KRISTINA LEE PODESVÁ ON ISLAND DEVELOPMENTS

At first glance, Island Developments offers a tale of two islands, one of concrete and the other of broken glass. Its stories initially appear discrete and parallel, joining in two instances, once in tone (the past) and then in space (as islands). In fact, these narratives are much more closely intertwined in a taut fabric that dissolves the distances separating things—fact from fiction, art from politics, and space from society among them. While the specificity of Rose Island and Island of Broken Glass—the narrative subjects of this tale—implies that two distinct histories are the project’s central concerns, taken together they suggest the silhouette of an island-scape, compelling us to consider more carefully what an island constitutes and how it might be developed.

On the one hand, an island is simply a land mass surrounded by water, the result of natural and ancient geological processes, comprising what Henri LeFèvre calls “absolute space” in his original work The Production of Space (1974). On the other, an island might also be a nation, a holiday resort, a refuge through an array of economic, political, and cultural practices that provide space socially. At the same time an island is produced, it takes on the yoke of property, a commodity among all others, which can be sold, traded, and developed for profit and further exchange.

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In their rendering of both islands, Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder provide multiple representations and hybridizations, drawing attention not only to each place in particular, but in the space where they intersect. Indeed, by inserting the fantastic among historical details and documents, we are reluctant to fully trust the miniature presented and to think instead of the bigger picture. Ironically, had the artists chosen photography as the exclusive medium of Island Developments, we might read the desolation at work as an exploration focused on the limits of memory, individuality, and truth telling, but that is a rather bygone, and by now moribund, exercise. Instead of wondering how or what might have happened to Rose Island and Island of Broken Glass, we might ask what significance lies in the articulation and production of such places and their histories. Cranfield and Hilder privilege the complex processes that determine these spaces over their crude and pithetic facts, which they lay bare as a kind of lighter. By adopting a variety of media—including sculpture, drawing, bookworks, dialogue, video, music, performance, reporting, and found objects in both aural, visual, and linguistic strategies—the artists look not at the what of representation but the how.

In gentle curves of shimmering glass and silver walls, Mouse roses boldly—almost stagily—proposed as classic architecture, as contemporary as today, a modern masterpiece that reenacts the classic architecture of the Belle Époque.

And what of the why? We could argue that some art today evinces an unhealthy tendency toward a romanticization of the past, the Sixties especially. By ignoring or failing to see how these were informed by our current situation, contemporary artists offer us and their predecessors a hollow embrace, pickpocketing the objects in both aural, visual, and linguistic strategies—the artists look not at the what of representation but the how.

In Island of Broken Glass, Giorgio Rosa in 1963, Rose Island consisted of a 400 square-meter concrete platform that was intended to house a restaurant, bar, nightclub, souvenir shop, and post office off the coast of Italy in the Adriatic Sea. Named the Republic of Rose Island (after, and presumably by, its visionary founder) the island declared independence from the Italian state in 1968. At the same time, Rose put into play a variety of actions that attempted to both knock down and secure the sovereignty of his micro-nation by adopting Esperanto as the official language, issuing postage stamps, and becoming President. Soon thereafter, the Italian government responded with accusations of tax evasion, and dispatched a few carabinieri, some tax inspectors, and ultimately the navy to dismantle the platform with explosives. The short war waged, therefore, illustrated the degree to which Rose’s use of linguistic and symbolic codes for nationhood had posed a threat (political and economic) to an established national government despite the relatively small space the island occupied.

Another small and contested site was the Island of Broken Glass, an artwork prepared by the artist Robert Smithson in 1967, which sought to cover miami islet, a small rock island in the Georgia Strait, with 100 tons of tinted broken glass. The idea was to enact a process by which the glistening glass would obscure the island underneath it, all the while slowly disintegrating and returning the glass to its original state as grains of sand. Despite multiple efforts, Smithson’s project was never realized, having fallen victim to public protests about the potential harm the project posed to wildlife as well as the faila mechanisms behind it and narrowly government bureaucracy. In addition, the opposition took a nationalist tone for Smithson was American. Here, the battles fought over the island territory pit art against nature and in so doing did deflect public attention away from industrial pollution and toward culture as the true contaminant of society.

Island Developments is an artist, writer, and curator based in Vancouver, Canada. She is the founder of Colouredprime, a free school within a school dedicated to the speculative and collaborative study of five colours (white, black, red, yellow, and brown) and cofounder of Cornershop Projects, an open framework for engaging with economic exchange. In between things, she is Assistant Editor at the Fillip Review.

PHOTO: Blaine Campbell.

Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder
Island Developments installation views

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