

Gayle Chong Kwan

Text 2

'Utopia is Elsewhere: Mapping The Obsidian Isle',
Text by Dominic Paterson,
in 'The Obsidian Isle' by Gayle Chong Kwan

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"The absurdity of reality is lost on the large land masses, but here on the islands, it is writ large. An island offers a stage: everything that happens on it is practically forced to turn into a story, into a chamber piece in the middle of nowhere, into the stuff of literature. What is unique about these tales is that fact and fiction can no longer be separated: fact is fictionalized and fiction is turned to fact."

Gayle Chong Kwan's fictional realm *The Obsidian Isle*, a chimera made up of lost realities and fake pasts, delights in precisely the kinds of confusion between fact and fiction that Schalansky so concisely describes. The artist presents us with constructed images of a place which is part Ossianic myth, part repository of abandoned building projects, as firmly rooted in Romantic conventions for representing landscape as it is in the contemporary world of advanced photographic technology. Posited as a place where Scottish history is both remembered and forgotten, *The Obsidian Isle* is both fantastical illusion and a hypothetical dark mirror in which we glimpse the kinds of myth-making and historical story-telling which sustain such realities as the nation state or national identity. Chong Kwan invites us to view a place, which is an amalgam of different places: where, then, should we locate *The Obsidian Isle* itself?

Though its ostensible location is close to Staffa in the Inner Hebrides, *The Obsidian Isle* might also be thought of as taking its place amidst an archipelago of other mythic, artistic, and literary evocations of islands. That significant artistic work has been staged around islands, both real and imagined, is perhaps unsurprising – islands, after all, have historically proved fertile ground for narratives of all kinds, from literary fantasies to scientific voyages of discovery. One might go so far as to say that islands are as much tropological as topographical entities; in other words they are formed (in our cultural imagination) by repeated tropes, figures of speech, and stories, as much as they are by their material reality. The stories, which render islands as places of adventure, abandonment, uncanniness, terror, imprisonment, discovery and so on, become inseparable from them. From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the figure of the island is always well-trodden cultural territory, and even the notion of a journey to a hitherto undiscovered island is itself a familiar trope by now.

The appeal of the island as device or trope for artistic, literary, or other appropriations has several dimensions, not the least of which is this very surfeit of associations, histories and narratives. But equally the island may serve figuratively as a microcosm of larger geographic or social territories; it may serve as a metaphor for isolation; an opportunity for retreat and solace, or even perhaps an occasion for establishing autonomy; it can provide a retreat from civilisation and history. To offer just a few examples from recent art, one might think of the quasi-mythological and fictive location depicted in Charles Avery's 'Islanders' drawings and installations, for instance, or Matthew Barney's use of the Isle of Man, and indeed of Staffa, as 'characters' in his epic Cremaster film cycle. Or take, in a rather different register, Vito Acconci's *Personal Island* (1992); a one-person row boat with its own small island attached, which – as if to disprove John Donne – allows the user to be an island if they wish to be. And, extending Acconci's critique of the modern desire for private space, we might consider the work of Andrea Zittel, who with *A-Z Pocket Property* (1995) and *Indianapolis Island* (2010) created dwellings which are artificial, domestically scaled, and fully inhabitable islands. The rich metaphoric material afforded by the very idea of the island is a crucial aspect of Chong Kwan's project too, supporting its uncanny atmosphere and making space for the historical events and characters it evokes.

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It is worth noting that islands seem frequently to become sites of historical or narrative importance in large part because of the ways in which they solicit fantasies of timelessness or of being outside of history. Tahiti might serve as a prime example of this seemingly paradoxical effect: the iconic stories of Captains Cook, Bligh and Christian, and later, famously, the biography of Paul Gauguin, are inseparably bound up with this place, precisely because Tahiti's role in the Western imaginary has been so often defined via prelapsarian notions of Rousseauian noble savages welcoming travellers to a land of sexual freedom and idyllic coexistence. In 1771, barely a decade after the publication of Macpherson's Ossianic verse, French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, influenced by Rousseau's writing, published an account of his voyages which made explicit this will to find a place outside the time of Western history. As his boat was about to depart Tahiti, he wrote in his journal: "I shall never recall without pleasure the brief time I spent in your midst and as long as I live will extol the happy isle of Cythera: it is the true Utopia." This image of Tahiti as an Edenic paradise was to be given further credence when it was reiterated in Diderot's 1772 *Supplément* to Bougainville's account, thus receiving the imprimatur of an Enlightenment hero: fact and fiction become inseparable once again.

