newly. The utilitarian nature of these spaces is acknowledged in some of the titles such as *Come and Go*, an anonymous Brutalist stairwell, while a similar piece, *Procession*, presents a nondescript flight of concrete steps, each describes a *terrain vague* brought into telescopic focus. It is the banality of these spaces, their neutrality that gives Smith license to reinvent so freely.

Smith's perambulations around her Phibsborough neighbourhood, and elsewhere in Dublin's north inner city, recollect Baudelaire's modern artist "ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert".<sup>4</sup> Her modus encompasses that rich tradition of the *flâneur*, the Situationist and the psycho-geographer, as narrated by Baudelaire, Joyce, Benjamin and Debord. Baudelaire insists that the artist has a "loftier" aim than that of the "mere *flâneur*", in pursuit of "the fugitive pleasure of circumstance." It might be suggested that the artist searches for something equally fugitive, a kind of knowledge.

These drawings literally draw our attention to "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent", the verso to the corporate grand façade's immutable recto. Baudelaire opposes these two distinct registers, worldviews that are reflected in our built environment and our psychophysiological responses to it. Worldviews invariably have a political dimension and the longing for immutable beauty and eternal truth is a profoundly conservative impulse – a grain that these drawings run against.

Smith sees her work as 'embedded' in both the “geographical and social space” in which she lives, and she sees this embeddedness as significant on a number of levels: her social and environmental activism are of a piece with her art making, they are a “continuum”.<sup>5</sup> There is another aspect to this embeddedness, one that she recognises as touching upon the idea of drawing as a means of knowledge generation. The title of the exhibition *Made and Considered* is significant in this regard. The artist is aware of this aspect, and sees her drawing as “a way of thinking,” the kind of thinking that is situated and embedded within the environment.

This “situated cognition” view of knowledge<sup>6</sup> sees cognition as “embodied” and “embedded,” reliant on both the body and the environment (both physical and social). This pragmatic, situated and enactive approach challenges conventional western conceptions of knowledge that regard it as something static and immutable. John Dewey characterises (1916) this view: “truth exists ready-made somewhere” and he regards it as essentially conservative and antidemocratic. For him, knowledge must involve action, and it must be of use: “only that which ... enable[s] us to adapt the environment to our needs and to adapt our aims and desires to the situation in which we live is really knowledge.”<sup>7</sup>

The exhibition title also brings to mind Giambattista Vico’s *verum-factum* principle, employed in defence of the humanities and the arts. Vico argued (1710) that, “the true is precisely what is made.”<sup>8</sup> Here we find the idea that we, as human beings, can only have true knowledge of that which we have made, whether individually or collectively. The significance of this point with regard to these drawings of the built environment is twofold. These spaces and structures were originally drawn by architects and made by builders. Now they are made and considered anew through Smith’s drawing process. On Vico’s view drawing might perhaps be seen as the means of knowing the constructed world *par excellence*.

The knowledge embodied in these drawings and generated through them represents the antithesis of what Dewey condemned as a “scorn” for the kind of situated knowledge that deals in messy stuff, in the physical, the particular, the fugitive and the contingent, that regards knowledge as “high and worthy in the degree in which it deals with ideal symbols instead of with the concrete.”<sup>9</sup> He is referring to the idealist metaphysics of eternal and immutable truths alluded to by Baudelaire. Against these, Dewey asserts an “enactive” and “situated” approach to knowing.

There is a thread that runs through the fabric of Smith’s work. It is not just the content of these drawings; the ends if you like – motifs from the fabrication of public spaces – but also the means, the acts of drawing, that have a political dimension. Dewey tells us that in the conservative view “means are menial, subservient, slavish; and ends liberal and final ... Thus the identification of knowledge with esthetic contemplation and the exclusion from science of trial, work, [and the] manipulation ... of things.”<sup>10</sup>

Both Vico and Dewey’s ideas contribute to the rehabilitation of species of knowledge represented by the arts, and they both saw such knowledge as ultimately benefitting and democratising the civic sphere and the public space. In this centenary year of the proclamation of the Irish Republic we might remember that the *res publica* originally referred to things and spaces held in common, as opposed to the *res privata*, the private sphere. These drawings emerge from a complex multi-layered engagement with that public sphere. The artist sees the various layers and dimensions of that

engagement as a continuum that encompasses social, aesthetic, epistemological and, yes, political dimensions.

Tom McGuirk, April 2016

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Baudelaire, C., (Mayne, J. trans.) 1964. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. London: Phaidon Press. pp. 12-13.
- <sup>2</sup> Correspondence with the artist.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Baudelaire, C., (Mayne, J. trans.) 1964. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. London: Phaidon Press. p. 12.
- <sup>5</sup> Correspondence with the artist.
- <sup>6</sup> Aydede, M. and Robbins, P. eds., 2009. *The Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>7</sup> Dewey, J., (Boydston, J.A., ed.) 2008. *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 9, 1899-1924: Democracy and Education, 1916*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press. pp. 344-354.
- <sup>8</sup> Costelloe, T., 2016, "Giambattista Vico", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), E. N. Zalta, ed., URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/vico/>
- <sup>9</sup> Dewey, J., (Boydston, J.A., ed.) 2008. *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 9, 1899-1924: Democracy and Education, 1916*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press. p. 274.
- <sup>10</sup> Dewey, J. 2000. *Experience and Nature*. Enlarged, Revised edition. Dover Publications. p. 124.

Tom McGuirk is Senior Lecturer in Art Theory/Critical Theory at the University of Chester.