

ANU DRILL HALL GALLERY

Juan Davila: Panorama of Santiago, Chile: 1973-2003

Roger Benjamin

Davila's panorama floats blankly before the gallery visitor like a misplaced minimal sculpture: a canvas ring on wires, that only reveals its sense as one bends down and steps into its illuminated interior. Up on the central viewing platform, a continuous image is disclosed, unfurling as one swings the head to range over its hand-painted surfaces.

The panorama transports one to a place rarely seen by Australians: the pedestrian bridge across the Mapocho River in downtown Santiago, capital of Chile. From the vantage-point assumed for you by the painter, passers-by move quietly, or rest against the steel girders of the railing, peering down on the building-site below. Here bobcats excavate the concrete-lined channel of the Mapocho to install an underground freeway. At one end of the bridge, the gaily-coloured stalls of a street market can be seen; at the other, a tree-lined boulevard and beyond it, the soaring metal rim of a nineteenth-century railway station. Were it not for the distant cordillera of snow-capped Andes, one could almost be in Paris, somehow mixing the Seine at the Quai d'Orsay with excavations at the Gare St.-Lazare.

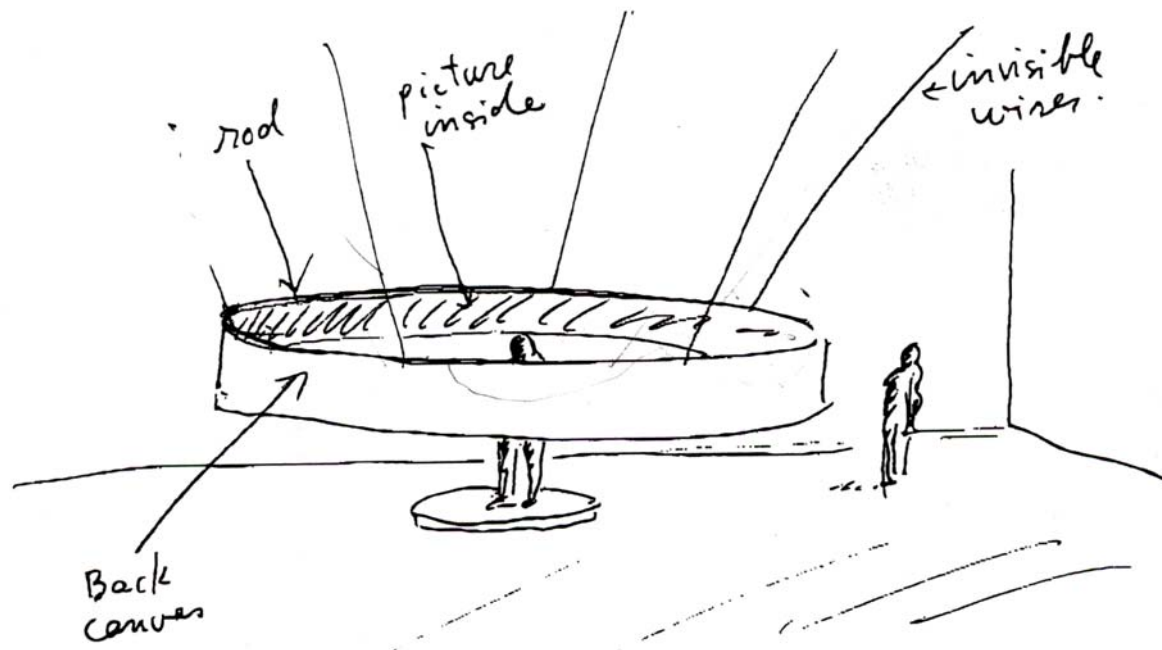
In a sense this is right, for Juan Davila has placed the viewer inside the space of art history as well as topographical illusion. The *deja vu* in the panorama is that of the steel railway bridge of the Pont de l'Europe, as painted by Gustave Caillebotte and Edouard Manet in the 1870s. Caillebotte's Parisian dandy looking out between the girders has been replaced by a beautiful Chilean youth, mercurial of profile and clad in a jacket of many coloured stripes. His is the sombre gaze of a witness to history, not the vacant curiosity of the flaneur. In this place, three hundred years before, the Spanish settlers encountered and eliminated the indigenous Mapuches, taking their name as a souvenir. A great stone bridge, the Puente de Cal y Canto, was erected over the often-dry bed of the Mapocho. It too was thrown down, replaced in the 1880s by the modern steel structure that stands today, designed in the manner of the great French engineer who put his stamp on metropolitan modernism, Gustave Eiffel. So too was the Estacion Mapocho, visible in the distance (Santiago's Estacion Central was actually built by Eiffel). In the stakes of far-flung colonial versions of modernity, Santiago snared a greater celebrity than the British who supervised

the building of 'marvellous Melbourne' in the same era.

