

Orientalism

as an

Aesthetic

of Othering

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Orientalism as an Aesthetic of Othering

I have used the Gordon Ricketts Fund to critically respond to the use of visual culture as propaganda for Imperial ideas and perspectives. Through using Edward Said's critique of 'Orientalism' as the lens through which to interpret and focus this research, I have developed a series of drawings to creatively respond, through visual means, to the material I found. The images adopt and subvert traditional visual tropes to critique the ways that many countries, cultures and people across Asia and the Middle East were represented and depicted by those in Europe.

My creative research method has been one of collage, as a way of layering, synthesising and juxtaposing different fragments and references. I used this approach to create two large –scale analogical drawings laden with multiple symbolic meanings and references. These analogical drawings simultaneously hold and communicate the ideas contained in their layers: their purpose is didactic. Both the drawings take the tropes used to 'other' people from the 'East' and give

them visual form, reflecting the inaccuracies and ignorance of these uninformed stereotypes back. The large-scale drawings can be seen as an extension to my Masters dissertation¹ on the frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, where I researched the ideals and messages embedded in the painted interiors of this medieval town hall. My two drawings take the form of a frieze of people and a large map, which are directly influenced by the Allegory of the Good City and the lost Mappamondo (a world map), two frescoes in the Palazzo painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti.

I have used this project to develop my creative portfolio, but it has also allowed me to develop my critical perspective on the current state of the cultural heritage sector, giving me the time to learn and develop tools to better interrogate the professional sphere I am working in. I hope to use this project to continue creatively (re)interpret historical collections and material in the museum sector.

During my research, I came across problematic (and upsetting) representations of Orientalism at public heritage sites. In many cases they were not coupled with any captioning or additional interpretation to either challenge or critically examine the works.

I plan to use my drawings and this report to pitch creative research residencies with cultural organisations that hold examples of Orientalist architecture and design material, using my perspective and skillset to develop new work that does critically respond to their archival collections.

¹ - Public Works: A discussion on the relationship between the spatial sequence and didactic quality of the narrative frescoed interiors of the Palazzo Pubblico in medieval Siena as commissioned by the Nine (1287-1355).

This dissertation was written at University College Dublin in 2017/18 and nominated for the 2018 RIBA President's Dissertation Medal

The Gaze



“The Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined... the Orient then seems to be a theatrical stage affixed to Europe.”

Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p.63

This drawing takes the form of a frieze of people, framed within a theatrical stage set, who are travelling East to West. This spectacular scene is witnessed through the theatre binoculars of a wealthy couple from their vantage point in a theatre box. The composition is a critical visual representation of the “racially prejudiced gaze of Empire”².

The figures in the scene are racialised stereotypes taken from Orientalist and Romantic paintings by European painters. Character stereotyping was also prevalent across music halls, plays and musical comedy in the UK, where:

“the Orient provided an unrivalled opportunity to portray not only spectacle in setting and costume, but also

peculiar people with funny names, old laws and customs and characters who were slippery, grasping and lascivious”³.

The procession foregrounds this crass caricaturisation through visual abundance. The absurdity is exaggerated through the inclusion of wild animals, a lush rolling landscape of carpets and the inclusion of a terrestrial realm of djinns, dragons and ghostly lanterns.

2 - Hirsch, p.16

3 - Mackenzie, p. 53



An Imagined Geography

“It should not be forgotten that, geographically [The Orient] was ill-defined... Gradually the Orient expanded.”

John M Mackenzie, Propaganda and Empire, p.54



This drawing is an inaccurate map depicting the Orient as a singular, amorphous and homogenous land mass. The inherent contradiction of a warped map gives visual form to the indeterminate and conflated geography of 'The Orient'.

For Edward Said, the Orient was “almost a European invention”⁴ used to create “a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar and the strange”⁵.

In this sense, the Orient only existed in direct relation to Europe: this relational structure was created and maintained in order to hold power and influence unequally. Through difference and othering, the people, cultures and landscapes of the countries between the

Mediterranean, India and China were flattened by the European Coloniser's imagination into one entity. In style, the drawing references the many maps of Empire, particularly those created by the artist Max Macdonald Gill for organisations dedicated to promoting Imperial interests such as the Empire Marketing Board.

4 - Said, p.1

5 - Said, p.43

This drawing is an inaccurate map depicting the Orient as a singular, amorphous and homogenous land mass. The inherent contradiction of a warped map gives visual form to the indeterminate and conflated geography of 'The Orient'.



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