

# LACE

... is made by simultaneously stitching two coloured threads to follow the outlines of perspective views of docklands buildings and structures, while leaving the underlying paper otherwise unmarked. The perspective view is provided by a photograph taken with a 50mm lens, which most closely approximates the human field of vision. Both perspective view and tactile object, the image slowly reveals itself as one's curiosity is engaged. This aspect of seduction in McMahon's work emanates not only from the evident intricacy of the labour, but also from the virtual domestication of large impersonal buildings, re-casting them as the subjects of humble embroidered scenes. Conversely, the image of the building before it leaves the architect's drawing board also relies on a certain knowing ambiguity, a teasing suggestion.

A work from her solo show 'ORDER' at The Lab Dublin City Gallery in June 2006, 'Closed Loop [Idea Zero]' appears as a bundle of different coloured square foam tubes – like “knots in space”<sup>1</sup> – based on the picture diagrams of the physicist Richard Feynman. This work is from a particular diagram which models the mechanism of a technique called dimensional regularisation, to make projections into real space, while avoiding the cul-de-sac of what physicists call “infinities” – the place where mathematical equations break down and can no longer explain observable phenomena. The piece results in a 3-D projection of a 2-D diagram used to reduce a multidimensional event.

This desire to “see around” the diagram is also present in these works, in the attempt to see through and behind the photographic image, but it is predicated on the idea that, like dimensional regularisation in the Feynman diagram, “something is not right”. Does this mean that McMahon is trying to sort out myth from reality – by unpicking the lines of say a perspective image projected onto the senses? Like the Closed Loop, the drawings constructed from the sewing process, which are multi-dimensional images, entail a remarkable perceptive shift.

In an answer to where the thinking behind her work was presently directed, McMahon said “I use vectors [lines with orientation] as a tool to indicate a relation that makes metaphorical identifications”. She describes her work as “playing with the meanings induced from the drive to find pattern or symmetry from forced associations” - i.e. the association of an *image* of docklands development with the *reality* of that development. “In turn these meanings generate belief...[the work is] unravelling the projection of reality onto our consciousness – describing conscious form as perceived by our senses”. The act of stitching itself “forces incongruent materials [be it drawing, thread, pipes, foam] into different spaces of the world [books, diagrams, equations] ...disrupting the normal exchange of meaning between spaces and orienting the viewer towards peculiar narratives”<sup>2</sup>.

We can see that in this case it is the buildings themselves, and the docklands development programme, that is the force compelling McMahon's analysis. In these drawings, or stitchings, she is using vectors as a means of interrogation, inspired by models drawn from her work in physics, to question the veracity of images, and thereby expose the duality of image-making. There is a parallel with Calvino's narrative constructions, which invariably reveal the duplicitous nature of perceptions and uncover mirrored realities. “I have set up a few scenarios which play with the squeezing together of life and logical form”<sup>3</sup> – in this case the promised image of docklands development as represented by flagship buildings, and the void which they create around them into which the viewer must establish new life.

Because McMahon's work derives from an analytical practice - science – it suppresses the desire to compose, or to pursue “dynamic rhythms” or formal relationships. Since the early minimalist sculptures of Robert Morris and others in the 1960's, the relationship between objects and the viewer situated in a spatial field has been understood as a purely phenomenological interaction. This has led to artists rejecting the idea of either innerness or priorness as securing signification - in this work meaning is context, a function purely of the body's immersion in the world, and the work is therefore liberated from the need to create a

sculptural illusionism which converts one material into a signifier for another. Rosalind Krauss calls this “a model of meaning severed from the legitimising claims of a private self” – early minimalist artists thus “understood their ambition to be tied to a new set of propositions about ‘what the world’s like’”<sup>4</sup>.

While the sculptors like Morris and Judd sought to establish *a priori* “facts” about an object’s existence, which were then contradicted by the perception of it in real space, in this series McMahan seeks to decouple the perception of *an image* [the photograph] from its perspective vectors. The sameness of the resulting thread drawings and, in particular, the obverse renderings, derives from the underlying perspective grid and thus exposes the “sameness” of the images and, in turn, the actual buildings. Her work thus denies the illusionism of the photograph which removes the building from literal space and places it in a metaphorical one. Her coloured thread vectors simply activate the exterior space of perception. Then, almost like a Doppler Effect, the obverse image records their passage, leaving the paper in between witnessing the event in time and space.

