

From When to Where to Next and Out There.

Are you traveling in time; the future or the past? Are you traveling in space; inside or out? Above or under? Towards or away?

You never know exactly what you're looking at in David Powell's paintings, the spaces in them are universal and recognizable and yet in a sense abstract. Layers of subjectivity have been peeled off 'real' places, reducing them to their barest essentials; the underlying bone structure of the real. These spaces are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, you're neither here nor there, in a sort of vacuum that may or may not exist within time and space. The paintings explore how memories are represented and/or reproduced: on the one hand there has always been a faint and elusive 'image' (visual or non-visual) that needs to be translated to be able to be seen or read.

On the other hand, this representational image will only ever be an approximation of a memory, it will always remain within the realm of translation. What is it that makes these paintings so 'familiar yet unfamiliar'? Is it that they seem to remain within this field between the memory and representation?

'Back' (2011) illustrates this notion of being 'neither here nor there', it strongly reminds me of the time when I was a kid and sitting in the back of my fathers' car at night, driving home from a birthday party or a day out. The motorway between one town and the next was always monotonous and affecting the elapse of time (a time bubble where everything outside of it moves at a different speed rate than you). I remember the street lights flashing by at frequent intervals being very hypnotic, whereas street lights in the city don't have this effect: the intervals are less frequent because of the changing acceleration of the car. The city and the motorway are opposites – places and non places. The motorway is a place you only enter in order to get to another place. This 'being between places' excites me and is really in the foreground of Powell's work. I would say the work 'Back' (2011) is a recognizable example of referring to a non-place such as the motorway, but it's clearly not a representation – or a memory for that matter – of it. Nothing in the painting directly suggests a motorway; you see barren land, a pavement in the foreground and a figure who seems to be either sinking into, or coming out of something.

In the meantime, traffic continues to roar past overhead.

Another important aspect of the work seems to be the tension between architecture and nature, both elements are zoned and demarcated, separated from each other, and seem to be contained within the space of the painting. The borders, boundaries and divisions take control over all other visual elements, keeping them in check. There are car park spaces, yet the place where a car would usually be is occupied by a person or a pile of grass. Other paintings depict figures glimpsed behind hedges or brick walls, divisions between private and public space become ambiguous.

Dutch landscape is almost entirely designed (reclaimed land), these paintings also refer to design in some way; the design of spaces, architectural design or the design of nature. The formal geometrical aspects of buildings, bricks and pavements are in sharp contrast with their natural counterparts; wild, proliferating and unpredictable. Yet geometrical forms, such as hexagons, rectangles, circles and ovals, all have their origins in nature, a fact that seems to both underline and undermine this contrast. It appears to me that the paintings are built up from different layers of rationalisations of the environment around us, that includes both the natural and the conventional environment.

The use of diptychs and triptychs enables sequencing in painting, something traditionally belonging to conceptual photography of the 1970's. Are these paintings to be read as a hybrid of conceptual photographs and contemporary figurative painting, framing time in seconds instead of hours? Are the different panels made to frame time horizontally (elapsing) instead of vertically (accumulating), prolonging the action of perception?

Powell's work raises questions about the balance and imbalance of architecture and nature, conventional and natural elements in the public space, but remains objective at the same time. A feeling of unease and awkwardness is conveyed, both by looking at the figures and the overall atmosphere in the spaces the figures inhabit: deserted, unidentifiable, generic, exemplary, impersonal spaces, often seemingly located at the border (periphery) of a city. But at the same time, the figures look like they wouldn't want to be anywhere else.