

FELICITY CLEAR

## FOREWORD

I first recall coming across the work of Felicity Clear, in a group show in Temple Bar Gallery two or so years ago. These were small paintings of swimming pools which for me were reminiscent of Robert Altman's film *Short Cuts* based on stories by Raymond Carver. They were stark and beautiful and conveyed a sense of urban loneliness.

Since then I have seen her work frequently in exhibitions at Tulca, at Galway Arts Centre and at The LAB and each time I have been struck by how contemporary and powerful her work is and how exact a sense of place she captures in her work. In my opinion she is charting contemporary Ireland in a very unique way.

At the Mermaid we receive quite a number of submissions for our gallery. On reading Felicity's proposal I was immediately excited by the resonance this show would have for us – it made utter sense and I was thrilled to have an artist give such careful consideration to the space and environment. The Mermaid itself exists at the centre of a constantly evolving space, while Felicity's work is consumed with the changing environment of her home county of Wicklow in particular. She has a wonderful gift of making real buildings, mysterious and removed from us. There is a strangeness about her work that most definitely makes you look anew at your environment. To my mind, she is one of the most exciting artists working in the contemporary visual arts in Ireland and it is an honour and delight to show her work here. We would also like to express our gratitude to Wicklow County Council Arts Office for their support of this publication.

**Maureen Kennelly**  
*Artistic Director*  
Mermaid Arts Centre

# REMEMBERING HOW TO BE IN THE WORLD

Sally Timmons

August '08

Using graphite as a drawing tool, and acrylic paint as a means to render large sections of tonal colour that are washed across both canvas and paper, Felicity Clear presents a series of drawings depicting virtual 'loci' (or places) of various scale. The works give the appearance of floating blueprints or drafts depicting detached elevations of numerous physical environments. What is unsettling about the environments depicted is that the renditions appear to be disrupted in their vision, not unlike the unprecious doodles generated by a draftsman, crumpled up in a ball and scrapped to make way for the 'actual' more laboured, more sober rendition or vision of things to come.

What Clear implies in these works is a certain hope for the potential uses of the locations she represents. Having visited numerous sites under construction around Ireland, prior to their completion, the artist has 'metaphorically' removed the crumpled up doodles from the waste basket, flattened them out again, re-adjusted the scale and

applied colour. In doing so she allows the viewer to notice something that might not otherwise have been seen. She renders these sites as the push/pull of banal versus strange while hanging in the balance of Utopian ideals. The term Utopia stemming from Sir Thomas More's monograph *Utopia* - in which More coined the word as a deliberate play on the two Greek words that supply the U sound eu (good) and ou (not). When taken together with topos (place) Utopia could be constructed either as a good place or somewhere that does not exist<sup>1</sup> - In Clear's renditions of familiar yet virtual or unsettling loci there is always something that reminds one of something else. Something that is present within the drawings of places that almost exist, yet are not actually there at all.

For example, in the *Diamond Valley* series (2008), a courtyard in what looks like a housing development has the semblance of a roman amphitheatre. Balconies jutting out from the corner of the same apartment complex have the expectation of

<sup>1</sup> *Modernity and Utopia*, John R Gold, The Sage Companion to the City. Eds Tim Hal, Phill Hubbard and John Rennie Short, 2002 pp 69 (published in 1516. *Utopia* was ostensibly a travelogue about an idyllic Caribbean island kingdom written by a wandering portuguese philosopher, Raphael Hythloday).

an orator's rhetorical address. All good and useful components of any activated social space in which gatherings might take place but virtual in the sense of the possible ways in which they might be put to use in a gated private housing development. A balcony that might have served as a place from which an orator might make a historical address becomes defunct and used for the purpose of storing bicycles and rubbish bags. The theatre of life takes place now behind closed doors and the spectacle that might have been promised by such physical structures simply acts as a vacant gesture that was not really intended by its designer to be taken up by the milieu.