For Juan Davila the fragile modernisms of the colonial periphery – those of Chile, or Algeria, or Australia – puncture the exclusive claims made for Paris by the dominant historians of French art, the T. J. Clarks and Griselda Pollocks. For them Paris is the privileged locus of modernity and Woman is its very figure, be she a prostitute at large on the streets or an elegant bourgeoisie chaperoned by her family. In Davila's painting of Santiago the passerby is humbler, and more likely male: a mestizo, not quite white; poorly dressed and lined with care, like the mustachioed man with a lunch-box who advances bleakly across the bridge. Today a worker in the revival project of Chilean late capitalism, one asks what rigours he knew in the disastrous period of General Pinochet's dictatorship (begun when the long hand of American foreign policy reversed the socialist government of Salvador Allende).

Himself an emigrant refusing that political horror, Juan Davila prefers not to depict, as have other artists on the left, its direct manifestations.¹ His couple on the bridge stand in as witnesses to events of which faint traces nevertheless survive. The river-wall to the right still bears the marks of an enormous mural, effaced by the military junta soon after the coup d'etat of 1973. This mural, painted in the late 1960s by the radical Mural Brigade of Ramona Parra, was a two-hundred metre-long history of the Communist Party and the Chilean workers' movement. Davila would have known it as a young man. Partly uncovered by the flooding of the Mapocho during 1982, the murals were quickly covered again with grey paint. These ghostly traces, barely perceptible today, evoke the voices of the artists, writers, musicians and intellectuals who were tortured and killed during the years of the dictatorship – those whom a new generation of Chileans risk forgetting forever.

This is the first time Juan Davila has attempted to paint a panorama, a form of visual entertainment largely confined to the nineteenth century. Panoramas were giant circular canvases, usually set on the walls of purpose-built rotundas with sky-lit ceilings. Often housed in permanent buildings in London, Paris and Vienna (but also in ambitious regional capitals like Melbourne), panoramas usually offered physiognomies of



Juan Davila, Panorama installation drawing, 2003. Image courtesy the artist.

great cities seen from a central vantage-point, or else the recreation of recent epochal events, such as the battles of the Napoleonic wars. 'The observer stands on a platform, and the space between this platform and the picture is covered with real objects which gradually blend into the picture itself. The picture is lighted from above ... so that no light but that reflected from the picture reaches the eye ... the staircase [and] the platform are kept nearly dark' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edition).

It was not possible for Davila to attempt the conditions of lighting or scale that make the illusion of another place complete. But he is one of the rare painters alive with the technical skills – and the ambition – to attempt his own panorama, cut to his memories and his own need for cultural intervention. The Canadian artist Jeff Wall has expressed his fascination with panoramas by using a wide-angle lens to photograph the restoration of the Bourbaki Panorama (in Lucerne, Switzerland).² A parallel spirit of postmodern homage to a lost visual technology invests the Australian Tony Clark's reinvention of the 'myriorama' (another popular 19th century visual entertainment).

In this sense Davila's panorama of Santiago is a symbolic gesture, aimed at asserting the relevance of the Chilean experience to Australians, and addressing the profound loss of home that affects the migrant. For his 2002 paintings on the current Australian refugee crisis, Davila discovered a deadpan style of painting that lacks the colourful complexity of his familiar collages of appropriated art. In them, Davila embodied the figure of the Refugee as a tall brown-haired woman, stripped naked or

besmirched with mud. She stands in a desert landscape that evokes Woomera, but is based on snapshots of the harsh Chilean plains before the Andes mountains. That perspectival scenography of desolation

(with its source in author snapshots) is continued in the panorama of Santiago. In writing of the migrant's experience of a 'wholesale loss of one's most meaningful and valued objects to which memories and deep affections are attached', Davila has concluded 'the subject of the Diaspora is in constant mourning that can only be resolved by utopian thought, the materialisation of the lost nation that erases the here and now of the new place.'³

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¹ 'In an exhibition that attempts to address human rights issues, I use this format to surround spectators and move them within an illusion. Rather than illustrating abuses that are not visible... I propose a narrative based on the medium, 'Juan Davila, *Panorama of Santiago, Chile: 1973-2003* (Artist's Statement), June 2003.

² See Thierry de Duve et. al., *Jeff Wall*, London, Phaidon, 2002.

³ Juan Davila, 'A Brief Commentary by the Artist', in *Juan Davila: Works, 1988-2002*, ANU Drill Hall Gallery, 26 September -3 November 2002, pp. 16-17.