

Re-Imagined Prisons

By Nigel Warburton

"Beyond the real, historical prisons of too much tidiness and those where anarchy engenders the hell of physical and moral chaos there lie yet other prisons, no less terrible for being fantastic and unembodied—the metaphysical prisons, whose seat is within the mind, whose walls are made of nightmare and incomprehension, whose chains are anxiety and their racks a sense of personal and even generic guilt."

Aldous Huxley on Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons*.

Emily Allchurch's new series is a photographic homage to Giovanni Batista Piranesi's darkest work; but it is also an exploration of her own imagination. The starting point for each picture is a specific plate from the eighteenth century architect's sinister 'Imaginary Prisons', an enigmatic series of etchings that has been admired by artists as diverse as Aldous Huxley and Escher – Huxley described them as 'the strangest and in some ways the most beautiful of Piranesi's etchings'. Allchurch has painstakingly collaged found elements on the visual structure of each of seven plates: every detail is a contemporary photograph she has made for this purpose, and a complete image may involve the seamless integration of hundreds of parts. *Urban Chiaroscuro #5: Rome* for instance is composed from multiple images of Mussolini's fascist architecture, an ancient viaduct, a contemporary street sign, and so on. In one sense, then, nothing here is invented. Everything is consciously chosen. The framework is Piranesi's; the imagery is documentary, collected and composed from the real world. This technique of visual transposition, like a strict poetic rhyme scheme, sets the parameters within which Allchurch's own creativity emerges.

The effect is uncanny. The images are familiar yet strange. Those who know the Piranesi originals will recognise the organisation that masks the details of construction; those who don't, will recognise present day elements, yet be drawn into these incongruous spaces that have an air of menace despite providing womb-like enclosure. They are scenes in which a murder or a mugging might have taken place: apparently deserted, but observed from afar by unseen authorities who are too distant or unconcerned to intervene. The presence of surveillance cameras suggest that something bad might happen here or already has. The scale is unclear, but in each it is oppressive. Steps lead somewhere, but where? Windows are barred with grilles. Light from elsewhere suggests there might be a way out, another exit, but only for those who are prepared to run, their footsteps echoing up high into the vaulted atrium.

These spaces are not completely devoid of human presence: within some a tiny figure can be found – a man kneeling praying in the inside of a mosque, the artist's own reflection in a curved mirror as she photographs the scene, a blurred figure striding quickly away from danger, tiny figures of workmen in a lift. In all seven there is some trace of humanity, a shadow if not a person. But the architecture and the space dominate and there is nothing reassuring about discovering that you are not alone here.

Within the strict formal architectural space and the constraints of Piranesi's structures, Allchurch places elements with contemporary resonance which can be decoded one by one: the surveillance cameras and mirrors, modern signs and graffiti and other contemporary details gradually become apparent as the eye travels around the created

space. This is a trope drawn from the frontispiece of Piranesi's work where the title is carved into the stone wall of a 'prison'. In Allchurch's interpretations, the viewer is drawn into the enclosing space by light, by perspective and by the desire to explore and make sense of the incongruities of structure. The scale of the pieces encourages us to enter within the frame and discover the depth and detail, to imagine the tactile qualities of the space.

Each of the elements has an overt meaning; nothing is arbitrary. In one sense they are composite documentary records of the artist's journey around a particular city in pursuit of the jigsaw pieces that will complete her mapped image. She compresses a journey around a city into a single scene. Allchurch works on one picture at a time, collecting the urban details and angles that will complete the puzzle, even dreaming about entering the spaces that Piranesi invented. But behind this manifest content, and the consciously chosen symbols, there are hints of latent fears, terror even. It is not far-fetched to say that Piranesi's subject wasn't so much architecture but the psyche. This is a theatre of the mind with its jumbled symbolic content. Archways, tunnels, pillars and bollards have obvious sexual connotations for the Freudian.

As well as having the quality of interpretable dreams – Piranesi's and Allchurch's - these imaginary prisons are also the stages on which a nightmare might unfold. At an autobiographical level, it is significant that in a previous series the artist also engaged with fear – there in a much more straightforward filmic mode she documented ominous urban landscapes, often at dusk, pedestrian spaces with only one way out. This fear was not an abstract one: some of the emotional charge

of both series comes from a real memory of danger. Twilight for her is always both beautiful and menacing. She was understandably drawn to Piranesi's ambiguous etchings which provide visual metaphors for a state of mind that resonates with her own. She has to dare herself to enter some of the darker recesses of sites she wants to photograph to complete an image, challenging her own sense of danger. The power of these works, then, resides in their dreamlike construction of uncomfortable terrain as much as in the implied meanings of their elements.

Photographic illustrations only go so far in communicating the visual impact of the series. Each picture is mounted as a transparency on a lightbox. Where Piranesi's sombre etchings seemed to be moving in the direction of pure blackness; Allchurch introduces colour and light. Each city, Rome, London, Paris, has peculiar qualities of luminosity for her that determine the palette for the images associated with that place. London, for instance, is characterised by the yellowish light from the bricks of the East End; but also the metallic bluish tones of the Jubilee Line's harsh lighting from which parts of *Urban Chiaroscuro #2: London* is composed. Rome's light is tinged with a warmer orange or in *Urban Chiaroscuro #5: Rome* the white light reflected from Mussolini's version of modernism. As a series, the seven palettes of the seven images complement each other in their tonal modulations. Light and colour provide a note of optimism that is lacking in Piranesi's dark vision, but this optimism is tinged with contemporary uncertainty and a sense of foreboding.