

Anxiety in two dimensions: discussions with Nick Mobbs

Nick Mobbs is first and foremost a printmaker; his practice involves making sculptures and temporary installations, but these serve as stages in creating a final image. He is interested in the psychology of space and place: how we order, construct and understand space, and the powerful tension induced when our experience of a space upsets logic, familiarity and predictability. Over recent years he has explored the development of linear perspective, the theatrical and filmic techniques of model making and set construction employed by James Casebere, Thomas Demand and Anne Hardy, and interventions into existing spaces by rearranging familiar objects, reminiscent of Adam Dade and Sonya Hanney's 'Stacked Hotel Rooms'. His work has a cryptic simplicity; the sparse spaces do not try to convince you through detail, nor offer any comfort. He is currently developing a new body of work which directly re-introduces an anonymous human presence, exploring the covered body and its relation to shelter, disguise, concealment and the desire to define and control one's personal environment.

The following is taken from a series of discussions with Nick, in person and by e-mail.

Karen MacDonald, MFA Curating, Goldsmiths.

KM: I'm interested that you choose to present your work two dimensionally; putting layers of mediation between the source and the viewer. It would seem more obvious, or easier, to conjure that feeling of unease by making installations or films...

NM: When you move around an installation of this nature in a gallery, you can't get away from the knowledge that it has been created in the gallery. You're looking out for how the artist is trying to 'fool' you, what effect they're engineering. I wanted to get away from that. I think when we view a picture we can enter it mentally and leave the gallery behind. So we can be confronted by some alien arrangement of pillows in a lounge without thinking this is a room in gallery made to look like a lounge. I've been invited to make some work for a gallery in Nottingham but they want me to make an installation and I'm hesitant.

KM: I can see why. But it might be an interesting opportunity, if you could find a different way of handling it. I have no idea what that might be!

NM: The gallery is just one part of the building. There are other things going on in there as well. I might go for it if I could use somewhere outside of the gallery space, an area with other uses, where people come and go not for the purpose of seeing art. I haven't made up my mind yet, I'll let you know...

KM: The fact that you can't experience the original installation, arrangement, etcetera, that you only see it as an image, means you could imagine it 'really' existing

for another reason. It could be documentation of some other place or event taken out of context.

NM: Yeeess... I often get that reading, of the work as documentation, which is something I try to get away from. That's why I don't show the photographs: I want to confront the viewer with a picture, which can be read as a current encounter, rather than a photo, which is read as documentation. I manipulate the work through a printmaking process to distance it from being a photo. The large screen prints for example have an unreal colour saturation and large halftone dot giving them a graphic feel. But when photographed to send with an application or go on a website all this is lost. They end up looking like the original photo, reading as documentation of sculptural work.

KM: Maybe then it's more a reverse process of illustration. The viewer is left with clues and you're inviting them to back fill with some kind of narrative. It reminds me of children's novel 'Marianne Dreams', by Catherine Storr: whatever the lead character draws exists independently in a parallel reality. There's a kind of sublimation to the process, which lends a different authority to the image than if you presented an installation. I feel it has something to do with the quality of uncanniness itself. The image returns, or persists, as its own repressed, if you like – the source no longer exists and the new image has also erased the source's documentation, its own usurping double.

NM: My particular interest has moved away from the Uncanny in the textbook Freudian sense – I'm more interested in the state of anxiety or tension that goes with it. That's what I'm trying to create in my work.

KM: That sense of unease or dread that you can't quite put your finger on?

NM: Unease yes. Dread no. I want the ambiguity/uncertainty in the works to create anxiety in the viewer. I'm not after the kind of uncanny that creates dread in Edgar Allan Poe's stories. Rather, I want the viewer to be unsettled, and so question their own reading of the image.

KM: Freud was dismissive of Ernst Jentsch's proposal that the uncanny stems from 'intellectual uncertainty'. Yet Freud also admitted his own overview of the uncanny didn't account for its operation in the realm of the arts, that 'what is left [after his initial findings] probably calls for an aesthetic study'*. He suggested that the key was how closely the forms or events matched the expectations of realism set up by the author (or artist). I wonder if it is more about inadequacy of intellectual certainty. We might be clear if something is sentient, for example, but that doesn't stop it being more besides - - which is perhaps what accounts for Freud's hesitance; art is always 'more besides'.

