

Vitrine (noun): a glass display case: from French, shop window: ultimately from Latin - vitrum, glass (Oxford English Dictionary)



'Cartograph' by Blair Cunningham

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'Looking Through The Glass'

by Stephen Feeke

'Oh, Kitty, how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-glass House! I'm sure it's got, oh! such beautiful things in it! [...] Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through---' She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she got there. And certainly the glass was beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.

In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the looking-glass room.

As Alice demonstrates, glass is easily penetrated by the imagination. Looking through it, the viewer is indeed offered potential passage to a fantasy world. Alice's experience chimes with our own when we gaze into a shop window or vitrine. The glass itself seems to confer worth and value on the displayed items, which excites our acquisitive tendencies and our aspirations. Shops and arcades therefore use their windows to create an overall enticing spectacle so that we are encouraged to stop, look and buy. Not only do we aspire to owning the commodities on show, but we also envisage our life with them and the benefits they will bring us. As vitrines are found in museums and galleries as well as shopping centres, similar processes come into play when we view art objects since they too have the power to take us somewhere out of the ordinary.

Conspicuous consumption is not a new phenomenon. In his essay on the arcades (an 'invention' of nineteenth-century Paris), Walter Benjamin quotes Balzac's description of shop windows as the 'great poem of display [that] chants its many coloured strophes.' To Benjamin, shop windows were a key factor in the emergent status of Paris as the centre of modernity, describing the shopping arcades as 'a centre of trade in luxury goods. In their fittings art is brought in to the service of commerce. Contemporaries never tire of admiring them.' The first arcades appeared in Paris in the decades after 1822. About 50 years later, Thornton's Arcade in Leeds was designed, as the burgeoning middle-classes across Europe began to demand more opportunities to go shopping. Indeed, disposable incomes have done much to transform the appearance of cities and continue to do so, since we are endlessly driven towards novelty and all things new and are constantly 'striving for dissociation with the outmoded'.

So, standing before a window display we might envisage wearing those new shoes, being on that white beach or living in that loft apartment and also imagine how complete and better life might therefore be. The 'beautiful things' we aspire to are separated from us by a few tantalising millimetres of glass we can see what we want but we cannot touch, which heightens our desire. The fact the glass is transparent and also reflective is another key factor. After a moment of self-

projection into some better place, the surface of the glass intrudes. Our focus therefore shifts between our own reflected image and what we want, which places a vision of us at the centre of our own desires.

The display of art objects operates in a similar way. Arguably, viewing art relies on our aspirations to own what we lack. For instance, a work behind glass is even more desirable because it appears to be worth protecting. Moreover, our experience of viewing art is similar to looking through shop windows. Our imagination occupies the space between what ever we might be looking at and us. In that gap there is the potential for us to be taken somewhere else. After all, 'the single feature which most unites art from any period is its potential to transport us.' Which is certainly true of Blair Cunningham's work and by placing his work in vitrines around Leeds the experience of travel is manifold.

What therefore links Blair's work in his Cartograph project, the vitrines and arcades is this idea of potential travel. As Benjamin states, 'arcades, theatres, exhibition halls and stations [are] buildings serving transitory purposes' and are all built using a similar style and scale of architecture large vaulted passages that offer either metaphorical or literal routes somewhere else. It is therefore entirely appropriate that Cunningham offers us guides to imaginary journeys in the form of works based on maps.

Maps extend invitations to both real and imagined spaces. Places are translated into a series of signs and symbols, which signify somewhere real. Learning this language of signifiers allows us to understand somewhere we have never been to before. In addition, whilst studying a map, the mind translates the abstract signs and symbols into an image of actuality. In our minds we begin to plot our journey to this new location and begin to form a picture of what it might be like once we get there. Again, our imagination fills in the gaps of our experience and knowledge and we envisage a building, a street, a town or landscape we have never seen before in a locale we may not know. Maps therefore represent potentially limitless travel, in that our imagination allows us to go anywhere at anytime. Blair's 'maps' are redolent of this mental process: the lines he draws represent the lines we draw in our heads as we imagine travelling from A to B. It is appropriate therefore that his works are installed in vitrines in Leeds' train station and near the bus stops by the Merrion Centre.

Blair's 'maps' cannot be consulted because they are behind glass. Furthermore, by simplifying yet further the already reductive languages of maps to a series of marks, Blair's maps are representative of trips yet to be taken and also the journeys we make all the time. The abstract patterns of criss-crossing lines portray our bus ride to work for example, the short walk we make to the newsagent or to the sandwich shop or even the corridors between offices where we work - the very set of mundane routes we automatically follow and repeat every day, largely without thinking, and which mostly never change. Blair's drawings suggest that over a period of time, the act of taking these repetitive journeys imprints something of us on our surroundings: as if we leave a line or a trail behind us like a trace of our existence. In addition, our experience of taking these trips also creates an impression on us. We might hate our journey to work, for

instance, not because we dislike a particular road but because we hate the job at the end of it.

Certainly, the effects of the geographical environment that surrounds us, impinges on our behaviour and emotions, whether we are conscious of it or not. Therefore, every trip we take, however trivial or futile, is meaningful because it incorporates great personal investment and entails emotional involvement. Blair's work codifies this overall experience that we submit to every day, illustrating that the places we visit reflect something of who we are. By using mirrored vinyl in another piece, Blair also offers us actual moments of self reflection: to stop, en route, to look at ourselves. However, the shiny discs are not Narcissus-like pools. Situated in the main station concourse they provide an opportunity to consider more deeply the ways in which our daily travel leaves its imprint on us and the effects we are having on our surroundings. This work also gives the impression of a series of incised holes cut directly into the glass. Suggesting that should one linger, we might, like Alice, be offered an alternative to our regular, predictable paths: a portal through to a parallel plane which might then 'jolt us into a new consideration of the actual urban landscape around us.'

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