

Kevin J Pocock: Architecture, Space and Emotion Spurting Out of the Two-Dimensional

Steve Pantazis

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Kevin J Pocock is a Manchester-based artist working in painting, drawing and digital media, fascinated mostly with architecture as a subject matter. In particular, different architectural representations of space perspective dominate his paintings and drawings while his video works originate from his observations while travelling and capturing the moment. Pocock presents his thoughts, memories, and dreams in a semi-abstract, defined architectural space, often using common symbols and elements, mostly engaging with the legacy of Modernism, while his oeuvre shares the simplicity and geometric forms found in Minimal art. The impulse towards semi-abstraction is present from the early to the latest works, where simple forms appear as 'still life' with an emphasis on painterly principles, fictional/dream-like situations, and the interplay between space, surface, three-dimensionality, texture and colour.

Architecture and Dreams

Inspired by modernist architecture and utopian dreams and influenced by his training as an architect, Pocock starts with small spontaneous sketches for the creation of his paintings, drawings and digital animation and in his own words "the final work is very close in spirit to the original sketch." In his semi-abstract, defined architectural space that we find in his practice, the artist works on ideas and places he has come across, incorporating, according to him, "the universal to represent the very personal."

His painting *A Simple Dream about Japan* (2004) is simply about how Pocock has imagined and dreamt of Japan. From early on the artist was fascinated by the Japanese buildings and gardens and the landscapes of Japanese print makers such as Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige. In this work, the artist has created textured areas of paint and makes it challenging for the viewer to understand the subject matter as it can be either the depiction of a landscape, in particular of mountains, or the representation of buildings due to the geometric forms that resemble roofs; he manages though to convey the simplicity and serenity that characterises, from a western perspective, Japanese architecture.

Pocock's painting *City Square* (1998), conceived after a visit to Chicago, represents a figure-like sculpture standing on a flat pedestal, trying to claim its presence in front of a semi-abstract anonymous tower of unknown height. This building in particular, but also all the architectural forms in his art in general, are vacuous, as there are no windows, doors or any specific characteristic to differentiate them from each other. In general he depicts environments familiar to him with a sense of placelessness and vagueness, resulting in dream-like imagery. His buildings suggest the forms of those designed by modern architects in the 1950s and 1960s. The artist 'demotes' them to simple solid forms as though they were sealed and it were forbidden to peek inside. These buildings protect

what is inside, similarly to people who keep up their appearances without necessarily “betraying” their inner world of dreams, thoughts and feelings.

City Square brings to mind the dream-like situations where incongruous, unrelated objects and common classical sculptures are arranged in an architectural setting found in the works of the painter Giorgio de Chirico. By destabilising the logical connection between objects, the Mediterranean artist created what he termed “metaphysical” paintings, representations of what lies beyond the physical world. Veiled in an atmosphere of anxiety and melancholy, de Chirico's humanoid forms, blank architecture, shadowy passages suggest the intense irrationality of a universe torn apart by World War I. *City Square* and the majority of Pocock's paintings can be considered as having this metaphysical aura: the viewer stands in front of a painting of vacuous buildings that create shadowy passages, of empty streets as there is no trace of human life, questioning what lies beyond the physical world. He uses de Chirican motifs to express his vision of an estranged urban world where people have become alienated from one another, hiding their feelings, surrounded by modern architecture and chain stores which are the same all around the world.

Furthermore, Pocock does not comment on Modernism in a celebratory or critical way, instead the architectural forms in his paintings and drawings purvey a sense of detachment free from designs and external characteristics. In his architectural forms, we find a neutrality similar to that found in Modern and Contemporary architecture, created by Le Corbusier, Mies Van der Rohe, Tadeo Ando, Richard Meier and Aldo Rossi, with the decorative details rejected.

Space and Theatricality

In most of his paintings there is a strong sense of space. In *City Square*, Pocock's sculpture stands almost in the centre of the painting and the building is in the background towards the left of the surface, creating an illusion of depth. Also, the shadow of the sculpture produces a sense of natural perspective and the impression that it is very large in scale as the shadow stretches out across to the right side of the work. The sculpture appears to be moving from the centre of the surface to the right, an illusion created due to it standing on a platform giving a theatrical tone and sense of life to the piece. This is an aspect that we find in de Chirico's paintings as well, where figures/classical sculptures stand on plinths, creating a sense of theatricality. Pocock's theatricality becomes a compositional ploy rather than a fantastical scenario coming to life.