Clear's floating backgrounds in which real drama might take place allows one to consider the architectonics of memory (mnemonics) which in the past involved architectural analogies used by classical orators as a prime aid for memorising the argumentative themes and premises, or topics of their speeches. Nowadays this methodology for memory and recall is known by cognitive psychologists as the *method of loci* and is given a more clear definition by Rodney Douglas Parker,

In essence, both classical oratory and achitecture focus on 'places'– topio, or topics, in Greek, and loci in Latin – that identify important subject matter, points of interest and premises, both physical and conceptual.<sup>2</sup>

Parker describes the Roman methodology of Classical Mnemotechnics thus:

The Auctor ad Herennium (the earliest and most important Roman theorist and rhetorician who along with Cicero and Quintilian, left the oldest surviving records of classical mnemonic strategies) distinctly outlines a twofold strategy by which the orator articulates mental loci and then places in them the mnemonic symbols. The Auctor defines the loci – or backgrounds, as in theatre stage backgrounds – as scenes that are small, complete and distinct, and that naturally or artificially stand detached...<sup>3</sup>

What is being decribed is where the person intending to store lists of knowledge (that will be retrieved at a later time) imagines a series of rooms within a structure, such as a palace, that must be animated with pockets (or cells) of memory in an order that will make the route seem practical as a means to get from one place to another. One might also imagine a high rise building and a journey in an elevator from

<sup>2</sup> *The Architectonics of Memory: On Built Form and Built Thought*, Rodney Douglas Parker, *Leonardo*, Vol 30 No. 2 (1997) pp 147-152

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

one floor to the next. Each time the doors open a different mental world unfolds that allows the orator to envision the symbolic relevance of each section or location of a memorised speech. The method of loci demands the conception of an activity to take place in each location or memory cell that must be activated as a means to retrieve relevant information at the appropriate time. For this purpose, the scenes are in a constant state of animation yet only appear so when a door is opened upon them. Like in Clear's painting of *Boy Multiple* (2007), five small paintings of the same scene are re-presented but each one is different as though the artist is visually depicting this act of recall or re-seeing before she might forget. While this work is relevant to the act of recall its subject matter also portrays a more personal view of the overriding theme of the artist's current practice, that is, the social inadequacies of contemporary environments that are the result of capital growth and development.

It is as though Clear has consciously constructed and memorised her own series of detached backgrounds as a means to put forward her treatise on the social inadequacies that are a result of the grand plan of urban regeneration. Clear has somehow captured a moment in a time and place in which the processes of change are visibly taking shape. In an *Untitled* work (2007), a forest of delicate trees disrupts a location otherwise suited towards public and social gatherings. The trees seem to exist in an unchanging state of protest that is devoid of any purpose. In a work titled *7 Windmills* (2008), Clear has supplied yet another example of a vacant gesture, lacking in vitality - bar the dramatic tonal wash of colour acting as a theatrical backdrop - that promises a lifestyle that may or may not deliver, at least not yet. In these examples the environments presented in Clear's renditions become the loci, backgrounds or memory triggers described by Douglas Parker. The mnemonic symbols placed within these locations are the metaphorical references implied by the potential uses of these spaces such as *a citadel, a basin, a traffic island or roundabout* that act as subtle reminders of a society that has shut itself off from each other and can only be circumnavigated but not entered or accessed.

We are encouraged by Clear to take stock of each of these places, and like a prophet she too orates from the balcony of a mentally constructed, one bed-roomed apartment on the outskirts of Dublin and cries out (dramatic sentiment intended) that all is not without hope, but to beware the potential folly of our endeavour.

The Diamond Valley referred to in Clear's drawings is an existing housing development, whose title in Clear's own words,

...introduces a romantic grandiosity that I sometimes find in the ambition of a plan or in the potential of a plan.

A paradox lies in the fact that most housing developments are designed with the potential or possibility of facilitating the theatre of life, yet unlike the great platforms and theatres of the past, the spaces represented in Clear's drawings are devoid of human presence and the amphitheatre and balcony in Diamond Valley remain unanimated and still. They are unassimilated ingredients, described by Henri Lefebvre thus,

Boredom is pregnant with desires, frustrated frenzies, unrealised possibilities. A magnificent life is waiting just around the corner, and far, faraway. It is waiting like the cake is waiting when there's butter, milk, flour and sugar... Here mans' magnificent power over nature has left him alone with himself, powerless. It is the boredom of youth without a future.<sup>4</sup>

The possibilities for the spaces in Clear's drawings are present but remain latent and until now, unnoticed. Each place or locus represented is devoid of reference, whether to scale or time and even though some of the locations actually exist (such as Salthill in County Galway, and the aforementioned Diamond Valley in County Wicklow), without knowledge of this fact, they will remain familiar yet daunting. Nothing has taken place yet, but anticipation exists in the fact that something has the potential to occur. In time, social beings will remember how to perform their lives within the demands of these kinds of environments that present a stage from which anything could and will hopefully happen.

