

A DUBAI-DÉRIVE ON DAMIEN FLOOD'S INFINITE PLANE

By Rachel Bennett

TOPOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS

It's difficult to get purchase on Damien Flood's *Infinite Plane*. A frustration compounded when you understand the works are the fruits of a strategically conceived research trip. Flood's exploratory approach was to pick locations from a map – that flat expanse of navigable terrain, the comforting retreat of all new arrivals. These were easily definable and arbitrary points of departure for unpredictable cultural and topographical encounters with Dubai, Sharjah and the northern coast of Oman.

Such acts of encounter welcome and demand urban-unfamiliarities; Flood becomes the observer of ideas emerging as he moves through unknown landscapes. The approach is not a new one – in 1955 Debord and his *Letterist International* companions championed this *drift* (a kind of authentic experience-through-aimless-perambulation) as a fundamental of *psycho geography*, and Baudelaire's *flâneur* was an early, though more passive, proponent of a similar kind of experience making.

A traveller accesses a precious initial phase, a temporal twilight zone where the new retains a fleeting and irredeemable unfamiliarity. In this tradition, Flood investigates what is distilled from the initial experience of a place. These strategies – mapping, photographic documentation – imply a direct investigation into reality, and the outcomes – the images caught, the paintings created – suggest that some precarious place within this once unfamiliar landscape was located, a vantage point from which to experience and observe.

The landscape is the almost-immediate context of viewing, lying just beyond the gallery doors. But still, Flood's renderings shift and dissemble; subversions abound in aborted lines, canvases rotated, paint accumulated and bleached out. That initial lack of purchase is persistent and pervasive.

UN-PLANNING

Whilst the touristic ephemera of maps and photographs might imply otherwise, a major strategic approach was un-planning (incidentally, though we never discuss Debord, this un-planning remains true to the *Situationist* conception of the *dérive*). "I do not pre-work, there are no sketches," Flood explains. When I ask him about the almost 1000 photographs that constitute part of his research he counters, "I don't know if I ever looked back through them".

Even if he had tried to plan, what he experienced was a confluence of landscape and people. He's interested in the gestures he saw, identifying in them something that's both formative and formed. Gestures and landscape are fused in memory, existing on an imaginary plane. A symbiotic relationship between place and people emerge in works like *Lovers*, *Mask* and *Guy*.

Guy is a postcard, an *aide-memoire* that summons the sense of a driver and a desertscape. He drove Flood into the sand, his verbose gestures and the terrain both almost readable in the lick of paint traversing a bare, blasted expanse of canvas. These are scenes and situations fused together *as far as Flood encountered them*, that is to say — the relationships do not tangibly exist. Regardless, these remembered landscapes are inhabited and shaped by the many constituent experiences of encounter.

PERFORMING REMEMBERING

Flood's own gestures dashed on the canvas are both place and person, and neither. They're a conflation and invention as memory is wont to do. But there's magic in these sensory encounters; he recounts, almost reminisces, "*a kind of alchemical process takes place when you first experience something. It cannot be restructured or recreated – those little sparks can only be alluded to.*"

Not documentation then, but the extension of experience. "*It's a beautiful way to research; experiencing things,*" he says. The sentiment is neatly chiasmic – researching is a beautiful way to experience too, it seems.

He sustained the momentum from the trip, proceeding immediately to his Dublin studio where he worked between the paintings frenetically, on multiple canvases simultaneously. This was kinesthetic, it bound painting to remembering and remembering happened in painting. "*I was figuring out what I was interested in through the act,*" he explains.

Mental filtering and sifting is enacted with abundant impulsivity and intuitiveness. In *Tomorrow* turpentine poured onto the canvas is erosion, a violent reconfiguration – and finger prints on canvas sides belie the developmental rotations each has gone through. The phases of the process are a presence themselves. Like the photographs taken and never reviewed – the former iterations of the paintings aren't dismissed but constitute a phrase in the performance of remembering.

Some works signal arrival or delay; all are *in medias res*. Encroaching shapes exacerbate the sense of process, alien presences caught moving in or else departing from the frame. These visitors are aggressive and subversive or out of place and peeping in *Corset*, *Sleeper* and *Award*, strange and interesting, signaling arrival and granting formal harmony in *Telescope*.

The sense that we witness just part of a process persists.

THE DIVERGENCE OF MEMORY AND EXPERIENCE

There's a distinction between memory and remembering. Memories are complete, perfected and cast as artefact. Remembering is the active process.

These are visual renderings of multitudinous experience – sensory and intellectual, cultural and associative. All those mental sensations immediately and irrevocably lost, forever the preserve of the initial encounters. Begging the question of what it is to 'know' a place – who is better equipped, the tourist in the throes of the unfamiliar, or the resident equipped with (or jaded by) insight?

LEGITIMACY

Flood is confused when I ask to what extent the dominant de-lined figures are borrowed from his trip, finding the word 'borrowed' curious. I modify my question "*are they direct references, residual shapes you gained through your experience?*" This elicits a response; "*they are shapes that were not found in my practice before, they are of this place but they are not specific to this place*"

Afterwards I question myself – why did 'borrowed' feel appropriate – it implies that it is not his own to take or use; without familiarity there is a lack of ownership. Which in turn knocks into counter questions about ownership through familiarity. Ultimately the strategies of fresh encounter may be a more authentic way to know a place, before our perspective is grimed with the residue of experience and association. Anyway, temporal and spatial ownership is too moot a concept.

That said, even 'borrowing' feels too weak a word for some works. In *Hunch* and *Award*, arterial and fleshy objects seem like they've been violently extracted from elsewhere, in *Sleeper* the canvas

is rent by a slick wound. There's a foreboding implication that in trying to fix or encapsulate an experience you are ripping it from reality; memory making is violence here, when remembering is not kept in motion.

Flood's *Imaginary Plane* is a trajectory between *then* – the moment of encounter – and *now* – the moment of viewing. Or perhaps *then* is the moment of conception and *now* the moment of creation? Either way, the landscape of this plane is neither present nor real, it is conjured somewhere on that indiscernible tangent we traverse between encounter and memory, remembering and experience.

CORRUPT FLÂNEUR?

Flood's role in his previous work has been described as that of a "[corrupt geologist](#)". *Infinite Plane* sees him take on the mantle of anthropologist, tourist, *flâneur* and urbanist – not corrupt so much as an acknowledged outsider, the tourist who visits each role. Via this unfamiliarity there is a freshness and authenticity of encounter, amounting to a series, which – whilst not quite documenting a place or time – casts a vigorous impression of those specificities of encounter. We won't reassemble it, but we might be a little more prescient of its process

By Rachel Bennett, originally published on [Fat Nancy's New Diet](#).