In focusing on the building’s moment of appearing in the photograph and on its projected meaning, which is dependent on the connection we make between the image and the space of our experience, McMahan defeats the way in which the surface of architecture is understood to be a reflection of a real internal armature or structure. “In power architecture, surface treatment becomes everything – what it looks like, not what it is”<sup>5</sup>, i.e. neither the architectural programme nor the essential form differ from the most mundane building.

Usually the artist is more accustomed to addressing the question of surfaces than the architect is – the artist questions received wisdom, things assumed to be certain, and questions direct observation and the description of real givens. However, the concern with surface and, by extension, image, is also present in current architectural thinking, as articulated by Jacques Herzog, speaking of the library in Eberswalde displaying Thomas Ruff’s photographs: “the rectangular body of the building is really covered up, almost dissolved. On the other hand the strict, rigorous, shape destroys the individual motif, that is, the picture [Ruff’s photograph] is no longer perceived or considered important as a single picture but instead becomes serial in effect, like an ornament, so that it is effective in two directions. This indeterminateness, this movement back and forth between volume and surface and space, breaks down traditional categories... We use conventional materials but we relate them in unexpected ways so that their traditional character disappears... establishing new references as to what volume or weight or surface can mean”<sup>6</sup>.

Apart from the choice of buildings simply because they lend themselves well to this form of analysis – “it wouldn’t work on a tree” - for McMahan, there is furthermore a close connection between the labour of sewing and the architectural production of façades. Both tasks are trapped in iteration – constant repetition of the same module or form. This implies a kind of emptying out of the self, a submission to a predetermined order, which allows a non-prejudicial investigation of the projected image, and allows the viewer to pose the wider question of what the image reveals about the proposed docklands development.

What really is the nature of this docklands project? If you’re relying on image to sell product, then what exactly are you selling – the image or the product? What is the image actually describing? Commercial forces are much stronger than architectural aspects of city planning – as Herzog says, “commercial issues are much closer to planning and cover everything like a layer of plant growth, or everything that is constructive or spatial”<sup>7</sup> – being governed by commercial and technical considerations, urban architecture doesn’t really exist anymore in the sense of direct influence on the masses.

In Irish society today, space, or property, to give it its more widely understood term, is the new pornography – property magazines are now top shelf material. While the images used in brochures to promote docklands development are largely superficial – there’s little difference between them and images of docklands development in Baltimore or Singapore - the reality is

very different indeed, because it is Dublin, a place where there is a huge question mark over the provision of public services. There are serious issues about docklands development in Dublin which are not going to be explained away by images of yachts tacking past skyscrapers of steel and glass and *brises-soleil*.

McMahon's work is thus drawing attention to the nature of image, the way that images are made and used. How an underlying nostalgic can be exploited, particularly by handmade images, which still have enormous evocative power, much more than photographs or photomontages. Her drawings are three-dimensional - "space" in her work means the space between thread and paper, but it refers also to an unknown space – the space of development, and how the power of an image can sell this unknown entity. By revealing this void she presents space as a kind of opportunity, rather than as a commodity.

She is investigating the condition of image-and-obverse, which is similar to Calvino's notion of the façade being a kind of lacework that wraps around the city, the people in it and their interior lives. As a metaphor, lacework is useful – it knits things together and presents a public face, but the obverse of this face is a very different thing... like Calvino's city of Moriana: "from one part to another, the city seems to continue, in perspective, multiplying its repertory of images: but instead it has no thickness, it consists only of a face and an obverse, like a sheet of paper, with a figure on either side, which can neither be separated nor look at each other"<sup>8</sup>.

In "Invisible Cities", Italo Calvino constructs a series of mythical cities, as related through the accounts of Marco Polo to the emperor Kublai Khan. Among them, the city full of signs: the eye sees only images of things that mean other things. While you believe you are visiting the city, you are only recording the signs by which she defines herself – whatever the real city may be, you leave without having discovered it. Or the model of the *ideal* city – until yesterday a possible future – contained within the *real* city – that which is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so. McMahon's drawings, like Calvino's parables, are predicated on this duality, this conjugate nature of places and buildings which appear as one thing, but conceal an alternate reality within, or offer an opposite reflection.

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#### Notes

1. Bea McMahon, "What I've been thinking", 2005
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Rosalind Krauss, in "Passages in Modern Sculpture", London: Thames and Hudson, 1977, pp. 266 – 267
5. Bea McMahon, "What I've been thinking", 2005
6. Jacques Herzog, in an interview with Catherine Hurzeler, Probe vol. 4, Tokyo, 1997, pp. 59 - 63
7. *Ibid.*
8. Italo Calvino, in "Invisible Cities", Giulio Einaudi, 1972, p. 105