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This is an accepted manuscript of an essay for an exhibition catalogue published for 'The sites of myth' exhibition at Koel Gallery, Clifton, Karachi, Pakistan. This essay aims to consider the everyday spaces - imaginal, geographic, peopled and un-peopled - developed within the layers and strata of the paintings of Aqueel Solangi.

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Quotidian Space in the Sites of Myth

Dr. Michele Whiting 2017

There are traditions in European Art History that still pervade contemporary understanding of painting: figure, ground, sky, horizon, distance and proximity, these issues were considered and modified, illuminated and cajoled through periods of art history by practitioners innovating new images, some of which led away from the representational, and instead embraced the impressionistic, or the intangible even.¹ The dualities of sea and sky, mountain and sky, far horizon and close proximity are still issues that an artist such as Aqeel Solangi deals with in daily practice, and alongside this lies an intense exploration of the formal and sociological nature of architecture, objects and behaviours. Solangi's work explores the seductive nature of such things and their relationship to places and histories. The word 'ground' (above) in the context of this writing, supplants 'landscape' (an often over ripe word used liberally) because this painterly term allows for conceptual understanding of 'space' and 'dimension' to form in the mind's eye, that suggests other issues at play within the intellectual framework, the internal logic of the paintings if you will, which is discussed in this text.

One of the initially striking thoughts that surfaces when looking at the body of works, is that to lay claim to only discussing the processes of the paintings, or the harmony of colour, or the composition, would be to ignore the powerful suggestions that are made through conscious discernment (on behalf of the artist) as to the subject matter held within the frame. The choices made are integral to the freedom of both the viewer and the artist; for the onlooker, our compromised view (and it is always thus) witnesses frozen moments in time, where we are both knowingly engaged and disengaged at once. Engaged through Aqeel Solangi's sense of form that binds component parts of the painting into and onto one space within the frame, and disengaged through a sense of unease that pervades and is exploited through the emotional surface of the canvas.

¹ Berger J. Ways of Seeing. London, Penguin Books. (1972)

In order to explain this more fully, let us gaze on a work such as *The Frisbee Players* (2016). It is apparent in the painting that there is an invisible reality of space and time ‘folded’² in and on itself; the artist making manifestly visible an imaginary ground, populated by seascape, architecture and children, with a visceral sense of foreboding being retained within the marks and drips of the surface. The drip, now static, evokes stasis that seeps into the painted surface and this may be considered a respectful homage to Peter Doig’s trope. Underlying the surface is the complexity of construction and composition; the artist uses pre- existing images that are ‘found’³ as source material, and also digitally photographed elements made during moments of visiting places of interest. He forms digital collages, the compound nature of this process being a piecing together or collaging of elements that strive towards mythological thought, or rather non-complacent mythological thoughts, made visible. At the basis of this exploratory practice lie traditional values of painting, drawing and composition that Aqeel has adopted skillfully over the years.

“I learnt gilding techniques from Mark Mills at the Prince’s School of Traditional Arts (PSTA) London, where he taught how the effect of colour beneath the gold or silver can change their behavior. I applied this idea by using silver colour (not silver or gold leaf) here by adding a yellow layer underneath it, so that it gave the surface a glow and dream like feel. Upon the invitation by Dexter Dalwood to his London studio at Cubitt, he shared his recent works that were also based on same principles of yellow underneath with silver on top...”

Aqeel Solangi also quotes Neil MacGregor’s protestation that ‘every site is charged with memory’⁴ and in considering how this relates to the works, it is clear that memory is provoked in a myriad of ways as ‘places’ are revealed to us, the

² Vidler A, *Warped Space*. USA. MIT Press. (2002).

³ Often taken from the artist’s extensive image archive.

⁴ (Neil MacGregor cited in) Laurence, R. and Macdonald, F. (2016) *Great writers’ quotes from the Hay Festival* [online] Available from: http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160601-writers-quotes-im-good-at-getting-into-trouble?no_redirect=true [Accessed 17-08-2016]

onlooker. We are reminded of moments of revelation, of concealment and hide and seek, seen from the hazy moments before sleep claims us: subjects, images, objects transformed out of familiar recognition into a new memory. When we look at another painting *The Blue Tent* (2016) we see a blue tent, but it is concealing somebody, and is situated in a Roman Amphitheatre. The sky, a memory in itself is inspired from another time, by another artist (Richard Hamilton's *Sunset*, 1975). We can clearly see here, inspiration from pre-cursors in art's rich history and more prosaic encounters with contemporary painters such as the aforementioned Doig, and it is here again that we get a glimpse of sensing Solangi's aesthetic satisfaction in which memory, place, feeling and form are manipulated and merged with exemplary traditional skills. Again, these thoughts are clear in the collated postcards paintings, where ongoing pre-occupations with architecture, people and places are considered within the everydayness of the images. Collation as a verb, acting as a piecing together, and a method of layering, so forming new spaces between relations of images, and this is something that also occurs within the knowing construction of the paintings.

