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Screen Space

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SCREEN SPACE

Emotional Landscapes Series

Claire Robertson

For a millennium, the space for the hotel room existed, undefined. Mankind captured it, gave it shape and passed through. And sometimes, in passing through, they found themselves brushing up against the secret names of truth.

– Opening narration from *Hotel Room*, 1993, directed by David Lynch

The gasp of surprise that accompanies the experience of the usual becomes its name. It fixes the transcendence of the unknown in relation to the known, and therefore terror as sacredness.

– Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944

'Any big hotels have got scandals,' he said. 'Just like every big hotel has got a ghost. Why? Hell, people come and go.'

– Stephen King, *The Shining*, 1985

While travelling in Singapore in 2011, I happened to stay in a hotel room without any windows. It was a small room that engendered a strange cumulative mental and physical effect, as it withheld all natural signs of day or night and muted any hints of external sound and movement, ultimately denying me the sensory experience of time and place. With few fixtures and little décor – other than a curtain covering the windowless wall – I began to unconsciously seek out distraction by observing the peculiarities of the hotel room and the traces left by its previous occupants. The limited floor space restricted spatial engagement to visual observation, which primarily took the expedient form of simply letting my gaze drift. The more time I spent looking, the more attuned I became to the nuances of my surroundings: the scuffmarks on the walls and worn surface textures — evidence of human presence in a *lifeless* room. With a heightened perception of visual, auditory and somatic stimuli, my eyes were continually drawn to spatial details, such as the corners of the room or the intersecting lines between the floor and wall. A mental map began to form and direct my changing experience of the space. While often associated with leisure and a lackadaisical, holiday mindset, the hotel room is a fertile site for reflexive artistic contemplation, as its spatial focus concentrates the mind and its transitory nature amplifies the particularities of interior and exterior space.

For Melbourne-based artist Claire Robertson, the hotel and home are potent sites of creative potential. Her interest in how memory, history and meaning are inscribed in these places is evident from her early video works. Capturing the architectural features of the artist's own domestic space, these works present the home in a more ambiguous light, using composition, editing and installation to manipulate the viewer's orientation. In *Untitled (Corners)* (2012), Robertson's interest in abstracted elements of domestic space focuses on the notion of the corner as an in-between space that defines limits while simultaneously opening into an infinite limitlessness. She calibrates her shot framing, editing and display methods to make these architectural elements transient and unstable. These techniques leave the viewer with uncertain connotations related to these seemingly familiar spaces. This sense of uncertainty and the uncanny is something that Robertson has become adept at provoking, enabling her to question the fine line between interior and exterior, 'real' and 'imagined' spaces.

In general terms, an uncanny place is perceived as not being 'quite right' and even a place with a sense of danger.[i] It is a sense of the 'architectural uncanny' that is the central tenet of Robertson's current practice. The short and long term living spaces that she records are especially favoured sites for evoking uncanny disturbances. In their apparent domesticity, as the residue of family history and nostalgia, and their role as '…the last and most intimate shelter of private comfort',[ii] any acts that disrupt this normalcy appear (emotionally, mentally, somatically) heightened. In earlier works such as *Narrative* (2008) and *Chandelier Series* (2009), this uncanny effect on the viewer is generated through a lack of orientation brought about through camera position, subdued lighting and editing. However, in her recent body of work, *Emotional Landscapes Series* (2012), Robertson responds more to Freud's notion of the *Unheimlich* — the space that is simultaneously homely and unhomely, familiar and unfamiliar.[iii] She explores the concept of *Unheimlich* in the simultaneously intimately and private, shared and public space of the hotel or motel room. For Robertson, these rooms are in-between, temporary spaces loaded with connotations of hope and happiness, but also with an undercurrent of unease. These rooms function as a retreat for individuals, families, newlyweds, those on business or a hiding place for those engaged in more licentious activities. In her exhibition *Emotional Landscapes Series*, Robertson presents an installation comprised of a multi-channel video work, depicting the interior and exterior of an unnamed modern seaside hotel, projected onto large temporary wall structures. Audio-visual installation in Robertson's practice has a complex relationship with the viewer and creates a doubling of ideas on spatial relations: she at once foregrounds the space in which her art is found – the space the viewer needs to traverse in order to experience it – while creating a perpetual dream-space through the frame of the camera.[iv]

