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Extracts from *Something Is Not Quite Right: The Work of Daniel Arsham*

For the *Miami Nice* exhibition at the Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris in 2004, artist Daniel Arsham showed an architectural model and a series of drawings. *Untitled* (2004) is a mound of expanded polystyrene or EPS, sitting on top of a shiny trestle table. Embedded in its mountainous formation, which one assumes to be ice-covered rock, or perhaps even an iceberg, is an architectural structure which appears to be uninhabited.

EPS is used for insulated panels in building structures, as a molded packing material, and in the making of architectural models. Its irregular form means that it can never achieve crystallinity, and as such has no melting point. A long chain hydrocarbon, EPS is described as having 'chiral backbone carbons'.<sup>1</sup> The chemical term *chirality* derives from the Greek word for hand. It refers to a form of asymmetry where an object cannot be superimposed on its mirror image. The human body forms the most obvious example, where a left hand glove cannot be worn on the right hand.

*Untitled* (2004) is made of a material that has no melting point, but it represents one that does. Today ice is melting so fast that it will soon hit the point of no return, what climatologists have described as a 'tipping point',<sup>2</sup> where the heat that the melting ice releases will cause it to disappear faster, and the replacement of reflective white ice with absorbent dark water will rapidly increase the melting time even further, leading to an irreversible situation. The construction of architecture – involving the extraction of materials and the burning of petrochemicals – contributes to the diminishing of finite resources and increases the temperature of the planet in the process, while the occupation of buildings produces, in the form of cities, islands of heat rather than ice.

[...]

*Lobby* (2005), which featured in Arsham's first solo show, *Homesick*, at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris in 2005, is of a similar scale to the earlier *Crystala* (2004) and like the later *ODE/EON* (2007) also deals with an in-between passage or space. *Lobby* is not built at the usual scale of an architectural model, but something more like that of a doll's house – these tend to be constructed at 1:12, or less frequently at 1:24. Like a doll's house, *Lobby* uses the cut-away section to show both internal spaces and external finishes. But unexpectedly it is made of the actual materials with which one would construct a building – drywall, or plasterboard, metal studs and paint. In this sense it differs from both the conventional architectural scale model that shows the full-size design but in coded materials, for example, where cardboard stands in for concrete, and 1:1 mock-ups or facsimiles of details which demonstrate the use of materials at the scale of 'real' life. In *Lobby*, then, the usual rules that accompany the choice of materials in a scale model do not apply. The sight of familiar substances conjures up images of *their* real size and so reduces the viewer's ability to imagine the building at full scale. Unable to gain access, one is left to reside at the threshold (or lobby) of one's imagination.

Like contemporary artist Nathan Coley, Arsham has an interest in both the differing materials and the possible scales of architectural models, in particular in how variations from the norm can effect viewer's perceptions and conceptions of the relation between real and imagined space – do viewer's see the work solely as an object in itself and/or do they make a connection to a referent proposed or constructed? Coley's *The Lamp of Sacrifice, 161 Places of Worship, Birmingham* (2000) and *The Lamp of Sacrifice, 286 Places of Worship, Edinburgh* (2004) were made at a small scale and of a material typical of an architectural model –

corrugated cardboard,<sup>3</sup> while *Show Home* (2003)<sup>4</sup> also made in material usual of a model –ply – was constructed at 1:1, what curator Claire Doherty has called a 'facsimile' or copy rather than a model. However, like Arsham's *Crystala* and *Lobby*, Coley's *I Don't Have Another Land* (2002), a stained-wood model of the Marks and Spencers building in Manchester's Arndale Centre, blown up by the IRA in 1996, and presented with a line from a Jewish folk song as its title, is located at scale somewhere in between the object and its referent, leaving the viewer to oscillate between what is there and what is not.<sup>5</sup>

Arsham's two staircase sculptures continue his investigation of scale, something he describes in figurative rather than numerical terms. For Arsham, *Staircase* (2005) is the scale of a 'toy soldier' while *Open Staircase* (2006) a 'newborn baby'.<sup>6</sup> The absent mention of scale in the title of Arsham's work removes the anchor that could be offered by this kind of reference point, freeing the sculptures to operate as things-in-themselves. But at the same time, because of their model-like appearance, the assumption is that these works have been built to a particular scale and that they have a referent. And so the referent keeps returning, something (or somewhere) else is continually referred to, a double of the sculpture that is not fixed, but flexible and plastic, producing in the viewer a feeling that is destabilizing and could perhaps be described as uncanny.

