

Perceptions of Space

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BFA, Drawing

Maryland Institute College of Art

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Book Arts + Printmaking

The University of the Arts

Philadelphia, PA

Spring 2018

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Abstract

Personal space is the region surrounding a person, which they regard as psychologically theirs. It is normally considered to be an outside physical territory. However, I consider personal space as neither outside the body nor huge in nature. To me, it is an area I define as internal and intimate, it is the realm of the mind. My thesis explores how others perceive the idea of space in their lives. Through relief printing and bookmaking techniques I capture fleeting moments of time and space in our everyday life. In this thesis paper I discuss how people seek comfort in solitude and their need for a space that is specific to themselves. I will contextualize my thesis paper with readings and will reference contemporary visual artists that interpret the same idea in their work.

Introduction

The concept of heterotopia was first introduced by Michel Foucault in his essay *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*. He uses the term, heterotopia, to describe a space or place that is real in the world which differs from Utopia. In order to understand its real meaning, one has to use their own imagination. Heterotopias typically have more meaning than meet the eye. It applies to places that are not political or [culturally dominant] and thus are places that are at the same time both physical and mental.¹ Heterotopias are spaces that are not the space we normally occupy, one example would be movie theaters. When you enter a movie theater, you can enter it at different times and are given the opportunity to use your imagination and disconnect from the real world. When you enter a movie theater, you will be disconnected from the real world and when you leave, you are back in the real world again.

During my first semester at the University of the Arts, I created a series of prints about different places I had traveled to based on photographs I had taken (Fig.1.). When I looked at the photographs, I tried to remember the places and events in my mind and



¹ Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* © Pavillon, L'architecture De La Maison. 1980.

Figure 1 Yiyun Qin, (2016), Offset Lithography, 22" x 30"

I drew them piece by piece based on my memories. As time passed, the events and subjects I remembered the most were the images I kept in my drawing. I developed an interest in this idea because as I went through all my photographs, it felt as though the sites were in front of me again. When I travel, I tend to glance at everything, taking photographs randomly to find scenery that interests me. However, as I revisited these photographs, I noticed objects that I hadn't originally intended to capture. The more I started to pay attention to the small details, the more they replaced the main focus of my photographs. I began drawing freely on a piece of paper and as my memory wove together unrelated objects, the drawings became more interesting. Those places I've been to, which are real in the world, were now faded by memories and time and therefore I had to use my imagination to recreate those experiences.

Chasing Butterflies

When I was in elementary school, a boarding school which was two hours away from home, my mom would drive me home from school every Friday and back to school on Sunday evenings. The school dorm was a six-story tall building, and it did not allow access to the parents. There was a window facing the front door of the building at each floor, so my mom would always stand in front of the front door of the building. I would run up the stairs and wave goodbye to her at each story. As I walked up the steps to the next floor there was a feeling of excitement because I would see my mom again at another floor. Those windows became a symbol of hope for me because I knew my mom would stand there and wait for me to wave at her, the window was the access that allowed me to continue to see her. The sensation of hope and excitement would dissipate while walking toward the sixth floor, which is where my room was, and be replaced with sadness. I knew that would be the last time I would see her for the whole next week. At the sixth floor I would stand in front of the window and wave goodbye to her for a long time and finally watch her leave. The duration of

time I took walking to the sixth floor seemed to be too short, meanwhile, it also seemed extremely long. Time seemed to be distorted and it created mixed feelings for me.

In the Spring of 2018, I created a series of monotype prints portraying architectural spaces using grey toned colors. It appears to be an actual architectural space but when the viewer looks closely, the space is distorted. The space could not exist in real life and therefore encourages the viewer to wonder what is real versus unreal (Fig. 2).

