

In Search of an Harmonious Landscape

From the street the building occupied by 'Big Idea' reminds me of the cool anonymity of the Millennium Seed Bank by Stanton Williams. This is a very precise architecture – careful detailing, no room for error. The steel and glass façade gives nothing away, there is a glass window, but it is way above eye level. On entering the building we are faced with another white wall, a mask or a shield of sorts. Artist Rosa Nguyen has projected onto this wall an image of a bodily organ.

Along with the help of members of 'Big Idea', the communications and graphics group that own and occupy the building, and as part of an ongoing programme to engage artists with this building and the operations that go on within it, Rosa has been making 'Feed'. For this work she has placed hand-sized ceramic objects in the ground floor meeting room and upstairs studio, larger vertical ceramic vases in the exhibition space and other selected locations around the building, as well as scanned and animated images of pod and organs forms as projections on the video monitors.

I've never watched Rosa work as an artist, or ever spoken to her in that much depth about what she does and how she does it. I understand that she works alone, and this space in which she makes her art, is a place for 'her', a solitary and quiet place away from the demands of close family and friends, as well as students. So Rosa makes her art alone and it is a physical process, this much I know, but how she makes decisions about shapes, colours, texture, that I don't know. And I will never find out by asking; knowing her work requires a sensual engagement with it.

I know the artist best in terms of her work as a shiatsu practitioner. Once a fortnight (or thereabouts) over the last half a year I have visited Rosa at her home to receive treatments. I went to her because I felt I was split in half, that there was a gulf in between my brain and my body. Sure enough, the result of my first treatment indicated exactly a version of Descartes' split, told me what I thought I already knew. But strangely enough, six months

down the line, the result of my treatments in shiatsu has revealed a new kind of world for me.

Shiatsu informs me that my mind and body are indeed joined, I already believed this as a feminist theorist, but shiatsu shows me this physically. All the things I am thinking, my body is thinking too; the states that my body gets into – skin, nerves, organs – are responses to, and effects of, my states of mind. The image of my inner space, the places inside my body, as a complex geography of flows and a delicate network with multiple loci of energy all in balance with one another, is a new one for me. But it corresponds very closely to the way I understand the outside world as an architect, in terms of social space or a series of relationships between people and places, where people make places and places make people.

There is an interesting connection to be made between Rosa, the artist, and the work she makes, which is very much an extension of the way she relates to people. The objects Rosa makes are part of her desire to create harmony and balance in the world. The philosophy embodied in this building is one of precision and calm, but it is the rational control of man over matter. At first I considered the relationship between Rosa's work and the building to be one of contrast – a feminine harmony of fluids, vessels, nature and relations of empathy against a masculine regime of architectural geometry and linearity. But it is rather more complicated than this, particularly given the inversion of the usual heterosexual coupling, here a female artist makes the action, a sensitive intervention, into the more passive masculine site.

If we follow the wall along and go into the rooms behind it, we enter the 'hard-ware' of the building, or at least I saw it this way. A number of small rooms, artificially lit, containing a lot of computer 'kit' and a board room of black and white, steel and glass. There is a horizontal alcove in the board room running along for about three metres at shoulder height. Rosa has painted this a blood red and placed in it many of her ceramic gourds. They are organic in colour – whites, creams, yellows, browns and reds – and in form they are round, smooth and hollow. Some rattle, when you pick them up and shake them, others are silent, like people.

Behind the wall, a stair case is tucked away, this takes us up to the sky-lit first floor 'attic' where the 'soft-ware' of 'Big Idea' is contained. Rosa has placed many more gourds upstairs on the desks, along with peoples' day to day clutter - pens, paper, cups. The gourds can easily become absorbed into the professional world of work, yet one more thing on the desk, but it is also possible to understand them as organic interventions that draw out the more sterile aspects of the often impersonal business environment. Some of the objects have names, one is 'nut anus' for example, names that indicate how thoroughly out of place they are in this setting. Anthropologist Mary Douglas might call them 'matter out of place'. Yet to pick up these vessels and hold them allows us to make a physical connection with the sort of object that can be better understood as a kind of toy or gift. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott has commented on how toys help us travel between real and imaginary worlds. These plump yet contained gourds are offerings that prompt us to make a connection: with another person, object or place.

While I am not a big fan of the building is body/body as building mode of analogical thinking, I do find there are interesting parallels and connections to be made between bodily space and architectural space. This relationship is less for me one of form and more one of process: what goes on in the building is what is interesting not so much its shape. This building was originally a timber factory, the wood entered on the ground floor and was processed on the upper floors. A similar division between lower and upper, hard- and soft-ware goes on today. What shiatsu has shown me is that product and process, form and content are not so far apart, that they might be understood less in terms of the signifier/signified relationship that structural linguistics favours or the more contemporary 'hybrid' favoured by digital technologies and French philosophy but more as a system of responsive networks of flows, of actions and emotions. Rosa focused my attention on the spaces within my own body and told me that if my head felt too full, I could store things in other parts of my body, down in my stomach for example. The way to gain access to these new secret compartments was not through my thinking brain, but through my feeling self.

So it is not only what happens in buildings in terms of what people do, but also what goes on in the minds and hearts of its occupants, this makes a

huge difference to the ways in which space is experienced. The vessels Rosa makes can be understood as figures in possible relationships, and here she has set out them out in couples, much like the different, and sometimes seemingly strange, partnerships human beings make with one another. Many of them have digitally reproduced images of seeds on their surfaces, and others are marked with scanned patterns of other vessels; much like the projections we make on each other that contain all, of parts, of ourselves. The colour she has used on the wall – blood red – corresponds to bodily fluids, but more than their visceral qualities, liquids contain energy that circulates through the body connecting all the organs and fundamental substances. The image projected onto the protecting wall, that one that faces you as you enter the building, is of heart protector, an organ which in shiatsu relates to the pericardium, the membranous sack that encloses the heart.

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