

Jennifer and Kevin McCoy: A Passion for Detail

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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).

lacking in passion since passion is based on the narrative of seduction reaching a climax: this is just a computer-generated kiss. Similarly, like the film produced by the installation *Soft Rains*, customised computer software is used to control miniature cameras, set elements and recorded dialogue. The artists distribute scenes from well-known films across seven platforms, staged almost in the manner of a dolls house. A series of spotlights illuminates details of the carefully made constructions, while small cameras shoot from different angles and feed close-up images to a main computer which then edits the material randomly. The computer is in charge – the director, in a sense – and the results are shown on a big screen presiding in the gallery.

Another installation, *Traffic*, gives the whole cinematic deconstruction game another twist. Four platforms, as in *Soft Rains*, represent a couple's relationship – that of Jennifer and Kevin – through their own relationship with cinema. One model shows a date in Paris at a screening of Godard's *Week End* (1967). In another, the artists are in their own living room watching Spielberg's *Sugarland Express* (1974). Another shows the couple watching *American Graffiti* (1973), and this time the living room has been replaced by the hospital room where Kevin was recovering from a heart problem. The last shows the artists again, watching *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) in a bar in Texas. These theatrical efforts are as much about cinema as they are about the uncanny relationship between art and life, cinema and reality. The choice of the movies is very carefully made. It is irrelevant to ask ourselves if any of these scenes really happened. Instead we must ask ourselves how much of Paris we learnt to see through Godard. Or, take the hospital scene: as Kevin recovers from an illness, the couple watch *American Graffiti*. The film, like the sets of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, treats the lives of four teenagers like vignettes, showing the last night of their summer vacation in California. An intriguing movie, it ends with a series of on-screen title cards revealing the characters' ultimate fates: one is killed by a drunk driver two years later, another is reported as missing in action in Vietnam, one becomes an insurance salesman and the last avoids the draft by moving to Canada to become a writer. In a similar way, we can feel detached from reality sometimes, watching ourselves experiencing life. The artists therefore not only experiment with how image is produced, but also the impact cinema has had on our perception of life. By looking at a visual representation of the memories of others' lives, the artists give us the chance to see ourselves, and the piece makes it possible for us to fully connect sources of information that were otherwise separate.

The artists emphasise the role of artifice, of the disparate. Their passion for detail makes narrative sequences possible like in 'real' movies. The actors are small figurines, altered and repainted to create the illusion of being tall or short. Often the figurines appear twice, each time having, for example, a different facial expression. Thus, when one of the cameras film one or the other of the figurines and the computer edits the images, the result gives the impression of change, of time passing. But the sets are in fact static; they are giving us the opportunity to see everything in one shot. An 'actor' in these movies is not the source of action but the target of a vast array of devices, swarming towards it. It is actually the computer that creates filmic narrative out of a fake reality.

The rhetoric of technology, and to a certain extent the rhetoric of globalisation, revolves around the idea of speed. Machines not only make it possible to speed up the production of and access to information, but also they are capable of expanding the territory and broadening the action of the subject by creating virtual communities that receive and bounce back information in a never-ending process of feedback. Recording liberated the image from being just presentation, a landscape. Recording liberated the image from the moment of performance. In cinema we never know where things actually take place or when exactly they took place. Recording allows us to play

a scene over and over, to take the movie home, and to choose when and where to see it. Impossible relationships and perspectives are made possible, tiny details can be made huge and huge ones compacted. By presenting us with the sets, the departing point, and also the images generated from them, the artists make us aware of the power of 'recording' and of what it actually means. Their installations help us to understand better the relationship between landscape and narrative, as well as the psychological implications of both experiences. The act of making a film becomes the art of creating new mental locations, new nuances: the most basic material is transformed and challenges what we think we see and what we understand about it. The works of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy present the viewer with a complex layering of references or points of view, visual and aural treatments that do not contribute to our knowledge of a particular movie, but to a different understanding of what constitutes a film and how our experience of life and memory is shaped by it.