



KRISTINA LEE PODESVA ON *ISLAND DEVELOPMENTS*

Brady Cranfield and Jamie Hilder
Island Developments installation views
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Photos: Blaine Campbell

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 time (the past) and then in space (as islands). In fact, these narratives are much more closely interwoven 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—imply that two distinct histories are the project’s central concern, taken together they suggest the silhouette of an isle-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 LeFebvre 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 nature sanctuary, a castaway’s curse, or a pirate’s refuge through an array of economic, political, and cultural practices that produce 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 valued, traded, and developed for profit and further exchange.

Space. Function. Design. TATE is a unique collection of thoughtfully designed homes. Priced within reach, these highly functional spaces are as easy to buy as they are to live in.

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 minutiae 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 destabilization at work as an exploration focused on the limits of memory, indexicality, 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 putative facts, which they lay bare as a kind of cipher. By adopting a variety of media—including sculpture, drawing, bookworks, dialogue, video, music, performance, reportage, 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, Musée rises boldly... as strikingly proportioned as classic architecture... as contemporary as today... a modern masterpiece that references 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 eras inform our current situation, contemporary artists offer us and their predecessors a hollow embrace, pickpocketing the images and accoutrements of history while leaving behind what is truly valuable—its zeitgeist. It is, of course, to the past that these islands belong temporally, but it is their failures that may prove instructive to us now.

Rose Island, for example, provided a test case for examining the limits and possibilities of state building. Designed and constructed by Italian engineer

Giorgio Rosa in 1965, 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, Rosa put into play a series of actions that attempted to both announce 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 Rosa’s use of linguistic and symbolic codes for nationhood had posed a threat (politically) and loss (economically) 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 proposed by the artist Robert Smithson in 1969, 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 futile mechanics behind an inept and cowardly 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 doing so deflected public attention away from industrial pollution and toward culture as the true contaminant of society.

Inspired by the famous Group of Seven, Brentwood Gate ...is a collection of six, intimate low-rise new condo towers – a rare find in this neighbourhood of developing high-rise towers – plus a 27 storey glass and concrete tower.

It is not trivial that one of the components in *Island Developments* features a drawing that looks like the shattered concrete remains of Rose Island strewn across a natural island, the former evoking Smithson’s project site. Below the image float the words “Island of Concrete,” implying that in their fusion the two islands produce an image of destruction and ruin not unlike the introductory banner that displays radiating forms, which variously resemble roses, explosion clouds, shards of glass, and fragments of thorn. But, this gesture is more celebratory than nihilistic, offering failure as a tool rather than a fate.

In Vancouver concrete and glass condominiums mark the city skyline with capitalist tower blocks. As high security and luxury fortresses, these buildings stand as islands alongside multiple and identical neighbours, which seem to reproduce without end. In this configuration we find an archipelago, an isle-scape that compels us to consider more carefully what an island constitutes and how it might be (re)developed. Recalling the capitalist notion of creative destruction in which innovation arises out of failure, *Island Developments* re-purposes that process and locates it within an artistic and political framework.

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