Considering aspects of 'place' in contrast to the spaces within the painting, we can think about what place is and might be: Geographer Edward Relph in his now classic phenomenological text *Place and Placelessness* states "*...to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know your place*"⁵ This concept strikes a chord in all of us, we understand the notion of our place implicitly. Solangi explains his relationship to notions of place thus: "...in a way it was a constant search for unidentified place that maybe suited my imagination and to some extent myself ,and this has perfectly defined by the curator Mike Tooby 'You travel around yourself and your home, rather than that place, or besides that place you learn yourself as well.'⁶ When I photographed the site of the Khewra Salt Range, it was like I found something, something I didn't know, I think it was like I found the match of that place visualized in my

⁵ Relph, E. (2008) *Place and Placelessness*. London: Sage Publications. Originally this text was written forty years ago, but was reprinted in addition with a contemporary context. (p9, p16)

⁶ Tooby, M. (2016) *Thinking around exhibiting*. Group discussion. Bath School of Art & Design. 19 July 2016.

mind or as artist Camilla Wilson in a discussion on my work stated that 'It (Place) was already there in your mind, it's like something you actually already had invented before you saw it because it's in your repertoire.'⁷ The paradoxes of space is a constant, it draws us, as artists to consider and mediate our own place in the world, but it also points towards other issues that are perhaps implicit and not explicit- buried to us until we visit a site, explore space, consume place, make a painting.

In the painting *Khewra* (2017) when thought through in relation to unpacking 'place' within Solangi's corpus, we see some sense of urgency that becomes apparent within it's painterly surface. Aqeel Solangi visited the Khwera Salt Range in December 2016, drawn to the tunnels, the lights iridescent on the salt surface, or as Marco Di Capua noted that light revitalized 'the living flesh of that place'.⁸

As Solangi explains "The overpowering character of the tunnel is larger than life in comparison with the human figure where the grandeur of nature is evident with all its glory. There are human interventions besides this natural setting, for example a wooden barrier, electric wiring & light. The melancholic gaze of the figure and overall setting of the work resonates to the works by Peter Doig, specifically *The Pelican (Stag)* and *100 Years Ago*, where a single figure stares at the viewer in a very unusual way. This eye contact is different from Davinci's *Mona Lisa* and off course Manet's *Olympia* as well. The identity of the figure is visible and to some extent recognizable. The girl is looking at us but a certain distance is maintained, it might be because of her placement in the composition. She has turned to pose or she might be unsure to proceed ahead as both feet aren't aligned."

This awkward state underlines the aforementioned sense of urgency being mediated in the painting. It forces us to approach the painting tentatively, unsure of 'place' and unsure of meaning; as viewers we bring to perception of the

⁷ Wilson, C. (2016) *Tutorial*. Bath School of Art & Design. 9 August 2016.

⁸ Di Capua, M. (2005) 'Earth's Construction'. *51 international art exhibition - la biennale di Venezia*, 2005: 165

painting our 'place', this might be politicized, local and loaded with global challenges that we face, or intimate and saturated with memory. In this awkward state we search for clues, essences of things to hang onto, and just as we begin to form an idea we see something else. The eye is therefore never 'easy' in the sense of it never being able to settle, this restlessness denotes urgency that comes to the fore, even though the figure portrayed is quiet, melancholic even. This means that, as viewers we are searching for our 'own place' within this painted place through Solangi's mediated place, formed conceptually through collapsing one space into another, and thus the folds continue to fold in, on and of themselves.

Aqeel adds "While I was painting this work, there was a news on Geo TV today (30-01-2017) and confirmed on internet that UNESCO to add 8 more Pakistani sites to the World Heritage Sites list and among them Khewra Salt Range is also the one. I liked this coincidence. The 2nd coincidence was that I came to know that The Khewra Salt Mine is also known as Mayo Salt Mine, and Mayo School of Art (my alma mater National College of Arts previously known as Mayo School of Art) were of the same name. Both were named in the honour of Lord Mayo viceroy of India"

Emotion in painting inhabits a different space from everyday emotion, maybe gesturing towards it through layers, saturation and echoes of colours that help to create a sort of frame of human consciousness, this is not political in a sense of any overt politic but rather points towards the frailty of mankind and his/her position within a shifting and difficult world, raising questions of existential validity within these reduced, painted spaces. Take for instance ***The Abandoned Boat*** (2016). In this painting three figures narrate their relationship - at a moment in time - to a singular boat. Through a rigorous process of photography, the construction and composition of the painting tells of a pedestrian day in the making. Boredom, as an emotion, hangs heavy through the lack of engagement with the boat in the two seemingly disconnected figures, and the almost banal situation or site. An umbrella lies discarded to the forefront of the work. This object seems dislocated from the subjects, it is heavy like a fallen bird, one has the immediate view that it probably doesn't function

well any longer, but what is its purpose? Positioning the umbrella at the forefront of the picture plane, means that the artist has so positioned it for the viewer to be aware of looking into the reality presented, making us, the viewer cognisant of this action, and this is in opposition to Formalist theories that assert flatness and non-illusionistic tendencies. The umbrella here serves another purpose, in that it reminds us of certain Western art histories, such as Hans Holbein the Younger, whose work *The Ambassadors*, housed at the National Gallery, London and painted in 1533 shows an anamorphic skull hovering in the near picture plane as a symbol of mortality. Correlations can be drawn with the broken umbrella (although not anamorphic) unable to function and discarded into viewer 'space', expanding the flatness of the painting, with the nature of being discarded ('discardedness') accentuated through the situation of the boat.

