

‘Hannah Collins: Emotional Cartography’

Gilda Williams

In 1980 – the opening year of the Postmodern decade -- cultural theorist Raymond Williams published his influential essay ‘Ideas of Nature’, which shattered any clear demarcation between the ‘natural’ and the ‘manmade’ landscape. As Williams theorized, the built environment is but an accumulation of social, historical, topographical, and economic causes, hidden in plain sight in the world around us. The outdated notion of ‘landscape’ as combining the unpredictability of Nature with the rationality of human management crumbles in the many places where inhabitants struggle to survive human intervention.

Williams’ ideas eventually crystallized in a pioneering concept: ‘Cultural Landscape’, a new discipline pulling together separate fields: history, sociology, economics, anthropology, and urban studies, among others. The landscape was re-conceived as an active product and producer of a place. Such a vision disrupted the natural/manmade division while also replacing the Modernist conception of the environment as a potential tabula rasa, to be razed and rebuilt from scratch. Modernism had not proven a shining new beginning -- just another layer to be reckoned with.

In that same year -- 1980 -- the artist and filmmaker Hannah Collins had just finished a year-long tour of the U.S. courtesy of a Fulbright scholarship. Her interest in her surrounding world was influenced by her own self-reckoning as an artist; to understand the complex human-natural-economic-political world in which she lived also meant for Collins to interrogate her place within it, and how this might be expressed in her art. Just as the developing concept of a ‘Cultural Landscape’ served to incorporate numerous approaches within it, Hannah Collins’ art not only crossed the social, architectural, and historic through the use of overlapping media (photography, installation, documentary, and filmmaking), but hinged on an impetus towards self-awareness. There is an abiding self-questioning of her recurring need to travel and unravel both different and sympathetic histories; her films are about the unseen observer – both the artist and the viewer. In her films -- such as those in which she investigated the outskirts of Barcelona (*La Mina*, 2001-04), or the North African population in a former industrial town of northern France (*Solitude and Company*, 2008) -- the artist is central to the work, yet rarely seen. Having survived ‘growing up without a sense of permanence and place’ due to the suffering of her paranoid schizophrenic father, she has developed into an artist with uncommon powers of empathetic interest.

I would describe her practice as an ‘emotional cartography’: mapping through sounds and imagery the places inhabited by people whom she wishes to share with us. Her desire to transmit an overall close emotional experience results in the recurring, immersive quality of her art – whether in the immense, 5x7m photos functioning like lifesize stage sets; or the film and photoworks combining sound (such as *Purifoy*, 2014, which includes voices recounting the history and culture that she documents, or *Solitude and Company* incorporating ambient music by the local DJ Boulaone); the roomsize *La Mina* installation; or the scale that she bestows upon small things, such as oysters transformed into a sensuous presence. We are asked not just to look at her images but perhaps to revisit the physical and emotional engagement that she experienced when observing them.

Born in the 1950s, Hannah Collins spent her early childhood enjoying the natural beauty and freedom afforded on the isolated Scottish isle of Arran, before moving to London. As a young woman she found herself living and working in the East End where she produced her early photographs, mostly interiors, such as *Thin Protective Coverings* and *The Violinist* (both 1986). Exhibiting in noted commercial spaces from London’s Interim Art and Matt’s Gallery to the legendary Leo Castelli in New York, Collins’ large scale, semi-constructed photographs gained the attention of the international art world. In 1991 she was awarded the European Photography prize, and, in 1993, was nominated for the Turner Prize.

