Christina McPhee: A Commonplace Book

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MP: I’m fascinated with the contradictory implications of Venus’ uninhabitable atmosphere as the inspiration for this body of work. It operates in these pieces both as a symbol for the earth after what you suggest is the inevitable moment of carbon saturation and as a fantastical shelter from this storm, something you’ve coined, “tesserae tents.”

CM: I started thinking, about using the tesserae—complex ridged folds—of the surface of Venus, as a simple visual analog for carbon intensification in our atmosphere. It’s thought that Venus may once have had water, even oceans, but that there is no carbon cycle on Venus, so there can’t be any absorption; there are no oceans to take up the excess carbon. Most of us are wondering how much longer the carbon increases in our atmosphere can go on before there is massive loss of coastlines, dramatic changes in ecosystems, and then what about us? So, imagine improvised shelters at, or inside, these neglected areas, often alluvial or littoral swamps, marshes, or riverbeds. I dove into intimate spaces on the scale of the watershed and the rushes; a mammal’s-eye view in contrast, and immediate proximity, to alternative and traditional petroleum energy-producing plants on a huge scale. I felt that there was an invisible assemblage going on, maybe Venus-like intensifications of carbon in the air. I started to imagine how, as we try to quickly build and go online with alternative energies, at the same time we might not be converting away from carbon emissions fast enough. How abstraction is a kind of tactical move to deflect attention from the literal reportage of a photograph. That lag between the image recognition (the documentary moment) and the sense of an overwhelming dynamic reportage of a photograph. That lag is the inevitable moment of carbon saturation and as a fantastical shelter from this storm, something you’ve coined, “tesserae tents.”

The hot colors offered, deliberately, a pleasure, to scream out “tacky shiny bad taste!” as Venus and her fans might prefer. Since these paper structures were kind of anti-models, really, the color can go wild and schlocky and excessive. Assembling the stacks of folded paper sheets in precarious balances, I work with one hand on the sculpture, the other with a still digital camera or with my video camera, pouring water from the hose into the pooled iridescent and probably toxic puddles of airbrush paint, as at the same time I shoot and edit inside the camera.

MP: I’m equally compelled by your concept of the kairotic or “bastard spaces,” such as the Sunset Midway oil fields near Taft, California, that exist on the edge of civilization where you have been shooting video. Unwanted and neglected spaces seem to have something different to say to us, or even inspire solutions to this ecological conundrum.

CM: I film on the fly at high-tech energy installations, shoot at dawn, dusk, or after-hours on weekends, a few minutes at a time. I shoot the videos as a kind of drawing. I work within a sense of the rhythm of the site, for example, in response to the rich sound rhythms from turbines. The shoots—guerrilla-style as they are—involve a poignant gesture or kairotic moment, which in urban slang may mean, not only the “perfect time or apt moment of luck,” but in a strange reversal also “is used to express gaiyness or queerness or just to make fun of people who you don’t like, as in “go away you kairotic bastard.” I’ve never actually heard anyone say this, but the Urbandictionary.com gloss on “kairotic” as opportunistic, fortuitous, and non-standard is so trippy. You can’t really visualize what the world is going to be like if the Arctic sea ice melts. You can imagine drowning cities and things like that on a grand scale, but what about the intimate detail, the less obvious byways? In a sense, the future is a kind of forbidden landscape. It’s possibly so alien to the familiar and the everyday that no speculative images exist yet of it. One is left like Blake to imagine dynamic worlds of elaborate strangeness. Or to create launch pads like installations for time travel to a future after oil, as Isa Genzken has done. So the thing to do is to shoot at difficult-to-photograph sites. At Sunset Midway, I got stopped by security even when I am shooting from the public road. I am told that the airspace, the vise itself, is a property of the petroleum companies!
Energy extraction is going on in neglected natural areas, especially littoral or marginal streambeds, riverbeds, and swamps or sloughs, in estuaries near the ocean, because of the need for large amounts of water for cooling. An assemblage of disconnected elements are thrown together. The point of contact is a kairotic moment—that’s where the videomontage attempts to condense these points and extract their sweetness, like squeezing fruit for a stream of luscious juice.

MP Your method of translation from video to layered and sequenced stills provides a 2-D foundation for these investigations. You mention that you seek traces of something not found in the video footage. What are you looking for? What have you found?

CM Printing these photomontages as physical objects is, in miniature, accelerating the accumulation (of carbon) climate change. I think of the magical geomorphologie of Constant. His *New Babylon*, as if suspended like night-necklaces over the plains of Northern Europe, prefigure networks. So if that’s where we live now, what happens to the agency of the artist? I think there’s still nature beyond our control even though we are inside it and complicit. There’s still that absolute process. The tesserated image comes into the physical but moves back into and through the network, as the images are doing in this interview. In the photomontage process, I sense that the image sequence becomes a solid like a wall or a ship’s hull, patched or soldered together in tiles. The future, far from immaterial, feels like a mass we can almost touch. Maybe we could see it if we could just get inside the doorways, beyond the portals of the tesserae.

MP And yet, one of the elements of these works that is so startlingly beautiful is the use of drawing and painting as a way to explore the layering methodologies used to find traces of something not found in the video.

CM I wish to ask what it feels like to be alive now, as the climate is going crazy. One way to do that was to start from the extreme opposite position of fantasy—by drawing very loosely from the Magellan mission to Venus from small jpegs online. The drawings started to move further away from the conceit of Magellan and into rashes of lyric, even cheesy, iridescent paint. I began to use loud colors and “bad” paint and make the forms alternate between subtle topographic shifts in graphite and streaks of paint movement. At length, some of the drawings grew too large and moved outdoors. I would shoot video as I was also pouring paint or water on big sheets of paper stock hung like sheets to dry in the cool morning air. I worked in color sets—tesserae-yellow, tesserae-vermillion—as if to work up and down a chromatic scale, like “scoring” the models in a performance sequence. As soon as I could finish a sequence of video, I would arrange the raw footage of the tesserae models into sequences surrounding shots of the energy-producing landscapes, so that the tesserae would seem to be clashing or merging with the turbines and the steam vents. It was as if the video had become a middle term between drawing and painting on one hand and photomontage on the other. The videomontage cancelled intimacy in the impromptu tesserae models by setting them into the huge scale of energy production. As a countervalent move, I returned to photographing the models at the site of their conception, my studio yard and montaging the shots into my field photographs of places of abandoned technology overgrown with new growth—forest and debris, rotting ocean piers, abandoned kilns.)
We Used Words To Cause Suffering (After Classical Maya Hieroglyphs and Elena Ferrante), 2016
Ink and graphite on Fabriano Rosaspina paper, 50.1 x 71.1 cm / 19.75 x 28 in
Woman Ceding Family (Afer Nekia Chaney), 2017
Ink, color pencil, and graphite on Takefu washi, 63.4 x 96.5 cm / 25 x 38 in