Roger Hopgood
And Then There Were None

Initially, the series *And Then There Were None* seems to concern itself entirely with interior space; there seems to be no trace of the concern with landscape that characterised much of the earlier work. Closer consideration, however, reveals that a reflection on landscape does still exist through its reference to the Picturesque and its exploration of the vantage point from which the Picturesque landscape might be viewed.

Emerging in the 18th century, the aesthetic principle of the Picturesque was defined by its pursuit of a wilder, more rugged depiction of nature, a depiction that was found to exist in the work of painters such as Claude Lorrain. One aspect of this treatment of nature was the roughened textures of aged and weathered surfaces. The early followers of the Picturesque held that an appreciation of the textures of age and decay was not confined to those found in gnarled oaks and ancient ruins; the textures of decay manifest in the lives of the rural poor were found equally appealing. The craggy faces of those eking out a living, cottages and hovels in disrepair, lives unaffected by modern day improvement, were all recognised as having aesthetic value. It could be said that the Picturesque aesthetic, in one form at least, found its meaning through inequities of power. Advocates of the Picturesque were typically those who were in a position to enjoy the pastoral landscape at a distance rather than those who knew it at close quarters and worked the land through necessity.

Compositional conventions in the Picturesque, and the placing of the viewer in an ideal position to recognise the scene as a coherent whole, assisted this sense of empowerment. The naturalism of the scene, its seemingly unstructured appearance, helped to create a sense of mastery and omniscience since the ‘randomness’ of the scene ‘hides’ the vantage point from which the viewer is able to see with perfect clarity. Landscapes with this kind of disorderly order are in fact completed by the viewer’s presence. The viewer’s look fills the gap in the geometry of the picture; the scene anticipates the spectator and subjugates itself to the spectator’s look. Yet, in that this feeling of empowerment is achieved through the viewer adopting a given vantage point, the Picturesque, like the trompe l’oeil, offers a fragile position of mastery. Rather than situating the spectator in a position where some true essence of nature is revealed, the Picturesque could be regarded as merely appeasing a desire for nature to be a certain way; we are perhaps offered the illusion that nature is not indifferent to our existence.

Lacan’s notion of the returned gaze is of relevance here, with the subject’s sense of self being influenced by the external world. At the heart of the Picturesque, it could be said, is a desire for nature to counter a lack by substantiating the viewer’s sense of relationship with the world. The frame and pictorial conventions are a hindrance to this since they potentially reveal the artifice of the construction. For this reason, the

viewer must deny the frame's existence as a curtailing perimeter. The composition must rest easily within its boundary. The vantage point on the Picturesque scene could thus be viewed as a site of conflict where a desire for wholeness - the self embedded in nature - necessitates a denial of the formal elements of construction.

In the series *And Then There Were None* the country house is used to represent this site of conflict. Country houses in the 18th century began to be built on higher ground to take fuller advantage of the views of the gardens, which increasingly were being modelled in the Picturesque style. In this way, the country house became the focal point of the surrounding 'naturalised' landscapes with all views facing towards a vantage point occupied by the house and its inhabitants. In the series, the landscape beyond the room is seldom seen. The focus is on the landscape we imagine to be there. Although we do catch sight of it here and there, and its presence is expressed through artifacts within the rooms, we are, in the main, denied any confirmation that we occupy the vantage point. We are in a state of limbo where the landscape seems close to laying itself before us but in most cases, it is merely the light that streams through the windows that gives us a tantalising sense of the exterior space.

The pervading tone of disquiet in the work can be linked not just to the struggle for a sense of self but also to the histories associated with the interiors themselves. Social inequalities and injustices, it could be said, are woven into the fabric of many English country houses, not least for the associations many have with the profits from imperial conquest and slavery. Yet, in the absence of the Picturesque view, and the sense of empowerment this might provide, the rooms themselves seem to elevate our status. The heritage interiors offer a familiar trope of Englishness, and this world, external to the self, seems to confer subjecthood upon us. The large, collaged objects that appear in the rooms, however, introduce a presence that is spectral and uncanny. The comfort afforded by the heritage interior is challenged. Thus, the site of conflict is one in which the spectator recognises the affirmation of self on offer but is required to navigate around the evidence of construction, bypassing the signs that might destabilise the privileged position that is otherwise available. In *Ballroom with Milking Stool* (2008) we feel ourselves to be in a space that is part of the tradition of the English social elite. The tall Georgian window, the wood-panelling and large hanging tapestry are some of the indicators that suggest this. Through the window we can see distant trees and can gauge the extent of the grounds that surround the house. There is a stillness both inside and out: nothing stirs in the grounds and the piano in the room with its closed lid seems to emphasise the silence. The only figures we see are those in the tapestry that form part of some kind of celebration of nature. It is difficult to make a judgment on the period that is represented. The interior has a timelessness that denies any easy reading of tell tale signs. There is a feeling that time has stood still and that such spaces are a refuge from the troubles and uncertainties of the modern world. Without knowing the title, we might initially be confused by the large three-legged piece of furniture that seems unusually worn. We might at first mistake it for some kind of crudely fashioned table. Once we realise it is a stool its

unrealistic size begins to undermine the authority of the stately interior. Imagining life in the country house in the past we might be forgiven for dwelling on the idea of a life of leisure and privilege. The class divisions that would have played a part in providing this we may feel we are able to justify on the basis that, so we understand it, harmony across the classes generally prevailed; that the deference shown by the servant class was reciprocated by the paternalistic care of the 'master'. But the presence of the milking stool seems to contradict this version of the past. The deeply worn texture of the stool ought to bring Picturesque appeal as its weathered surface should put us in mind of the charms of rustic life but the stark contrast between it and the more refined wooden structures in the room instead make us think of the life of labour to which it was attached.

Lacan's analysis of Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) considers the way in which an anamorphic skull in the painting undermines the spectator's mastery of the scene. The portrait of two world travellers and their possessions allows the spectator standing before the painting to assume the subject position at first without contradiction. But the eventual recognition of the skull from an altered viewpoint pulls the rug from under the subject's feet by revealing the void that has opened up where the spectator once stood. The spectator, now defined by the painting, becomes the object of a returned gaze. In *Ballroom with Milking Stool* and others in the series we might say that something similar is in operation. The collaged objects conform to the perspective of the space in which they are situated and appear to share the same light source but their presence interrupts the viewer's complicity with the narrative of tradition and heritage that would otherwise draw us in. The stool, through its crude, functional form, fractures the 'memory' of the past. History becomes histories. The spectator can no longer rely upon the 'authenticity' of the room (many are displays within museums) to adopt a position of subjecthood. Just as the spectator's vision of the external world must steer clear of contradiction for subjectivity to be affirmed, the interruption of the givenness of the room's appearance reduces its potential for conferring a sense of belonging on the viewer. In other images, we find objects that similarly threaten to topple the spectator's subject position. Often this threat may not be immediately realised as the objects themselves offer visual delight and a fetishistic pleasure in the historical artefact - an antique silver coffee pot, an 'Uncle Tom' Staffordshire figurine. But as clues they can be unpicked and the narrative dimension that begins to come to mind when considering the series as a whole is that of the country house whodunit. Here, however, we are invited to detect crimes and injustices in which we may ourselves be implicated. The subjecthood on offer is caught up within a discourse of power and privilege but to unravel this and interrogate the specular image of wholeness we may uncover our own vested interests and our own vulnerabilities.