In 1998, Collins moved to Barcelona. Her travels have taken her to Eastern Europe -- perhaps in pursuit of familial roots – as well as wholly unfamiliar places: from Istanbul, to the Joshua Tree desert (*Purifoy 2014*), to the Amazon (*The Fertile Forest*, 2014). One potential theme at the heart of Hannah Collins’ work is the concept of ‘occupation’: how do we humans occupy space -- physically and symbolically; artistically, architecturally, economically or socially? How do we ‘occupy’ roles and positions in both the local and the wider society? How do we ‘occupy’ ourselves in the sense of earning a livelihood? And, finally, how does art occupy space – does it stretch across a wall, like the bank of five screens in *La Mina*; or occupy a wall and almost ‘stand’ on the floor, just like us, in giant mural-like photographs? Or do we engage in a close, intimate relationship, as with her photobooks or the many small

photographs stretching on the long shelf-like structure making up the installation *The Fertile Forest?* Each of us, Collins' works seem to say, must define and occupy a 'position', and the artist seems indefatigably interested in documenting how the forces of creativity, material and emotional needs, as well as macrocosmic political/economic policies shape those choices, or how the subcultures existing as microcosms within the city – whether Rome, Madrid, London – seem, despite shifting histories, to return to recurring local patterns of occupation, century after century.

Other artists have similarly attempted to observe a comprehensive view of the occupied landscape. Robert Smithson, for example, with *Spiral Jetty* (1970) not only drew together the vastness of geological time with the finite nature of historic time (particularly, the Gold Rush), but presented his findings in multiple media – the Great Salt Lake earthwork itself as well as photographs, drawings, and a film. Collins too documents her art-making across media, such as *Parallel*, 2007, her work with African immigrants in three European cities, which exists as a photobook and film installation.

Another artist of Smithson's generation, Ed Ruscha, in photobooks such as *Thirty-Four Parking Lots* (1967), serially captured from the air how the virgin American earth is transformed by the automobile, regimented into rows of straight lines. I was reminded of Ruscha in an image from *La Mina*, in which Collins photographs from a balcony, far above the city pavement, children's chalk-drawings of swirling magical birds and fiery dragons – like Ruscha's hard-edged Los Angeles grid, reborn in Barcelona as flamenco-dancing, mythological creatures. Collins' methods of investigation and display embrace the sedimented nature of human and natural space that Smithson and Ruscha envisioned, enacting what historian Thomas Schlerth called 'aboveground archaeology' (1990): not so much digging underground for hidden signs of the past but acknowledging the aboveground signs of time's passage, and the lingering effects on both the inhabitants and the landscape itself.

When looking at Collins' artworks since her very earliest pictures, the temptation arises to read them as allegories. In *Platespinner* (1985) an intensely skilled man spins atop tall sticks a glowing array of a dozen plates, all flatly perched and precariously balanced, creating a strange, floating horizon in perpetual motion. This figure might symbolize a complicatedly balanced system, hovering on the verge of collapse, about to disappear for all time. In *Thin Protective Coverings* we see the freely available street-material of cardboard boxes which the young artist hauled back to her east London studio: as if a symbol for her own emotional defenses, opened up and laid bare in their vulnerability; or like Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, splayed open to demonstrate how hollow they really are. In *Violinist*, we see a violin-playing female friend of Collins, balancing on a sea of mattresses covering the floor. In this enclosed space, an anonymous violin-player remains devoted to her music, a kind of allegory of stability on the brink of a crash, or of art (music) responding to whatever conditions exist 'underfoot', finding equilibrium in the effort to continue. In these early images, the sense of temporariness and transience (the unadorned mattresses; the boxes) becomes almost prophetic of Collins' own journey.

In one well-known image from *La Mina*, a young boy holds in his hands a caged bird: bird is both a symbol and a mirror image – a symbolic overlap which, as Collins is keen to point out, the boy is well aware. Hers' are thoughtful subjects perfectly conscious of the power of their own image. These pictures are not allegories but, as critic Michael Tarantino put it, artworks 'somewhere between a *tableau vivant* and *nature morte*, a kind of interior landscape'. The photographic series titled *Clouds* (1988) show an empty sky, taken a week after her child was born one winter in England: 'It was the first time I went outside onto the roof of my house ... I saw not only Stieglitz's series of clouds *Equivalents* but also my own range of thoughts and feelings.' The only presence here is the unseen photographer. However, we find in *Clouds* the three essential centers around which Collins' art coalesces: firstly, the world around her (the sky and clouds); secondly, an awareness of her choices of media within art history (Stieglitz); and finally, the artist's reactive emotions. As critic David Company has written, Collins' art is 'both an epic form, and a subjective horizon of doubt or hesitation ... of finding a ways to picture feelings.'