Complexities of space also rear their heads in *The White Arch* (2016), and this painting is exciting in the sense that so much is at play here; the painting proposes a strategy of presenting historical past in a way that challenges the meaning of the nature between us and the material world, in other words the spaces between past, present between meaning and symbolic space collapse. This is not subversive, as it still observes rigours of painting practice through construction, pigment, stroke and so on, however, when we question the subject matters brought together we can begin to decode something else that is going on here. The foreground details an ugly, barren rock which is juxtaposed against an architectural subject- that of *The Bridge of Sighs*, or *Ponti dei Sospiri*, in Venice, Italy. The history of the bridge built around 1600 and designed by Antoni Contino, was a walkway of legend that spanned the courts of Justice and the Palazzo Ducale prison. On the right was justice, and on the left the hell of execution and imprisonment, in Christian context. So, the bridge represents an in-between space betwixt two concepts; here and there, Heaven and Hell. The turquoise of the foreground and the sky are unsettling and invade the minds eye, so that we begin to focus on the right hand side of the work- the Palazzo Ducale Prison. Alberto Giacometti once said that 'The object of art is not to reproduce reality, but to create a reality of the same intensity, and this sentiment is something that the artist adheres to in conceptualising the work.

Speaking about the angel motif in his painting, *It was a dream and you are part of that* (2017) Aqeel explains “...the interesting part is the Angel’s wings where blobs of paint formulate them and the overall execution is not photorealistic but a painterly one. This imagined source with the help of photograph is a painterly debate where a place/site is situated through paint...the actual sculpture is made of bronze, titled as *The Angel of Peace* is installed in Parade Gardens adjacent to the Pulteney Bridge in Bath UK and photographed 2016 during my Masters studies at Bath School of Art and Design, Bath Spa University...”

History, in this painterly situation, is foundational, formed within the warped and folded new conceptual space⁹ of the painting, the site exists in the human mind, either as a place visited and in memory, or as a place of longing to visit. We also have a freedom to choose between right and wrong, between good and bad, so human nature is at question through the free floating, conceptual spaces of the painting, with difficult and visceral histories engaging with the viewer through a sense of significance unfolding; like waiting for something to happen in a suspended space, it is exhilarating and slightly terrifying.

As we stand in front of the paintings, we are present in the moment, made aware of our own human condition, our roots and origins and also our shared contexts; these thoughts are also illuminated through the collection of painted postcards, mentioned above, that detail different fractional places that could be scrutinized in parts but rather a reading of the totality provides a sense of wholeness to a disjointed and almost dystopian vision. The paintings of Aqeel Solangi challenge us to question the worlds that we inhabit and awake in us something else that we can’t quite put our finger on, a spatial germ of an idea, played out through quotidian, folded spaces, within which infinite possibilities open up. Thus

⁹ Vidler A, *Warped Space*. USA. MIT Press 2002.

shedding a conceptual light that warms us, and where we as humans, can conceptually bask and frame ourselves, and this potentially is the complex, but lasting effect of the paintings as a collated presence.

Dr Michele Whiting graduated with a first class honours degree from Bath School of Art and Design, Bath Spa University, she also completed her Masters programme with distinction and gained AHRC funding for PhD studies within the research hub Typologies of Landscape at the university (Thesis title: Space, Place and Site through Contemporary Moving Image Arts Practice: Entering Elsewhere. Completed 2011). Since then Michele has worked teaching Post Graduate research methodology studies, and supervising Doctoral level students at Bath School of Art and Design, and is a specialist on-line blended learning lecturer and assessor with Open College of the Arts, part of University College of the Arts (London) where she works with undergraduate and M.A. level students. She has a research based drawing practice, completing research commissions this year with Neuroscientists within Bath University, and teaches drawing at Drawing Project U.K. She enjoys writing and reflecting on art practice and regularly gives academic papers and lectures in the U.K. Canada, USA and Europe. Michele has developed a collaborative research project with Dr Linda Khatir, www.quilosandthewindmill.com which goes from strength to strength, this year with a solo show in Chicago USA, where she will return this September for a residency programme. She has been selected for Wells Arts Contemporary Arts Prize and over the last two years has exhibited in the U.K. Sweden and South Korea, amongst other places.