Robertson's creative method is driven by meditative processes, during which she immerses herself in the details of an environment. These actions cause her perception to become finely attuned to subtleties such as shadows and shapes of light, surface textures, chipped tiles, scuff marked, uneven walls, and other forms of historical residue. This observational ritual allows a relationship or dialogue to develop with the particular space. In *Emotional Landscapes Series*, a series of static camera positions, disconcertingly absent of people, are used to study this unnamed seaside hotel. The editing allows just enough time for us to begin to observe details, and orient ourselves, before shifting to the next location or viewing angle. When we view a typical film, the realistic codes of mise-en-scène and continuity editing combine to create apparently seamless, totally coherent spaces.[v] By contrast, Robertson's editing techniques render the environment uncanny, founding a generative system for the production of ambiguous, open-ended, nonlinear narratives. The resulting experience of the work allows for ruminations on the psychological dimensions of built spaces, reflecting on notions of architectural emptiness and ruination. Robertson's technique has much in common with experimental feature filmmaking, which is often not so concerned with 'shooting' as it is with 'capturing'.[vi] It becomes less about creating highly orchestrated and tightly composed events and more about collecting a body of materials that will then be manipulated extensively during post-production. New Media theorist Lev Manovich comments that digital filmmakers work with 'elastic reality', crafting new story spaces through advances in post-production technologies.[vii] Editing in Robertson's work ensures that locations lose their specificity and associations, allowing narratives to remain unfixed.

An engagement with the history of filmic codes allows Robertson to explore her interest in capturing residues of life 'lived in architecture'. British artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien's installations, films and documentaries examine the symbolism of cultural places and various metaphors for the voyage. In his 2010 film, *The Leopard*, he examines the cinematic afterlife. The camera follows actress Vanessa Myrie as she wanders through the rooms of Visconti's palazzo, where the once opulent and luxurious interiors are now abandoned. It is perhaps Julien's lingering camerawork, influenced by his experience in documentary filmmaking that is most interesting in this discussion of Robertson's practice. In *The Leopard,* Julien stages a series of vignettes in several locations, utilising dance and the movement of bodies to rearticulate these stories. Robertson's work, however, disavows any set narrative, actors or characters. Instead, she structures the projection screens to form a set into which the viewer can take the place of the absent performer.

In David Lynch's 1993 mini series, *Hotel Room*, we briefly follow the stories of the occupants of room 603 of the Railroad Hotel. The room is the stage for sinister, small-scale stories of intense drama where the only consistent characters are the staff who service the guests. People check in, something dramatic happens, they check out, leaving the story open-ended. Robertson explores the notion that the hotel room marks a moment of pause between places, where nothing or anything can happen. She frames these investigations as part of her research into the psychological dimensions of built spaces through digital video. Her use of the temporal and ephemeral qualities of the video medium and understanding of filmic tropes allows her to adeptly fracture our material sense of time and space. Video and film have an extensive history of exploring and presenting perceptions of the real. Robertson harnesses this potent pedigree in her visual investigations to create a productive friction between place, history and narrative that extends towards unexpected ends.

Channon Goodwin

[i] Falkenberg, M., *Rethinking the Uncanny in Hoffmann And Tieck*, Peter Lang Pub Inc, 2005, p.41
[ii] Ibid.
[iii] Trigg, D., *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny,* Ohio University Press, 2012, p.27.
[iv] Willis, H., *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing The Moving Image*, Wallflower Press, 2005, p.79
[v] Ibid., p.52
[vi] Ibid., p.35
[vii] Ibid.