Bougainville and Diderot's paeans to Tahiti remind us that islands are often treated in utopian rhetorical terms, and indeed Thomas's More's original Utopia was itself a fictional island realm. As Colin Davis has noted, there is good reason for More and others to insist on a spatial remote setting for their utopias: "If the ideal society is not to meld with our imperfect world, not to be contaminated by it, then, we are told, its precondition is isolation. But with *isolation*, we are already in the semantic territory of islands, oceans, and voyages." Utopias, then, are places we might be on our way to, or from, but which must necessarily elude our grasp and remain unlocatable. The pun in More's choice of name for his ideal society is cunningly well-chosen – the ideal place always seems to turn out to be no-place (*ou-topos*), and island paradises all too often turn out to have their dystopian side.

Bougainville himself, looking out at the atolls east of Tahiti asked: "Is this extraordinary land rising, or is it in ruins?" The terms in which he poses this question can't help but bring to mind the terms in which Robert Smithson describes the appeal of the post-industrial landscape of New Jersey where, he writes "buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built" and where history vanishes in "a Utopia minus a bottom." This travelogue, like several of Smithson's other writings and many of his art works, delights in a confusion and reversal of binaries. Past and present, science and myth, culture and nature, centre and periphery all shift their meaning, become undecidable. Unsurprisingly, given these interests, Smithson was drawn to the idea of fabricating islands, proposing, for example, to pour one hundred tonnes of tinted glass onto Miami Islet to create *Island of Broken Glass*. This work Smithson claimed was "not meant to save anything or anyone, but to reveal things as they are." It was to function, one might say, as a kind of dark mirror, and Smithson's own obsession with Mayan myth, and with obsidian as a material, makes his work and thought one possible route to mapping and locating Chong Kwan's project. The particularity of *The Obsidian Isle* lies in its emphasis on Scottish history, of course, but also in the somewhat utopian tenor of its premise that it is a place where national history can both be remembered and forgotten. And yet, for all that this mnemonic isle seems an ideal solution to the problem of living *with*, but not *in* the past, the tone of the Chong Kwan's images, with their sense of ruination, uncanniness, and hallucination, intimate that this too is an unattainable or dystopian utopia.

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(extrait)**

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L'artiste nous présente des images construites d'un lieu qui fait référence d'une part au mythe d'Ossian et d'autre part à une accumulation d'immeubles abandonnés, profondément ancrées dans les traditions romantiques pour représenter un paysage tel qu'il est dans le monde contemporain des nouvelles découvertes en matière de technologie photographique. Considéré comme un lieu où l'histoire écossaise est remémorée ou rappelée, The Obsidian Isle est autant une illusion fantastique qu'un hypothétique miroir noir teinté dans lequel nous entrevoyons les créations des mythes et les contes historiques qui renforcent ces réalités comme marqueur de notre nation et de notre identité. Gayle Chong Kwan nous invite à regarder cet endroit qui est un mélange de différents lieux : où, ensuite devrions nous installer The Obsidian Isle elle-même?

Peut-être que sa position est proche de Staffa vers les Hébrides, The Obsidian Isle pourrait être considérée comme prenant sa place au milieu d'un archipel d'autres évocations mythiques, artistiques et littéraires d'îles. Cet important travail artistique, mis en scène autour d'îles, à la fois réelles et imaginaires, peut paraître surprenant - après tout les îles ont toujours été les sources d'inspiration de toutes sortes de récits, de la littérature aux ouvrages sur les grandes découvertes scientifiques. On pourrait même avancer que ces îles sont des entités autant tropologiques que topographiques ; en d'autres termes qu'elles sont issues (dans notre imaginaire collectif) autant des figures de style, et d'histoires, que de leur réalité matérielle. Les histoires qui montrent les îles comme des espaces d'aventures, d'abandon, d'étrangeté, de terreur, d'emprisonnement, de découvertes et ainsi de suite, deviennent indissociables. Depuis le début du XXI^e siècle, l'image de l'île est toujours un territoire culturel bien délimité, et même l'idée d'un voyage sur une île jusqu'alors inconnue est en soi une métaphore de nos jours. La particularité de The Obsidian Isle réside dans l'accent mis sur l'histoire écossaise, bien entendu, mais aussi dans l'intention quelque peu utopique qui a pour prémisse un lieu où l'Histoire nationale peut être à la fois rappelée et oubliée.

Et pourtant, à cause de cela cette mnémonique île semble être une solution idéale au problème du vivre avec, mais pas dans le passé, le ton des images de Gayle Chong Kwan, avec leur sens de la ruine, de l'étrangeté, et de l'hallucination, nous affirme que cela est aussi une utopie irréalisable voir une contre-utopie.