

## Emily Wolfe: *collage* and memory

*Collage* is a recurring pictorial motif in Emily Wolfe's recent artistic practice. Although her paintings are not *collages* in the strict sense of the term – the assemblage of pre-existing materials attached to a two-dimensional surface – her paintings serve rather as records of the work that precedes the actual painterly act. In that sense, her works are painted memories of preparation, of excavation, of selection and of assemblage which are as much records of her thought processes as they are displays of her astonishing painting technique.

In recent years, landscape is a prominent component in her work. But, her landscapes are not based on actual views. Instead, Wolfe's source material is 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century European landscape prints after paintings by Claude Lorrain (*circa* 1600-1682) and Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789). She photocopies the prints in sections and then cuts them up and reassembles them as paper collages with the addition of other materials such as coloured photocopy paper, old notepaper, pieces of *Permatrace* and masking tape. She then photographs the collages and discards them. It is only then that the actual painting begins as she works from the photographic image.<sup>1</sup>

What fascinates Wolfe about this process is the complex layering of references between reproductions and “originals”. Claude Lorrain was the most esteemed landscape painter of the Baroque period. His paintings were commissioned by cardinals and princes and such was his fame that he kept a sketchbook, known as the *Liber Veritatis* or Book of Truth, recording his compositions to guard against forgeries that were being made in his own lifetime. Another use for these sketches was to serve as an *aide-mémoire* should a patron request a replica of a Claude he had seen in someone else's collection. Claude was not above recycling his own compositions to meet demand. Once the paintings were reproduced as prints, they became even more widely known and imitated. Claude-Joseph Vernet was a French painter, who like Claude spent much of his career in Italy but in the following century. He too imitated Claude's style, giving it a modern twist by depicting scenes of storms and shipwrecks contrasted with scenes of calm, moonlit waterscapes, intended to be seen together as pairs. He too recycled his popular compositions in order to meet the demands of the market and like Claude, his paintings were reproduced as prints for those who could not afford an original painting.

In this latest series of works, Wolfe has revisited Vernet's classic technique of contrasting pairs. We see rain-laden storm clouds lashing a jagged coastline as churning waves crash onto the rocks. But, neither shipwreck nor rescue team for distressed survivors appears as Vernet would have done. All human incident has been removed. Instead, Wolfe has depicted *faux collages* of semi-transparent sheets of *Permatrace* draughting paper “stuck” onto the surface of the canvas, which itself

is depicted as a simulated sheet of paper showing a colour reproduction of the “painting”. Move along, and we see a moonlit port scene with a jetty which, by comparison with the storm scene, is almost preternaturally calm. No human content again, save for two becalmed tall-ships in the mid-ground which are mostly obscured by *faux collages* of black paper strips. Wolfe has taken the *collage*-effect to another level here. The entire scene is represented as an assemblage of overlapping fragments.

Wolfe delights in revealing these complex layers of cross-referencing and her paintings add yet another layer to the cycle of re-presentation and replication. In this respect, she acts like a creative archaeologist, peeling back the layers of the imagery she sources. But unlike the archaeologist, who searches for scientifically verifiable “truth”, Wolfe accepts that in art no such “truth” can ever be found. Every image is mediated, seen through different lenses, and meaning is never static or finite. This may be the reason why many of Wolfe’s paintings have something of the surreal about them. Curiously, I’m reminded of the work of the ex-patriate New Zealand artist, Felix Kelly (1914-1994).

Whether it be the fluttering curtains in her paintings of 2010-12, the kitsch ceramic figurines that appear in a series of works in 2018, or the *faux collages* of European landscapes with masking tape and circles of paper enacting the rise and fall of sun and moon in her work in 2021, Wolfe’s meticulous technique conjures forth the frisson of recognition that is the quintessential effect of *trompe l’œil*. In so doing, Wolfe, consciously or not, engages with a venerable tradition in Western art history – the mimetic or illusionistic power of art.

The origin myth of the tradition can be traced back to antiquity as recounted by the Roman writer Pliny the Elder. According to Pliny, the two most revered living painters of Classical Greece, Zeuxis and Parrhasios, staged a competition to see which of them was the greater painter. Zeuxis was famed for his illusionism and he painted a bunch of grapes so convincing that birds flew down to peck at them. Parrhasios then invited Zeuxis to unveil his work. When Zeuxis stretched out to pull away the curtain over the painting, it turned out to be not a real but a painted curtain. Zeuxis conceded defeat saying, “I have deceived the birds, but Parrhasios has deceived Zeuxis.” It is not hard to find a reference to Parrhasios’ victory in Wolfe’s *Hothouse* and *The Prey*, both from 2010, which feature curtains pulled across windows, tempting the complicit viewer to “uncover” the obstructed view.

But to push the *trompe l’œil* effect in Wolfe’s work further distracts from the real issue at stake in her practice – memory. Memories are by their very nature intensely real, often fleeting and notoriously unreliable. But humans need memory to survive. Imagine trying to live without memory, it’s impossible. Each of us is the sum of our individual memories, stored away often haphazardly in our subconscious. When they emerge most intensely, it is usually in our dreams. Things

remembered, however minor, often occur in dreams out of context and inexplicably located in our dream narratives. The familiar becomes strange and uncanny and this usually results in anxiety. Wolfe's paintings operate in a similar way. The layering and fragmentation, the "real" and the simulated are held in a constant tension by the photo-realism of Wolfe's technique. The calm of her moonlit port scene is just too calm for its own good. What trauma is concealed beneath those black rectangles of simulated paper? Wolfe's new paintings reward such interrogation.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Email to the author, 5 February 2023