

Gayle Chong Kwan

Text 4

‘Gayle Chong Kwan: Caught in a Dark Mirror’
by Laura Mclean-Ferris in *New Forest Pavilion Catalogue*,
Venice Biennale, 2011

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1938: An unlikely, glittering tower of slender, Art Deco proportions reaches 300 feet up to the skies, from the top of Bellahouston Hill in Glasgow. Slim, steel-clad sections are lined up next to one another like books on a shelf, creating a sense of optimistic vertical drama, whilst three separate viewing platforms on one high side of the building give the architecture a lick of flamboyant, futuristic modernity, recalling the designers and artists associated with De Stijl. The Tower of Empire, designed by Thomas S. Tait (or the Tait Tower, as it would come to be known), was built for the Empire Exhibition in Scotland, an exhibition of design, trade and industry that was intended to pull Scotland out of the economic recession that dogged the country during the 1930s. Though intended as a permanent structure – a beacon of faith in the future – it would be demolished after one year.

2011: The same tower rises once again, but somewhere else, this time. Even more unlikely now, the Tait Tower is now pitched in a barren wasteland, over which hangs an unhealthy-looking violet sky where dour mauve grey clouds are gathering. We glimpse this scene in a large photograph, as we peer out from something blurry that obscures our vision at the peripheries. This dark, penumbral wasteland is *The Obsidian Isle*, an imagined island situated off the West Coast of the Scottish Highlands conceptualised by Gayle Chong Kwan, which she imagines to be populated by the destroyed buildings of Scottish history. Behind the Tait Tower is the silhouette of another wrecked architectural marvel, the first Tay Bridge, which, when it was opened in 1878, was, at two miles, the longest bridge in the world. It, too, lasted a little more than a year, collapsing in high December winds sending a trainful of passengers plummeting into the icy waters below.

To construct views of this island, where bankrupt architectural memories and painful tragedies reign, Chong Kwan uses found photographs made of the buildings whilst they were still standing. Cutting these out to create small paper models, she then builds a diorama-like staging in which to photograph them. These small constructions might be memory as landscape; one thinks of memory’s contemporary reliance on photography, its melancholy smokiness and incompleteness: the way in which forgotten elements are blocked from sight. Here are fragments and stories from the past, dreams and desires that are paper thin.

Other ruins that emerge in different views of the Obsidian Isle’s elephant graveyard include abandoned cottages that date from the Highland Clearances; some tenements that once stood at Greenside Place, Edinburgh, which were demolished to make way for a ring road that was never built; and, significantly, Ossian’s Hall, a structure in Dunkeld that was made in honour of the blind third-century poet, Ossian, that was created to plunge visitors into darkness before opening out onto a dramatic mirrored balcony overhanging a waterfall.

Ossian is a historical figure whose discovery was claimed by the eighteenth century poet James Macpherson, though his existence has always been in doubt. Macpherson claimed that he travelled around highland villages collecting fragments of an epic poem by Ossian. So compellingly did the world, including other writers and artists such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, take to Ossian’s bathetic renderings of the myths of the Scottish Highlands and the bleak romanticism with which he described the hard terrain of the landscape, that, on some level, his existence or not began to matter little to many (though an official investigation was launched into Ossian’s authenticity). What is

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certain, however, is that Ossian's/Macpherson's writing gave its readers a way to conceive of the beautiful, yet highly treacherous, highland landscape – which in the eighteenth century was more commonly seen as a frightening and barbaric place – in a way that meant they could suddenly wrap their heads around the landscape, and clasp it close to their hearts. Scotland, then, as an imagined landscape, became these romantic images of the highlands, and it is this landscape that endures imaginatively today, one of fierce winds and hard rocks, of empty places of bleak beauty and isolation, landscapes stalked by tragedy and loss, occasionally tempered by soft heathers and pale light.

It is this atmosphere, distilled into a potent form, that pervades Chong Kwan's *The Obsidian Isle* works, which give us a way to understand the relationships between a more manmade landscape of loss that we, too, can begin to get a handle on. The instability that one associates with this landscape, the idea that at any moment, a Scottish building could be destroyed and could appear in the half-lit rubble, too, is an admonition of the inabilities of mind and memory to comprehend the landscape, past or present. Polished obsidian (or black mirror), the material that gives this series its name, was once used by landscape painters, who stood with their backs to nature so that they could paint its reflection in the polished mineral, which translated the world into a dark gradation of tones.

Themes of limited vision and blindness pervade in *The Obsidian Isle*. We appear to be staring at this wrecked landscape from a hole, or the mouth of a cave – an optical device that recalls Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* (1946-66), itself constructed as a diorama featuring a fragmented nude woman splayed on the landscape behind a series of thresholds (sculptural doors, a hole in a brick wall that was built as a hole, rather than as a wall).

As Rosalind Krauss has written in *The Optical Unconscious*, looking at *Etant Donnés*, the “viewer has in fact entered a kind of optical machine in which it is impossible *not* to see”. If Chong Kwan formulates a related type of machinery in *The Obsidian Isle*, she does so partly by reminding us of the ways in which inhibiting vision can allow different types of seeing, creating a reflection of a country that exists in a dark mirror world.

Here then, is a jeremiad to a world just lost, the could-have-been of the Tait Tower, a landscape of a Scotland that can only be seen through mirrors, holes and memories, or through the words of a blind poet. All these give us a faltering, fragile picture of place and history, but nonetheless it is something that we can just about hold on to.

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C'est cette atmosphère, distillée dans une forme puissante, qui imprègne les œuvres de Chong Kwan, et qui nous permet de comprendre les relations entre un paysage plus qu'artificiel (..) L'instabilité que l'on associe à ce paysage, l'idée qu'à tout moment un immeuble écossais pourrait être détruit et apparaître au milieu des décombres, nous rappelle les lacunes de l'esprit et de la mémoire pour s'approprier un paysage du passé ou du présent. L'Obsidienne polie (ou le miroir noir), le matériau qui donne à cette série son nom, était autrefois utilisé par les peintres de paysage, qui se tenaient dos à la nature afin de peindre leur reflet dans le minéral poli, ce qui traduit le monde dans une sombre graduation de tons. Les thèmes de la vision limitée et de la cécité se répandent dans *The Obsidian Isle*. Nous faisons face à ce paysage endommagé par un trou ou est-ce l'entrée d'une caverne - le dispositif optique nous rappelle l'œuvre de Marcel Duchamp *Etant donnés* (1946-66) -, lui-même construit comme un diorama mettant en vedette une femme nue fragmentée, couchée dans le paysage derrière une série de seuils (portes sculptées, un trou dans un mur de briques qui a été construit comme un trou plutôt que comme un mur).

Comme Rosalind Krauss l'avait écrit dans son ouvrage *The Optical Unconscious* examinant *Etant Donnés*, « le spectateur en a déduit une sorte de machine optique dans laquelle il est impossible de ne pas voir ». Si Chong Kwan suggère une sorte de machine dans *The Obsidian Isle*, elle le fait en partie en nous rappelant la manière dont une vue restreinte peut amener à plusieurs façons de voir, en créant une idée du paysage qui existe dans un sombre miroir du monde.

Voici donc, en une jérémiade d'un monde à peine perdu, le pourrait-avoir-été de la Tour Tait, un paysage d'une Ecosse qui ne peut être vue qu'à travers des miroirs, des trous et des souvenirs, ou à travers les mots d'un poète aveugle.

Tout cela nous procure un soupir, une image fragile du lieu et de l'histoire, mais néanmoins c'est quelque chose que nous pouvons conserver.