The horizon -- or its lack, as with *Clouds* -- plays a big part in Collins' image-making. The horizontal arrangement of cardboard laid out against the studio wall in *Thin Protective Coverings* is the first example of a recurring composition in her art: a long, horizontal display that seems to rise out of the earth, literalizing her vision of a layer of history, occupying her chosen site. This landscape-like horizontal image appears in the flat expanse of toppled tombstones in *The Hunter's Space* (1995); the long outdoor structure of screens in *The Road to Mvezo (Nelson Mandel's Birthplace)* (2007-08); the spread of bedstands, gates and other objects raised up and extending over a desert sculpture in the work *Purifoy*, 2014 (sound/photographic documentation of the California desertworks by African-American sculptor Noah Purifoy, 1917-2004); and the broad horizontality of a street scene in Istanbul (*Signs of Life, Istanbul*, 1992).

The long horizontal format is, of course, cinematographic but it also attests to the gravity-bound nature of human occupation on earth.

In *Signs of Life, Istanbul* (1992) rising from the expansive ground are, indeed, myriad 'signs of life': from once-grand urban buildings to tides of rubbish ('as if washed up after a flood', as the artist describes it), together forming a majestic, almost sculptural street-scene. Perhaps most vividly, in *In the Course of Time (6)* (1995), we find the late-industrial furnace-room of a Factory in Kracow, whose objects read from left to right as a veritable inventory of how objects and elements occupy the earth: they flow like water up or down in pipes; or merely lean against a wall like the spade; or roll across the earth like the rubber tyre and giant spools of rope; or are built up on blocks or bricks like a primitive architecture. In the middle a fiery, luminous centre: a fire ascending gravityless from it all.

The most recent sound/image work, *Purifoy*, is all about horizon – the flat desert expanse interrupted by horizontally laid-out sculptures, like a line-up of disembodied 'legs': prosthetic shins, covered in old trousers and 'wearing' shoes, like halved people waiting for some phantom bus. Other horizontally oriented images in *Purifoy* include the fragment of a rolling traintrack, or a sequence of cannonballs suspended in mid-air formation. Where *Purifoy's* assisted readymade sculptures – scaffolds, sheds, weathered accumulations of all description -- seem to describe an open expanse that is as 'all-horizon', her recent work in the Amazon, *The Fertile Forest*, seems in contrast to be – like the *Clouds* – utterly horizonless. The Amazon is seen in innumerable highly specified images as a tangle of vegetation, observed during her prolonged stays with the local tribe who were willing to share their ways and rituals with her. Extracted from the tangle of vegetation is an occasional fragmented view of the sky glimpsed through towering treetops, as if to float magically upwards from this life-affirming jungle. The shelf in the gallery where *The Fertile Forests'* sequence of innumerable images are on display winds its way at waist-level round the walls, becoming a kind of surrogate horizon-line absent in the jungle landscape itself.

Hannah Collins' work is, finally, a supremely ethical project, one intent on breaking down boundaries across media (photography, film) and genres (landscape, still life, portraiture) in which she must also test herself in discovering her own art-making. The role she devises as artist is not just image-maker and sound-coordinator but, perhaps above all, as a welcome, empathetic and curious guest. 'Ethics are hospitality', Derrida once said: the making of common world citizenship can only be accomplished by those, like Hannah Collins, willing to cross high fences and discover what lies beyond – hidden in plain sight.