NM: My own lay-psychology thoughts on Jentsch/Freud's arguments are that uncertainty over what we're confronted with provides a trigger to some repressed (or just outgrown) memory. 'Architecture of Fear', edited by Nan Ellin, has an essay by Anne Troutman, which suggests our adult fear of cellars, attics and dark stairways comes from using these types of spaces to confront childhood fears through play.

KM: Probably you've read Gaston Bachelard? He outlined how a predominance of thin, pinched houses with missing or shrunken windows in children's drawings, what he referred to as 'closed' houses, is a typical expression of trauma. Have you ever had a psychologist 'read' your images? Not that I'm suggesting you need it! - it would just be interesting to have a professional take to contextualise the lay-psychology readings.

NM: I was hoping to get a psychology student to help me to design a questionnaire for visitors of my solo show in Nottingham this autumn – to get feedback from visitors on how the works make them feel. Getting a psychologist to 'read' the images would be interesting too. All contemporary art attempts to engage its audience and make them think. I guess the science of how it does that is psychology. Works that look at feelings and/or memory are particularly prone to laypsychological reading. There's nothing wrong with that but the works are just art around a psychological theme. I'm an artist, not a psychologist.

KM: The visitor questionnaire – is that for your own research? It's quite an unusual step. There is something performative about it, which could influence people's experience. It might almost become part of the work.

NM: Someone suggested it to me. It's always interesting to hear what your work 'says' to people, what they take from it. Do they even see the themes you intend from the work and are there particular things which strike them? Because this work has psychological themes a survey of how the works make people feel could be interesting. You're right that it would be likely to change how people read the images though. I'll need to think about it carefully.

KM: 'Uncanniness' remains a strong presence in art, and it seems perennially present in film and TV. Apart from technological developments (the film 'Ring' wouldn't use VHS if made now), I wonder if it evolves over time? For instance, is today's uncanny specifically influenced by the perceived threat of terrorism – the fear that the neighbour (the familiar) might be the enemy?

NM: The intro to Vidler's 'The Architectural Uncanny' talks about how the uncanny has developed and changed with the social/political climate of the times. His book 'Warped Space' looked at similar questions. Both were pre September 11 though I think. "Protect and Survive" – the late 70s government pamphlet on how to build a shelter within the home to protect yourself from nuclear attack – has some great illustrations. As with kids' dens the shelters look like they provide only psychological protection from an imagined threat.

KM: Direct comparisons are probably fruitless, but it's interesting to consider that eeriness changes, like mores influence aesthetics. I guess it makes sense in a Freudian reading, as things are repressed because they're considered unacceptable or unwelcome; but Freud's essay itself seems to be seeking universal and eternal recipes for the uncanny. What do you think of Gregor Schneider's work?

NM: From what I've read and seen his early works were genuinely unsettling. I've been less keen on the recent work: once you place the work within the gallery environment, you view it as art and your guard is up. I know it's a fabrication so my experience of the space is not what it would be if I walked into an identical setup that wasn't in a gallery. I think Mike Nelson gets round this by creating environments that suggest the activity of some crazy person - he gives you all these clues to their thoughts and activities and you wonder about them. Your experience of the space itself is less important.

KM: Looking at the work on your website, I've been wondering if there was a point in 2008 when you stopped making models and started assembling things in 'real' spaces. Was that the case? Is the change in process significant?

NM: I began to feel that I needed a strong sense of a real domestic space as the settings for these alien presences. In order for the foreign or alien to jolt you it must be within the familiar. (This meeting of familiar and strange is also central to the uncanny.) There wasn't a sudden change over from models to 'interventions' - I played around with both side by side for a while.

KM: Could you say a bit more about the new work you're developing?

NM: The new work is continuing to investigate the darker side of childhood play. My focus has shifted from the kids den to games - particularly those involving concealment. I'm still working on some den type images too and structures which are very ambiguous - halfway between a den and a body under a blanket.

* Freud, S, 1919: *The Uncanny*, Penguin Classics reprint 2003, London

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