

enchanted drawing | drawing enchantment

I first came across Fiona Connor's *Inner City Real Estate* project somewhat fortuitously. Holidaying in Wellington I discovered that Fiona had also made the trip south, and had a show opening that very evening. Excited by this unexpected crossing of paths, I dropped by Enjoy to see how the show was coming together. Having never visited the new Enjoy gallery space I was somewhat underwhelmed; there was some awkward manoeuvring to enter the space, which was filled with a false wall at one end that housed three double-hung sash windows looking blankly onto the gallery wall. Connor had not painstakingly recreated the windows as I was expecting but had in fact sourced them from a wreckers yard. Compared with the richness of some of the previous work I had seen of Connor's I had trouble locating this change of direction. "Quite a minimal show" I quipped, Connor, in pre-opening busy-ness, said something off hand in return and I left to return later that evening, when these initial experiences were exploded apart.

Returning to the gallery later that night I again entered through the convoluted gallery entrance and into the main space. I was still under the illusion of being in a typical gallery space – white walls, polished timber floors – empty, save for the recently installed windows at the far end. There were some piled up building materials in one corner, remnants from the installation process.

It was around then that I noticed that a panel of wall lining had been invitingly removed.

Looking back now I can imagine other points of access to the work: following the top of the false wall along, the step up, the strange entry point, a close observation of materiality, but initially none of these triggered the work for me... Stepping through this threshold had a huge impact; completely changing my understanding of the project from that of a minimal intervention to hugely complex and ambitious piece, triggering a flood of questions.

I later learnt that Fiona talks of all her various forms of production[⊖] as a kind of drawing. I want to examine this in relation to the experience her works set up in order to answer some of those first questions. But first I would like to focus on that moment of unfolding and the complex, unsettling and exhilarating feelings I experienced.

Earlier this year I read a book by Jane Bennett that examined the role of enchantment in the contemporary world. Thinking about my experience of *Inner City Real Estate* I returned to it, looking for a way to explain the works' powerful effect on me. Bennett describes the sensation of enchantment with such exactitude it is worth quoting in full. For her it is "provoked by a surprise, by an encounter with something that one did not expect. Surprise itself includes both a pleasant, charming feeling and a slightly off-putting sense of having been disrupted or tripped up. In enchantment, these two are present in just the right measures so as to combine, fortuitously, in a way that engenders an energizing feeling of fullness or plenitude—a momentary return to childhood *joie de vivre*. Enchantment begins with the step-back immobilization of surprise but ends with a mobilizing rush as if an electric charge had coursed through space to you. In enchantment, a new circuit of intensities forms between material bodies."[⊗]

Bennett furthers her proposition by suggesting that enchantment is a necessary state of being to motivate people to act ethically towards the world and towards others. Connor's work taps into this current by presenting seemingly mundane everyday objects, but then imbuing them with a touch of the surprising, unfamiliar and unexpected. Stepping through the wall of Connor's installation, I had the sensation of the known world being pulled out from beneath me, that I was in circumstances previously unfathomable. Looking down as I stepped through I noted that the floorboards ran in opposing direction and stepped down — I had been walking on an entirely false floor previously unaware of what lay beneath. I then had that curious sensation that Bennett so well describes as a "mobilizing rush as if an electric charge had coursed through space..." My brain calculated the implications of this move and the scale and complexity of the work overwhelmed me. I felt like I had been taken along for a ride and

⊖ constructions, videos and more traditional works on paper

⊗ Bennett *The Enchantment Of Modern Life* Princeton University Press, New York, 2001. page 104

somehow discovered something secret.

Stepping through the wall is not unlike the experience Alice had stepping through another unquestionably solid surface; artifice is called into question.

Through the wall, the means of construction of this illusion is revealed: timber framed walls, lined with plasterboard on one side stand between a metre and two metres from the wall of the actual gallery. Connor's construction is canted in relation to the gallery space creating inhabitable pockets of space in the cavity between walls. These pockets open up, creating a space where secrets are shared. This, combined with sudden expanded understanding of the work, operates to powerful effect.

Connor describes her work as a drawing, which offers a provocative way of describing and thinking about her extremely thing-like construction. A drawing is of the thing, not the actual thing itself. It acts as a mediation between the object in the world and the fabrication of its representation. The work tests these limits of representation. Unlike conventional two-dimensional drawings hers is a spatial, inhabitable construction. It is, like all drawings, still also a piece of artifice. Connor takes her observations and filters them through the act of making. As a representational move drawing privileges certain aspects of reality at the expense of others; detail over substance, incident over any possible idealized state.

Given the architectural subject matter, her drawing has another level of resonance. Typically drawings of architecture precede the act of construction, projecting an idealized state of existence. Architectural working drawings, blueprints, act as an instruction, rather than a means to convey experiential effects. In undertaking heritage work architects produce "as built" drawings, acknowledging that the interpretation of the working drawings instruction does not always happen to the smallest detail, and that buildings undergo various changes through their lives. The dents, scuffs and scratches that a building accumulates are records of events; markers of stories.

Connor's drawing then, could be considered as the "as built" drawings par excellence. Her painstaking reconstruction of the 174 Cuba Street Enjoy Gallery space is highly attentive to the dents, imperfections and traces of history and use. In this way the work is archival, and yet as an exhibition it has duration, complicating the ideas of documentation and authenticity in a compelling state of near resolution.

By subverting our notions of space and truth, Inner City Real Estate creates an enchanting experience using drawing as both a means and an end.

Chris Cottrell
November 2006.

chris@make-do.net
www.make-do.net