

Jennifer and Kevin McCoy: A Passion for Detail

CHUS MARTINEZ

There are people who take salt in their coffee. They say it gives it a tang, a savour, which is peculiar and fascinating. In the same way there are certain places, surrounded by a halo of romance, to which the inevitable disillusionment, which you must experience on seeing them gives a singular spice. You have expected something wholly beautiful and you get an impression, which is infinitely more complicated than any that beauty can give you. ¹

W. Somerset Maugham, Honolulu

I quote this passage from Somerset Maugham because it helps me to introduce a notion central to the artistic practice of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy: how an image comes to life. What determines the fact that our brain retains certain images in an almost photographic manner, yet forgets a million others? Throughout our lives we live not only in different physical spaces but different virtual spaces too, thanks to television, cinema, advertising and art. All these different spaces use different languages and communication codes. Some spaces are perceived as informal, like the street or a living room (to use a public and a private example). Other spaces are gestural, cool, almost unreal, or perhaps better described as cinematic. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy are playful researchers, and take inspiration from all the images that we are surrounded by in an attempt to define new possibilities and principles and understand better the multiple worlds that we inhabit simultaneously.

In many of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy's installations the viewer is confronted with a series of models as well as an index of images. The artists remake specific scenes in miniature, some taken from cinema (as is the case with *Soft Rains*, 2003), and others taken from everyday memories, images that actually 'belong' to their lives (as is the case with *Traffic*, 2004). A series of cameras records these images and a computer chooses the sequence of shots, acting as the director. Each of these scenarios operates like a film studio, giving the artists the opportunity to re-enact life and memory. Every one of these sets could be read as a potential 'laboratory' of life: they make us think about the way an image is produced, as well as its meaning. The fact that they are hand-made also adds an interesting element of fallibility to the reality on which they are based. The works recreate each scene in miniature, and in that sense every re-enacted image actualises the mechanical act of

¹ W. Somerset Maugham, *Collected Short Stories Volume I* (Vintage Classics) (Honolulu: Random House, 2000), p 86.

watching a picture. The installations, made from these individual components, seem to offer the viewer the opportunity to re-visit the way in which we are trained to see. The works are optical experiments, the outcomes of which are not only the result of the artists' use of technology and handicraft, but they also invite us to think about the image as an unstable phenomenon that brings into being not one particular memory but many. The artists therefore seem to dismiss or challenge the instrumentalisation that goes hand in hand with the act of watching in our highly developed societies.

In *Underworld*, a novel by the American writer Don DeLillo, one of the characters mentions how, lately, geography seems to have gone back on itself and become smaller. Each of us assimilates only the part of the world that surrounds us. We try to escape from the density of an accelerated multitude of sensations by withdrawing and learning to move around in our individual realities. This is our way of shrinking our geography so that the world takes on a form which is attainable and manageable; a world in which we can move with absolute freedom, conscious that it is we who control the situation and not the situation that controls us. This maxim therefore regulates our expectations of what surrounds us. Science has evolved with the expectation of human progress as its main source of inspiration. Total annulment of the gravitational effect could be seen to correspond to this vision. Nothing could change our perception of the world so radically as to be set free from the force that holds us to this earth. The 'future' is embedded in this post-revolutionary moment in which we go beyond the influence of physical forces. Vehicles and people will be able to move around freely by levitating above the ground. Our space of action will no longer be limited to two or three planes and will expand in a way hitherto unimaginable. Such an opening up will cause no fear, since this colonisation will be the product of our dearly held scientific achievements. Fantasy and science, hand in hand. Dreams are a method of imagining which route technology must take to reach the desired goal. Image progresses from being a representation of what exists, to being a reflection of what could become real. Thus contemplation ceases to be the way of relating to the image; instead contemplation becomes both a method and an invitation to use all means within our grasp to make that image a reality. Mobility and future are two notions that go well together. The artistic practice of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy is an incursion into this universe of expectations: complete fiction can take place in any universe and the white cube space dedicated to art is just one among many others where such an experiment can unfold.

The German philosopher Niklas Luhmann declared that because of the numerous roles we play and the countless arenas in which we perform our tasks, we are each of us always 'partially displaced'. As a result of the plethora of voices and projects that are in competition with each other, and the multiplicity of imperatives urging us to make the most of them (regardless of time or place), we have the constant feeling that we are in turn 'partially excluded'. We perceive the here and now as an ephemeral state. We are always a kind of constantly transitory 'I', and our lives can be seen as a repository of identities that have never been able to come to fruition. This inability to come to fruition is played out in *The Kiss* (2003), an ever-lasting kiss between a man and a woman, based on the film *Body Heat* (1981).² In the McCoy's version two actors are filmed embracing and the resulting images digitised and re-edited live in a continuously variable way through the electronics contained in a red suitcase, also present in the gallery. The case operates like a robot that not only decides on one image over another, but also how to show it to us, endlessly. It is a work therefore

² Lawrence Kasdan (Director), *Body Heat* [motion picture] (United States of America: Ladd Company, 1981), Retrieved from <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/152527> (9 January 2007).