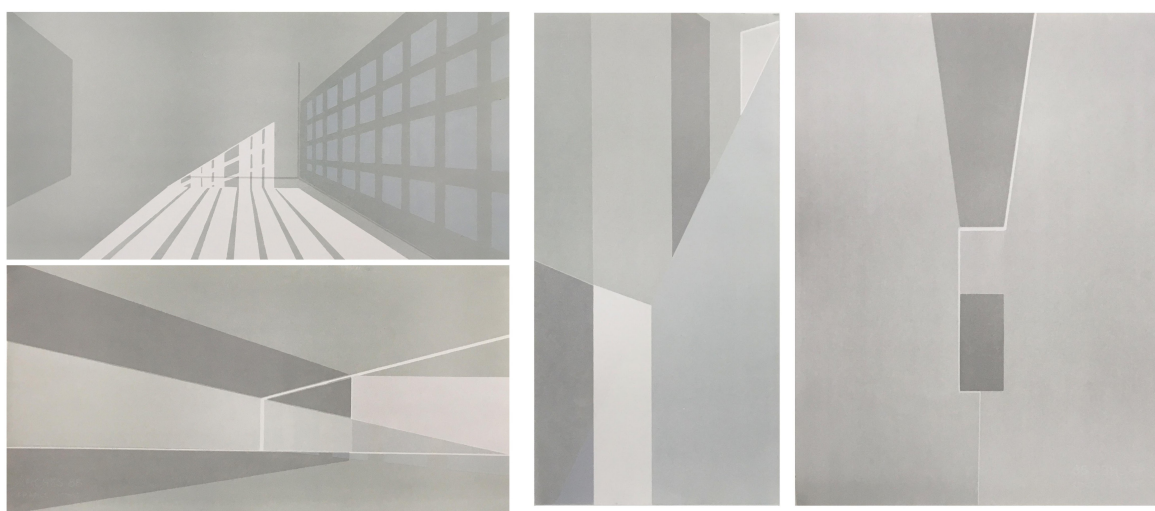


Figure 2 Yiyun Qin, *Leeway* (2018) Monotype,

When I read Rebecca Solnit's book *The Faraway Nearby*, I was immediately drawn to the way she tells her story and how easily she evokes empathy in the reader. There is a fascinating side of a story that evokes empathy in the reader. Solnit describes, "place [as] a story and stories [as] geography." She also discusses empathy as, "first of all an act of imagination, a storyteller's art, and then a way of traveling from here to there."² Indeed, I think storytelling is a similar process to an artist creating a tangible work of art. Both can create empathy. When people tell a story, one can almost imagine he/she is standing on the stage of another person's life, experiencing the same events and feelings as the storyteller or character. All the while, making the experience of another their own through empathy. The same thing happens when looking at another's artwork. You are standing in front of a world

² Solnit, Rebecca. *The Faraway Nearby*. Penguin Books, 2014. 13. Book.

that has been created by the artist, and trying to understand the stories behind the imagery they created.

In the chapter *Apricots*, Solnit discusses the struggles she faced when dealing with her mother. In her words, her mother's real problem was not with her but with the "enormous baggage of stories that had come between [them]"³. For me, I don't have that negative relationship with my mother, but our relationship is complicated in another way. For the first eight or ten years of my life, I really hated the decision she made of sending me to a boarding school since I was only five. I always cried when she sent me to school hoping that she would change her mind and let me stay at home, which of course she never did. As I grew up, I was used to leaving home for a long time and coming back only on vacations. However, I always knew this was also a hard decision for her, I knew she cried as well when the decision was made. It was never easy for us. The prints I am creating contain a space for my memories, an inner space that is real and unreal at the same time. Solnit says in her book that memory is "a shifting, fading, partial thing, a net that doesn't catch all the fish by any means and sometimes catches butterflies that don't exist."⁴

Illusion and Truthiness:

When I think about artists that influence my work, Mary Temple immediately comes to mind. Temple has exhibited her work nationally and internationally, and is well known for her *Light Installations*, a series which she began in the year 2002. I was struck by the exhibition review posted on the Minneapolis Institute of Arts website, *More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness*, where Temple considered "doubt" as a primary subject of her art.⁵ She works across mediums including sculpture, painting, printmaking, and site-specific installation. According to the review, her *Light Installations* series was driven by the idea of

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⁴ Solnit, Rebecca. "Apricots." *The Faraway Nearby*. Penguin Books, 2014. 13. Book.

⁵ Armstrong, Elizabeth, et al. *More Real?: Art in the Age of Truthiness*. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2012.

“trompe l’oeil paintings of shadow and sunlight that [seem] to merge with the architecture in which they are painted.” For instance, one of Temple’s installations, *Forest for the Sea*, was created in a scale of 25’ by 66’(Fig.3). It appears to be a soft shadow of the forest being cast by sunlight coming from the windows of Brooklyn’s Smack Mellon Gallery.



Figure 3 Mary Temple, *Forest for the Sea* (2006); Installation; 25’ x 66’

However, the shadow nor the leaves change when the sun moves through time. Even as the viewers walk by, no shadow is cast on the wall. By doing this, Temple was playing with the idea of illusion and truthiness. She explained that, “as viewers began to solve the visual puzzle of this piece and understand the reality of the environment, they may have realized they were taken in by a simple illusion—that their sense was surprisingly untrustworthy.”⁶

When I first discovered Temple’s work, I appreciated her cleverness. Her intention is not to trick the viewers but rather let them enjoy what they see. They are not meant to figure out what they are actually looking at. I worked on *Realm*, a series of prints, in Fall 2017 based on the idea of space, where I also played with the idea of illusion. In my print series, *Realm*, created in the Fall of 2017, I too played with the ideas of both space and illusion. One of the prints has layers of simple shapes that were either right next to or on top of each other

⁶ Temple. Mary. “Mary Temple-Artwork.” Mary Temple.

using the colors blue, yellow, pink, white, and grey. I also used the white of the paper as a shape to allow for empty space as well as represent an entrance. When the viewer is looking at the print, they are unaware whether or not the grey is a cast shadow or a ray of light(Fig.4.).



