

## Nicola Maxwell

"Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense." G. K. Chesterton, 'The Logic of Fairyland', 1909

Nicola Maxwell's ongoing series of large-scale photographs, 'Enclosures', examine the recent profusion of simulated environments and man-made interior landscapes across the UK. Maxwell's photographs are investigations into both the construction and consumption of these sites, whose uses range from commerce and leisure to 'conservation'. The artist's subject matter spans buildings designed to further our understanding of the natural world – such as tropical gardens and aquariums – to those which employ real foliage, artificial greenery and 'natural' imagery in order to create hallucinatory, hyper-real environments. Both types of spaces are man-made urban oases: both might be thought to recall the classical idea of 'rus in urbe' – of recreating the countryside within the city. As the existence of this Latin phrase suggests, the desire to create 'liminal' zones inside the city of a choreographed 'nature' is a long-standing impulse. However, bringing 'the great outdoors' inside might also be thought a thoroughly British phenomenon.

Constructing palatial glass buildings to encompass landscapes is, of course, an enterprise saturated with absurdities and contradictions. The modern origins of these architectural forms and indeed their ideologies lie in the Victorian iron-and-glass structures built to house the Great Exhibition and Exposition Universelle. Maxwell draws some implicit comparisons between the spaces and their 'predecessors': a wide depth of field reveals the details of the buildings' construction with great clarity. The long exposures necessary to capture such details renders the spaces empty of people. Accordingly our attention focuses upon viewing the buildings as feats of engineering and ingenuity. It is also directed to the imaginative contract we enter into in the spaces, either suspending disbelief that we are inhabiting foreign climes, or enjoying the play of illusions created by 'extending' spaces through photographic or painted trompe-l'oeil backdrops.

Across the sequence of eight images in 'Pleasure Gardens', the artist unravels the relationship between the buildings' forms and functions, by highlighting mismatches between the design vocabulary employed and their commercial or civic purposes. There might be thought to be two types of spaces in Maxwell's body of work. On the one hand, there are highly theatrical, playful environments, which are artfully choreographed and whose designs are based upon accumulation, excess, or surrealistic unexpected juxtapositions. On the other are civic spaces, which are intended to generate 'improvement' in the visiting subjects. Certainly in publicly funded garden spaces, the aim is to further the common good through didactic displays of flora. Although we can identify both quasi-scientific and 'picturesque' arrangements of species in Maxwell's work, they are far from being opposites. In many instances, it is all but impossible to distinguish which sites are created for the purposes of entertainment or distraction and which exist to inculcate and disseminate learning.

Some institutions in Maxwell's study are expressly created as a zone of green space – as civic 'lungs' for city dwellers. Others seem to create a facsimile or parody of the 'natural world' as we imagine it. But identifying which is which in one pair of images proves troublesome. Two grand foyers are both animated by palm trees: one is a grand and fashionable metropolitan hotel, the other a provincial court house. One is transformed into a beach setting, being furnished with several tons of sand and hallucinatory violent pink palm trees. The other is decorated by lush, tropical foliage planted over a snaking yellow-brick path. In both instances, the interiors are characterised by a visual language and palette of materials which contradicts their apparent purposes rather than articulating them. Affluent businessmen slumber surrounded by acid-hued monstrous plant life. A building where punishment is meted out and justice enacted is made to resemble the 'yellow brick road' to Oz rather than being characterized by dignified authority. The artist seems to ask: in public spaces, what shared vocabulary of civic virtue do we now possess?

In the image reproduced here, the artist observes a more casual surrealism. Initially our eyes are drawn to the incongruity of neon being used to signify a zone of 'natural' space inside a shopping centre. Our initial reading might be that the image is a 'parable' about our ability to become 'enchanted' by that which signifies 'wilderness' however mismatched the signified and signifier are, and how literal the sign. The artist draws our attention to the 'cognitive dissonance' necessary to inhabit such an environment. Whilst real rainforests are disappearing, we employ our collective resources upon creating facsimiles of 'rainforest'. Maxwell further complicates our reading by pairing the image with another depicting the natural history gallery in a civic museum. This latter features a delightfully trompe l'oeil painted rainforest as a backdrop. At the edge of the picture frame, a dinosaur made of over-saturated yellow plastic is also undecipherable; and if we recognize what it is supposed to be, it tests our

capacity to suspend disbelief. The distances – functional, psychological, and technological – between the shopping centre and the civic space are, again, rather more slight than we imagine. Rather, Maxwell seems to draw a parallel conclusion to that of architect Cedric Price, which is that the museum – and indeed the entire public sphere – should be more akin to a “fun palace” than a temple.

Supported by: MPS and Arts Council England: North East; and with thanks to the University of Sunderland Photography Department, Blue Planet Aquarium, Great Eastern Hotel, Manchester Magistrates Court, Metrocentre, Rainforest Café, Sunderland Museum and Winter Gardens / Tyne and Wear Museums, Tropical World, Xscape.