

China Dream

SALT Gallery, 2015, New Zealand

The Millennium Public Art Gallery, 2016, New Zealand

Review by Anna-Marie White, Curator, The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū

Lisa Chandler works from a studio at Mapua, a small coastal village on the edge of Tasman Bay; a sheltered haven at the top of Te Waipounamu, the South Island of New Zealand. Her studio is a converted apple shed and a reminder of the days when the Mapua wharf was a busy working port, processing apples from the surrounding orchards. Today, however, the wharf is dotted with restaurants, boutique shops and tourists. Recreational boats bob in the harbour. The locals are casual and their demeanour reflects a tranquil lifestyle. There is a strong sense of community. It is a calm and pleasant place.

Chandler also works in a vibrant cultural community and the region is well known for arts and crafts. Mapua was once home to Toss Woollaston (1910-1998), the leading figure of the modern art movement in New Zealand. Woollaston was influenced by the abstraction of Paul Cezanne (1836-1906) and the teachings of Hans Hoffman (1880-1966), and strove to reduce expansive landscape scenes – such as the view looking across Tasman Bay at the Richmond Ranges – to flat abstracted planes. Woollaston continued to develop his method of abstraction throughout his lifetime; as such, Mapua and surrounding areas feature strongly in his oeuvre. This is Woollaston country and his reputation casts a shadow on any artist working here.

Like Woollaston, Chandler also works in the modern painting tradition. Unlike him, Chandler is not inspired by the surrounding landscape nor motivated to capture a sense of that place. Rather, she is interested in the ‘non-place’, generic transitional spaces associated with the process of modernity – transport hubs such as train stations, airports and car parks, or sites of global commerce like skyscrapers and shopping malls¹. Chandler is excited by these kinds of spaces; places in which she feels comfortably anonymous and at ease with the logical and mechanical flow of people around her. Moreover, these places make a strong and obvious impression on her. Chandler aims to capture those feelings in her paintings and that guides her method of abstraction.

Since 2011, Chandler has been purposefully visiting and researching ‘non-places’ in Europe and Asia. Initially her work sought to describe the essence of these places: faceless people, sometimes veiled or obscured, moving with singular purpose through clinical whitewashed interiors. In keeping with the anonymous nature of these sites, Chandler limits the character or narrative in these scenes to essential details: a doorway, the escalator, glazed tiles, and pull-along luggage trolleys.

In 2012 she spent days in the London Underground; for all intents and purposes, the epitome of a global ‘non-place’. Over time, however, a sense of history and character began to pervade the spaces. Chandler learned about a burial pit containing casualties of the Black Plague that had just been uncovered during earthworks. She visited stations that had housed Londoners during the air raids of World War II, and noticed the numbers of commuters plugged into electronic devices: wires dangling from their ears, their privacy protected by a cone of sound. Unwittingly Chandler began to project a narrative onto this scene, that of zombies – the living dead – moving semi-consciously through space and time.

This research trip resulted in a large and ambitious painting, *Trapped within the Crowded Layers of Existence 2013*. While the painting describes a stereotypical commuter journey, Chandler incorporated the observations she had made: a row of corpses may be discerned in the bottom right corner, ghostly faces peer above their blankets on makeshift sleeping cots at centre, and some of the

commuters have blood-red-rimmed eyes. These are minor details yet contaminate the objective and consciously neutral position of Chandler's work until that time. This evolving conflict – between 'place' and 'non-place' – is made more apparent, however, in her latest series, China Dream.

In 2013 and '14 Chandler undertook two artist residencies in Asia, the first, supported by the Asia New Zealand Foundation, at Instinc Gallery in Singapore and the second at Red Gate in Beijing. Her residency applications were based on her active research interest in the 'non-places' of global cities, of which Singapore and Beijing were prime examples. Chandler soon discovered that these places were growing into mega cities with the insidious effects of globalisation becoming more apparent: from the loss of local culture to gross economic disparities and environmental pollution.

During Chandler's Red Gate residency, the Chinese government implemented a massive expansion programme that would see Beijing at the centre of a planned megalopolis – Jing-Jin-Ji – encompassing Tianjin and areas of Hebei, with a projected population of 130 million². Jing-Jin-Ji is intended to invigorate and revitalise China's culture, economy and identity; a reformist agenda that is summarised by the motto 'The Chinese Dream', which is inspired, in part, by the middle class 'American Dream'.

'Non-places' will proliferate in the planned development yet Chandler found herself drawn to hùtòngs, original alleyways that network through the city. It is here that indigenous culture still exists, though as Chandler describes, in Third World conditions. Initially she was shocked by the extreme contrast between the 'local' and 'global' spaces of Beijing and began to investigate the projected impacts of Jing-Jin-Ji. She responded to this research by making photograph-based collages, which allowed her to overlay and contrast her experiences in a quick and direct manner.

On her return to Mapua, Chandler began to work these collages into large-scale paintings. She began to meld the images to create surreal and 'dream-like' visions. This development is indicated by the title of the series – China Dream – which not only refers to the political context of the residency but also signals the artist's sense of 'distance' and 'memory' in relation to that place.

Each painting has a series of focal points, which overlap or 'melt' into each other. By this method, Chandler contrasts the densely packed features of the hùtòng against the modernist architectural style of skyscrapers, and reflects hand-painted market signage (featuring customary Chinese patterns) in the glass windows of store facades. Figures occupy the hazy zones between 'place' and 'non-place' – businessmen stride purposefully past a casually dressed man, hunched over a washing bucket, or slumped – head on hands – sitting exhausted, or overwhelmed, on a kerb. The title of that painting, drawn from a Chinese proverb, reads No Man Can Do More Than He Can, and is concerned with the pressure placed on the individual – and the nation – to rise above their current status.

Chandler has described these compositions as being based on 'pace and pause'. This is a neat summary of the way in which she balances detail with abstraction to construct a certain narrative. That phrase also reveals the purpose of the series – to consider an extreme process of cultural change – and indicates a fundamental shift in this artist's work. That is, these paintings do not maintain an objective position. China Dream expresses a critical attitude toward the expansion of Beijing and sympathy for the aspiring individual and local culture. Moreover, she employs narrative to critique the theory and aesthetics of the 'non-place', which she has previously adopted unquestionably.

It is interesting to speculate about this change in Chandler's work. She has travelled extensively yet it is Beijing, specifically, that has caused her to question the central tenant of her work. One might assume that it is the magnitude of the city, notwithstanding its planned growth, that has

given Chandler reason to think differently about 'non-places'. Moreover, it is intriguing to consider Chandler's empathy for local village culture, which possibly shows the influence of her life in Mapua. In any case, it is clear that a sense of place has emerged as a factor in Chandler's work; an unforeseen development that signals a new direction in her art practice.

Anna-Marie White

Footnotes:

1 See Marc Augé (1995), *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London: New York.

2 Johnson, I, 'As Beijing Becomes a Supercity, the Rapid Growth Brings Pain', *The New York Times*, 19 July 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/20/world/asia/in-china-a-supercity-rises-around-beijing.html?_r=1 [accessed, 1 August 2015].

About the Author:

Anna-Marie White is the Curator at The Suter Art Gallery Te Aratoi o Whakatū, the public art gallery for the Nelson region. In 2012, White curated *Cruel City*, a survey of contemporary art practice in Nelson – Chandler was one of four artists selected for that exhibition.

The title *Cruel City*, was drawn from a quote by Colin McCahon (1919-1987), one of the most significant New Zealand artists of the twentieth century, describing the difficult time that he experienced in Nelson in the 1940s.