Figure 4 Yiyun Qin, *Realm* (2017); Offset Lithography, Monotype; 22" x 30"

Elimination of Spaces:

Robert Irwin has been another influence on my work because of the way he interacts with the idea of light and space. He is considered an innovator in the Light and Space movement. He was originally a painter but later turned his attention to installations. His installation in 1997 at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art titled, *1° 2° 3° 4°* refers to four dimensions – height, width, depth and time, where he takes away forms from space (Fig.5.). In the installation, he cut three rectangles in a panoramic tinted window in order to create actual openings, the result of his removing the window panes altered the viewers' experience of how they perceive space.⁷ At first the viewer notices a color difference between the large window and the small rectangle within the window, then upon further inspection, the lighter blue openings reveal themselves as cut in the window.

⁷ Jarmusch, Ann. "1° 2° 3° 4°: Four Dimensions, One Masterpiece." The San Diego Union-Tribune, 17 July 2011.



Figure 5 Robert Irwin, *1° 2° 3° 4°*, (1997); Installation;

Similar to Irwin, I consider the amount of space and the subtle shifting of light within all of my work. The three print from my series *Realm* experience with the perception of space by exploring the concept of personal space. The original idea came from a friend of mine who found it hard to maintain a good relationship with her best friend after they became roommates. I thought about the idea of personal space and its importance in our daily lives. Normally, personal space is the region surrounding a person which they regard as psychologically theirs. It is usually considered as an outside physical territory, but the space I am representing is neither outside nor huge and overwhelming; it is an area that I see as internal and intimate. To address these ideas in my work, I eliminate the shapes and create a view that is muted to the eye while using the white of the paper as a component to represent the mental space one enters and exists in when seeking quiescence. I play with the idea of what is present and what is absent.

Interplay of Light and Shadow:

Another inspiration is “film noir” movies, which can be described as a stylish Hollywood crime drama that is associated with a low-key, black and white visual style. One of the key components of film noir is the dramatic lighting and the mood it creates using lighting for extreme silhouettes and an interplay of light and shadows. The extreme contrasts

between light and shadow reveal the mood and intentions of a character without the overuse of much dialogue.

The strong shadow effect in the films are created by placing the light above the actors' head and another light behind them to create a softer glow. To me, the shadows are more important than the light in these film noir movies. By casting a silhouette of something that is physical but not seen heightens the viewer's emotional response. A distorted figure will convey an emotional reading not of a physical self, but of a spiritual self. An example of this use of shadow would be in the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. It is one of the most important films from the German Expressionism period. In it, all the shadows are painted on the ground and on the sides of the wall instead of using light to cast shadows.

This artificial rendering of space plays an important role in the film and in my own work. My use of low-key lighting creates an atmosphere with a more significant cast shadow compared to the lighter areas. The size of the shadow is larger than the light. By emphasizing shadows with harsh lighting, I create a stronger sense of depth and volume. There is a seductive feeling about the space. I draw the viewers in but make it difficult for them to navigate through spaces once they find out the space they are looking at is unreal.

Conclusion

Throughout my research, I have found new ways to approach my concept which has given me different perspectives in order to create work that is meaningful to both the viewer and me. As my work developed, I began to understand that I was interested in creating spaces that are real and unreal at the same time. I was also able to give the space a seductive feeling by drawing the viewer in while at the same time making it difficult to navigate. By referencing contemporary artists and readings, I explore how the idea of space is perceived and the meaning behind it. Through relief printing and bookmaking techniques I capture fleeting moments of time and space in our everyday life.

Image List

Fig.1. Yiyun Qin, (2016); Offset Lithography; 22'' x 30''

Fig.2. Yiyun Qin, (2018); Monotype, 12'' x 24'', 15'' x 20''

Fig.3. Mary Temple, *Forest for the Sea* (2006); Installation; 25' x 66'

Fig.4. Yiyun Qin, *Realm* (2017); Offset Lithography, Monotype; 22'' x 30''

Fig.5. Robert Irwin, *1° 2° 3° 4°*, (1997); Installation

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