Edward Chell, ‘Common Ground’

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There is a politics in Ed Chell’s work that is played out through propositional structures built from strange comparisons, reminiscent of Berthold Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’. These comparisons have a humour about them, but without playing on irony, parody or absurdity they retain a serious dialectical purpose. There is a simple pointing procedure at work: consider these two visual statements, note their divergent content, then evaluate the meaning of their strange contingency. Part of Chell’s proposition is that through engagement with his carefully and knowingly produced art objects, the viewer will encounter associative displacements that raise questions. Estrangement, in Chell’s case, means orchestrating unexpected equivalences: of work and value, the aesthetic and the industrial, craft and art (fig. 1).

As with Brecht, the allure of pleasurable experience of the work becomes a source of intrigue for the viewer. Why is this image of a slagheap surrounded by references to flowers and the decorations of porcelain (fig. 2)? Why is this pristine white glazed surface attached to a crude wooden pallet? There is a disturbing compulsion in the deliberated force Chell brings to these liaisons that reflects on the tragic aspect of beauty, its fragility, being on the verge of loss or destruction. The tentative nature of discovering the beautiful, as Kant says, is based in the
‘disinterested’ encounter, finding without preconception, a fugitive recognition that could be mis-recognition, a form of judgement that brings awareness of temporality. Sometimes there is sadness about the mix of beauty and its preconception in the repetitions of histories of production, trade and marketing that Chell engages.

These thoughts of industry and beauty arise in relation to the intensely laborious and carefully planned fabrication of Chell’s own works. They also reflect on the history of the place of their installation. The Georgian residential architectural style of Danielle Arnaud’s gallery, a property built in 1764 and designed for the professional classes or wealthier trades people, suggests the principles of taste and propriety established and maintained as a form of obligation in that period. The ethical responsibility Kant imposed on members of civil society to know the rules of correct aesthetic judgement became encoded in practical household choices. This setting perfectly accompanies the domestic ideals and production values inherent in Chell’s references to the blue and white of Royal Doulton chinaware (fig. 3), early photographic techniques, botanic prints, the elegance of oval paintings. The gallery’s interior of graceful archways, fine marble fireplaces, discrete recesses, exquisite cabinetmaking and ornamental plastering demonstrate how responsible lifestyle choices of that period reflected shifting social hierarchies, defined through inclusions and exclusions, even within the intimacy of the household (figs. 4 and 5).
So far there is consistency in Chell’s continuing interest in observing forms of aesthetic dissemblance by which details are overlooked and histories disinfected, internalised and normalised. In this exhibition colour was the immediate key to Chell’s intentions: the reference to the deep blues and perfect whites of high quality porcelain manufacture; the gamboge and grey tints used in the paintings but also in the decor of the rooms in which the works were seen. These colour schemes refer to proprieties of refined classical taste, but in art these colours can also work with the optical disturbances. Chell’s employment of, for example, Goethe’s preoccupation with the opticality of sharply defined edges resonates with the cut-off edges of the beautifully glazed white and dark blue rectangles of flowers seen on the floor. Chell extends the projections along which the blue floral motifs are aligned, disturbing their regularity so that, seen from a certain angle, their neat delineation fuses into an abstract texture that subverts everything about their fine botanical distinction, reducing it to a bubbling surface distortion. Similarly with the paintings, subtly graduated tones of greys and yellows, used to create an image of trees planted along a motorway embankment, are perfectly matched to fuse through simultaneous contrast into a blank effect of light. This produces other, more abstract readings of texture or facture, which from certain viewpoints appear as a gilded sheen or a
damask weave. An optical blindness enters into the perception of the works that is not simply abstracting but emotionally affecting as images transform their presence.

Chell mixes absorption in illusions of surface with the reading of titles or text, in this case an introductory essay by Michael Petrie that points to the obscene evidential aspects of Chell’s images: the spoiled landscape, the pollution of industrialisation, the colonial histories of trade and of ghosted labour. Chell has, in order to refer to the perfection of manufacturing and the glaze of machined surfaces, also submitted himself to the impositions of labour required to produce the craftmanship of delicate textures and brushwork that appeal to bourgeois sensitivity. This implicates Chell, as working artist, in the unseen actualities of production and the effortlessly seductive presentation of objects designed for consumption. Here there is an element of risk: in epic Brechtian terms, a more difficult statement is to be considered, accepted or rejected in relation to modern taste. Petrie mentions this in his reference to the polished plank forms of the sculptor John McCracken. In these works the fetish values of commercial sheen refer to surfboards, honed by Californian craftsmen. Petrie says, ‘no particle of dust was allowed to mar their surfaces’, but then mentions the hidden labour of museum attendants whose work constantly maintains that dust-free shiny look.

Sentiment is an essential component in the politics of Chell’s work. The distance of history is sanitising. Recuperation of histories pervades British culture – in the conservations and reconstructions of the National Trust and English Heritage, or television costume dramas such
as *Downton Abbey* and *The Queen*. Chell uses this positive value for accurate reconstruction, albeit by modern techniques and tools, but questions its sense of nostalgic resolution. The comparative tensions visible within the objects Chell produces suggest the mysterious downside of exchange value that obfuscates the de-skilling and re-skilling realities and the social and environmental consequences of globalised trade. Clearly Karl Marx and William Morris have informed Chell’s awareness of the values and problems of production, but these now go beyond the ethical control of civil society, as understood by Kant in the seventeenth century, in the complexity of their modern manifestation. The sanctity of correct judgements of taste made by a society of individuals no longer informs consumer choices. Now ecological sustainability and evidence of ‘fair trade’ or social responsibility on a global scale are important but equally blind bases for consumer decision-making. Chell, using Brechtian estrangement, presents the viewer with equivalent choices from the past to mirror the contemporary consumer choices whose ethics remain to be decoded in the future.

Figure 5: Edward Chell, installation in the White Room at Danielle Arnaud Gallery, London; left, *Soft Estate I*, 2017, oil on shellac on 400gsm acid free watercolour paper, 135 x 105 cm; right, *Soft Estate II*, 2017, oil on shellac on 400gsm acid free watercolour paper, 135 x 105 cm; floor, *Willow Projection II*, 2019, acrylic and lacquer on gesso on panel on ¼ size Euro pallet, 60 x 40 x 15 cm, courtesy Danielle Arnaud, photo © Oscar Proctor

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