In his essay on 'The Uncanny' (1919) Freud's main argument, that the return of the repressed is the homely (*heimlich*) returning as the unhomely (*unheimlich*), is grounded in the connection he makes between home and the mother's body:

There is a joking saying that 'Love is home-sickness' and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: 'this place is familiar to me, I've been here before', we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body ... the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix 'un' ['un-'] is the token of repression.<sup>7</sup>

Through a discussion of the etymology of the term and examples of uncanny doubles in literature, especially the relation between alive and dead, animate and inanimate in E. T. A. Hoffmann's story 'The Sand-Man' (1817), Freud shows how the uncanny is 'frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar'.<sup>8</sup> But he is careful to stress that not everything unknown and unfamiliar is uncanny, rather, and here Freud follows F. W. J. Schelling, the *unheimlich* is everything familiar that has been buried, 'that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light'.<sup>9</sup>

A series of monochrome paintings, gouache on mylar, bear the title *The Return*. They all show architectural elements, white and geometric, in lush and empty natural settings, still ponds fringed by tall reeds, and overgrown woodlands, reminiscent of the mangrove swamps of Florida. In some, such as *The Return #2* (2005), there are obelisks, and in others, like *The Return #8* (2005), columns and beams, and in yet others, like *The Return #4* (2005), high-level walkways isolated at either end. But the most common architectural element featured is the staircase. There are stand-alone staircase structures in *The Return #13* (2005) and *The Return #14* (2005), parts of stairs which seem to have come from nowhere in *The Return #1* (2005), and in *The Return #5* (2005) and *The Return #7* (2005) the returns of stairs have nowhere to go. The 'return' of a staircase has a double meaning in this case, since 'return' is also a technical term locating the point where the steps change direction, for example, on a dogleg staircase this is by 180 degrees.

So what is it that returns in Arsham's fantastic landscapes? Does nature return to architecture or architecture to nature? Is the return a blissful reunion, or does it bring the threat of retaliation, conflict or even the possible annihilation of one by the other? The simple forms suggest that architecture returns in the guise of modernism, or that modernism, when it

returns, will do so in a pristine state, untouched by time, unoccupied in any way. Or are these geometrical fragments doubles that have come from somewhere else, that we mistake for the return of the original banished modernism? And are we right to assume that this is a return to the here and now, or are we looking at a future reappearance, in some other place. Perhaps the return is the other way around. It is architecture that has been here all along, and the natural setting that has returned, so recently that its arrival has not, as yet, had a chance to make a mark. It is possible that this repressed vegetation, which has been described as 'Florida's endangered wilderness',<sup>10</sup> has re-emerged, at once, taking architecture by surprise.

[...]

Arsham's *Playground* (2007), his second solo exhibition at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris, also shown in Melbourne, develops further his manipulation of the architectural surface and his interest in the construction of artifice. A series of swellings point to a space beyond the physical limits of the architecture, suggesting that a gap exists just behind the white surface of the walls and ceilings. In *Hammock* (2007) a tiny person's form hangs down into the gallery (a child perhaps?) held by the tensile folds of the ceiling, and in *Sheet* (2007) the wall traps and wraps, maybe swaddles, another small human. In the subtle modulations of the other two pieces in this series the actual human form is absent, but its trace referenced. The draped edge of the wall just misses the floor in *Curtain* (2007), its undulations tilt upwards into the gallery like the hem of dress in movement, gesturing an event – something about to happen – that has so far been concealed, suggesting the drama, otherwise implicit, in the space of the gallery. In the discreet *Wrinkle (3)* (2007) fine creases ripple across the wall, transforming the permanence of the architectural edge into something flexible and fluid. For the opening of *Playground* dancer/choreographer Jonah Bokaer created a piece which addressed *Sheet*, continuing both Bokaer's critique of conventional modernist portraiture via unexpected movement patterns and Arsham's interest in collaborations with choreographers and the potential of human interaction to transform the permanence of architecture.

