

Old Mint Street

“Old Mint Street is a long narrow street that runs north-east from the fortifications of Valletta at one end to the Mediterranean Sea at the other. Lined with high limestone walls, protruding gallerias, flat coloured doors and long slab stairs, it bustles until the heat of mid noon then retreats for siesta, opening up again late in the day and then settling quietly in the night.”¹

In this exhibition, Old Mint Street becomes the starting point and the departure point for a series of fictions. These fictions draw on personal memory and experiences of site, and in turn become part of the stories of culture and history. Like “Vulture Street” in Powderfinger’s album of 2003, and “Zig Zag Street” in Nick Earls novel, Old Mint Street becomes the inspiration and the context for listening, reading and in this case, viewing. The “street” becomes a general locale and a particular location, a symbolic interface between the personal interior and the public face of an individual. This street, where Ross lived and worked in Malta, becomes the site of reference, the orientating coordinates from which we set out on our trek through the exhibition.

In 2004 Ross was awarded a Creative Sparks Grant to undertake a residency in Malta. For Ross this was an opportunity to explore her cultural heritage and to map a personal history in the present. This journey becomes one of sensory orientation, where immersed in the sights, smells and sounds of her present past, Ross responds with a series of optical and tactile memory maps. Although somewhat opaque, these maps become an experiential lens through which to catch a glimpse of the artist’s personal trek.

The process of mapping her memory of a particular experience or sensation has been prevalent within Ross’ practice over a number of years. The operations of memory and abstraction work hand in hand in Ross’ practice. Memory becomes a faulty system of retrieval, while the strategy of abstraction produces a series of

referential maps. More particularly, the gaps and fissures in the attempts to accurately map each memory are significant.

In her work of the same name, Ross retraces the red ochre honeycomb forms that are part of the fresco design in the Decorated Hall of the Hypogeum. The Hypogeum is an underground necropolis that dates back to between 3600 and 3000BC. The Hypogeum (discovered by builders in 1902) sits in a quiet residential street, a burial chamber lying just under the surface of suburbia. As each tour group passes through the chambers, the lights are flashed on and off, so as to diminish the deterioration rate of the frescoes, allowing just a glimpse. This flash becomes like a flash of memory, or a spectral flash - a sudden illumination that leaves the darkness even more still and quiet. In Ross' memory maps of the Hypogeum, she places 19 cut and coloured circles in formation to create larger honeycomb figures spanning 1.5m across. Previously exhibited in Malta at Gozo Contemporary, this work is re-presented here in Brisbane, creating a lineage of site from the Hypogeum to the art museum.

The other lineage that Ross follows on from is that of modernist abstraction. In *Armour*, Ross creates fragile armour for the gallery wall from cut semi-circles of paper. Seen in the context of her earlier works, *Armour* brings together Ross' vinyl installations that retraced architectural features and abstract paintings that referenced purely decorative forms. In this current work, Ross responds to the patterns, markings and impressions found on Maltese armour, and forms that interlock and overlap for strength and flexibility. These patterns are echoed in Ross' paper scales, with their readymade colours or hand-painted patterns.

Similarly, in a series of paintings based on handmade lace, Ross responds to the decorative patterns of the object. Collecting handmade pieces of lace, Ross retraces the patterns of each individual piece onto circular canvases in subtle shades of white and pearl. Each painting traces the differences between individual pieces of lace. This becomes a quite literal mapping around a physical

form and also a strategy of preservation. Traditionally, the craft of lace making is passed on from one generation to another. This tradition is slowly dying in Malta, and the scarcity of these lace works adds to their value. This lace becomes an embodiment of history, a tangible trace of lineage. In her paintings, Ross is making her own lace, as a continuation of a tradition that she is part of and yet removed from.

In the installation *Bastions* Ross specifically retraces the physical sites of bastions found in Malta and elsewhere in Europe. Ross draws from her memory of the bastions as physical sites and also from illustrations in her guidebook to Malta, in what becomes a spatial diagram of this site. Site is a term that has undergone a series of transformations within the lineage of art practices in the last 30 years. The conception of site as a fixed physical location that frames and orientates the viewer's experience of the work certainly has a strong presence within Ross' practice. She describes the site as an anchoring point, an orientation from which to chart experiences. However, the site here becomes not just a physical location, but also a memory moment, the site of a memory itself.

In *Islands* Ross also references site, in particular the three Islands of Malta and the two islands of New Zealand (from where the limestone in this work originated). Limestone is the building material with which almost all structures old and new are constructed in Malta. Inscribed into each stone's surface are the traces of time, earth and weather, leaving pock-marks and skin depressions. Left in apparently random clusters, the limestone ruins of temples become a standing monument to a fissure in memory and time. Coincidentally, this limestone, displayed in its found state, was originally part of the façade of St Stephen's Cathedral in Brisbane. These objects become an embodiment of personal memories and stories, a drawing together of divergent sites and histories.

In the video work *Comfort Zone* Ross records the sensory overload of a traveler in a foreign place. We see the face of the artist, eyes closed, twitching and

contorting as if overcome with heady sensation. Her face becomes a physical interface between the private monologues and public dialogues that make up identity. Within the exhibition, this work articulates the tensions between Ross mapping her experiences and locating herself in a particular place, and the experiences of dislocation and disorientation that also arise.

This exhibition becomes a guidebook to Malta, one that omits the usual topics of where to stay, or the cheap places to eat. Yet with disarming clarity the work describes the decorative details of armour, handmade lace, tombs and ancient temples. Loaded with personal memories and sensations, this exhibition tells the story of what can be retrieved in snapshots a journey into the past. Here, the past becomes a fiction of the present and the present is a fiction of the past.

Rachael Haynes

¹ notes from the artist