This theatrical quality is found in other paintings of Pocock's, where architectural structures are arranged. In the painting *Bed* (2001), an anthropomorphic group of buildings lies on a bed, bringing to mind on the one hand, Henry Moore's sculpture *Four-piece Composition: Reclining Figure* (1934) of a female body, made by individual pieces of bone or stone-like shapes, resting on a plinth and Picasso's paintings of reclining women; on the other hand, the arrangement of the architectural pieces can be associated to the theatrical display of Minimalist sculpture, as the pieces are not connected and there is space in between them.

Even though Pocock's work is two-dimensional, there is a strong sense of three-dimensionality, through the creation of depth, space, and sculptural/architectural forms. His work, with the flat images, is in accordance with Clement Greenberg's and Michael Fried's view that a work of art is “a self-contained thing” exploring its own techniques and materiality and in particular modernist painting needs to be ‘pure’ avoiding any illusion of three-dimensionality. Nevertheless, Pocock's theatrical sense is analogous to that of the Minimalists, which was first pointed out by Fried in his essay “Art and Objecthood,” published in 1967.

Sculpture in Painting

Pocock's semi-abstract buildings, although drawn with pencil and painted with acrylics, can be considered as Minimalist sculptures due to their geometric solidity. We experience a sense of looking at sculptural work through painting and drawing, as he plays with symmetry and asymmetry, mixing different architectural representations of space and 3D projections such as axonometric and isometric. His practice resembles Henry Moore's drawings of his sculptures, which, for him, were not simply sketches, but instead illustrated important stages of his development as a sculptor. In contrast, Pocock first creates sketches and then improves them into drawings and paintings with the third dimension strongly captured in the two-dimensional surface.

Both his works with the same title *Ladder*, the one in acrylic on canvas (2004) and the other in pencil on paper (2004), resonate Donald Judd's Minimalist sculpture *Untitled (Stack)* (1967), who argued in his essay "Specific Objects" (1965) that his "work obviously resembles sculpture more than painting, but it is nearer to painting." For Pocock, who is interested in Judd's work, *Ladder* is primarily concerned with the cycle of ascent and descent, creating a veil of mystery as to whether the structure is rising out of the hole in the ground or is about to fall in it.

Irony, Melancholy and Aggression

The drawing *Mickey Mouse World* (2006) has a strong touch of irony. The buildings in the background resemble corporate skyscrapers and Mickey Mouse is chosen here as the corporate symbol – an absurdity highlighting the superficiality of the serious corporate world. The irony lies in that the famous cartoon character is associated with the humour and innocence of children's tales, while here becomes the logo of the adult business world, which favours neither humour nor innocence. Furthermore, this depiction of Mickey Mouse's upper head and ears within an image that resembles an architectural diagram brings to mind Pop artists' references to popular culture.

His video *These Final Moments* (2010) has a melancholic effect to the viewers. He shot this video on the train from Bergen to Oslo and communicates the feeling of melancholy at the end of a trip and the thoughts and fears for the end of life. The video is more like a moving painting, silent and only accompanied by specific intertitles that play the role of short stops along the journey, but most importantly direct and shape the feelings and the mood of the viewers.

In other paintings we find sharp objects, such as a mechanical battering ram, breaking in or penetrating the crown of the king in *The King is Dead* (2012), sharp tool-like objects in *Brutal Façade* (2011) and modern buildings confronting each other with pointing devices in *Streetfight* (2012). For the artist these works express his personal feelings about living in a city, where the architecture has no regard for the space or the people, and brutally imposes itself. The violent possibilities and sense of danger and pain reminds us of the Surrealist objects, such as Man Ray's *Gift* (1921), a flatiron with a row of tacks glued to its bottom. The flatiron is connected to middle-class values and by adding nails it becomes a symbol of a subversive attack on social expectations, while Pocock's work can be viewed as a blow to the establishment.

References and Further Reading

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Writer's Biography

Steve Pantazis has completed his Ph.D. thesis "A Journey in the Past: Tradition and the Importance of History in the Work of Jannis Kounellis" at the University of Manchester in 2009 and his MA in Museum Professions at Seton Hall University, NJ, United States in 2004. He is an online editor for Corridor 8, independent art historian, writer and associate editor for [Versita Publishing](#) in the field of Arts, Music and Architecture.