In a series of paintings from the same show, other elements attempt to stretch out across the edge of their accustomed settings. In *Ocean (Blue)* (2007), for example, monoliths rise up out of the water at the sea's limit, in *Beams (Blue)* (2007) two obelisks reach across a forest setting, and in a reversal of the 'nature holds while architecture transgresses' pairing, in *Limb (Blue)* (2007) the transversal element is a fleshy, but hand-less arm which comes out of a wall to meet the floor. Rendered in carefully hatched ink lines, rather than in flat painted surfaces, this work references a period of art and architectural representation which precedes modernism, and so renders its 'otherworldly' vision in historical terms. That each piece in the series exists as one of a pair of hand-drawn duplicates, where every line is not quite the same as its twin, only serves to underscore the uncanny *doppelgänger* quality. Rather than forward-looking utopias cast adrift on icebergs or banished to caves, we discover the archaeological remains of another time (our time?) in the deadly calm of what might well be a post-apocalyptic scene.

Arsham's version of the untouched ruins of the future are brought even more clearly into focus in his most recent series of paintings.<sup>11</sup> The beams have returned, painted now, not hatched, engulfed by, and not floating through, foliage. The colours that were previously indicated by the titles of the work reappear in the tone of the light infusing the painting – the strange orange glow of *Tornado Light* (2008), the reddish tint of *Another Light (am)* (2008), and the ethereal blue of *Another Light (pm)* (2008). Across the spectrum, all these hues bring with them a sense of disquiet.<sup>12</sup> Yet the light is not discordant, it is calm and soothing, and there is no sign that any event as dark as destruction has taken place, no clue even that it will. Nothing is necessarily wrong, yet something is not quite right.

It is this foreboding sense – that something is not quite right – which pervades Arsham's work. And no amount of careful deciphering will placate the demands made on me by the

strangeness of the still-life scenes he offers. Somehow architecture is implicated – as victim or as perpetrator – it is not clear to me, nor is the paradoxical sense of time I am drawn into. It is as easy to believe that the images predict a sublime aftermath, as it is to assume they have already forgotten a past disaster. But look elsewhere and Arsham suggests otherwise, soothing me that his scenes of lost catastrophes are mere fiction, teasing me with the gentle playfulness of his particular version of collapse and the exquisite delicacy of his apparently harmless white concoctions that creep mysteriously through the gallery walls.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polystyrene>

<sup>2</sup> See for example <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/global-warming-past-the-point-of-no-return-507030.html>; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6171053.stm>; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?xml=/earth/2008/04/24/earctic124.xml>.

<sup>3</sup> See for example *Nathan Coley: There Will Be No Miracles Here* (Edinburgh and Newcastle: The Fruitmarket Gallery and Locus+, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.showhome.org.uk/> and Paul Usherwood, 'Nathan Coley: North Shields', *Art Monthly*, n. 268 (July 2003) pp. 46–47.

<sup>5</sup> See 'Nathan Coley in Conversation with Claire Doherty', Claire Doherty (ed.) *Thinking of the Outside: New Art and the City of Bristol* (University of the West of England and Bristol Legible City in Association with Arnolfini, 2005) pp. 30–37.

<sup>6</sup> Personal conversation with the artist.

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' [1919] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955) pp. 217–256, p. 245. Accessed from <http://www.pep-web.org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/>.

<sup>8</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' [1919], p. 220.

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' [1919], p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> Elisa Turner, 'Critic's Pick', *Miami Herald* (7 July 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Martine Bouchier has pointed out the paradoxical state of the non-eroded ruin in Arsham's work. See Martine Bouchier, 'Daniel Arsham's Analogous Ruins'. See [http://www.galerieperrotin.com/artiste-Daniel\\_Arsham-17.html](http://www.galerieperrotin.com/artiste-Daniel_Arsham-17.html).

<sup>12</sup> Jeff Rian has compared Arsham's gouaches to Miles Davis's ballad, 'Blue in Green', from *Kind of Blue* (1959). Rian likens Arsham's 'modal aesthetics' to the way in which, for Davis in

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'Blue in Green', 'mode replaced melody and the improvisations were based on color-like modulations'. See Jeff Rian, 'The World According to Daniel Arsham'. See [http://www.galerieperrotin.com/artiste-Daniel\\_Arsham-17.html](http://www.galerieperrotin.com/artiste-Daniel_Arsham-17.html).