<sup>4</sup> *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes*, Lefebvre, Henri, 'Notes on the New Town', September 1959 – May 1961, trans, John Moore, London Verso, pp 116. 26



**Visible First Becoming Visible**  
acrylic and graphite on paper  
*110 x 145cm*  
2008



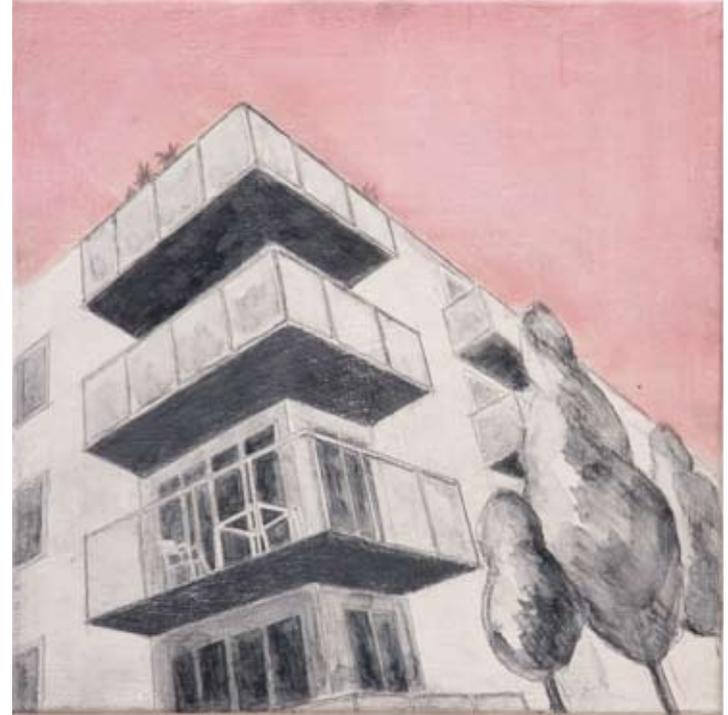
**In Diamond Valley**  
acrylic and graphite on paper  
*110 x 140cm*  
2008



7 Windmills  
acrylic and graphite on paper  
180 x 310cm  
2008



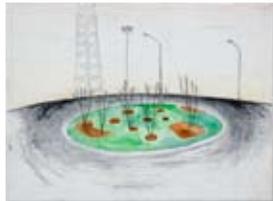
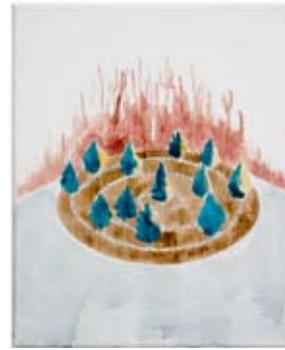
Diamond Valley 1  
acrylic and graphite on canvas  
40 x 40cm  
2008



Diamond Valley 2  
acrylic and graphite on canvas  
40 x 40cm  
2008



**Macken**  
acrylic and graphite on paper  
160 x 132cm  
2008



**9 Roundabouts**  
All acrylic and graphite on paper  
*Variable sizes between 18 x 24cm – 30 x 30cm*  
2008



**Paradox of Unintended Consequences**

acrylic and graphite on paper

178 x 302cm

2008



**Basin**  
acrylic and graphite on paper  
105 x 104cm  
2006



**Untitled (purple)**  
acrylic and graphite on paper  
113 x 107cm  
2007

## Enter the Rock, Led by a Boy.

A citadel of five high rises stands on the northern perimeter of the project. Together they are set in a mile square area of abandoned dockland and warehousing along the south bank of the slow moving river. Five high rises look out across the ornamental lake, at present an empty concrete basin surrounded by parking lots, construction equipment and heaps of arid rubble.

Gazing down deep from floor twenty one, we see extending from the base of each soaring structure, aprons of newly seeded grass. Nights pass noisily with constant movement through the corridors. Echoes of shouts and the slamming of doors. Construction starts in the utility shaft at 6 a.m. Exhilarated by the high-rise we inhabit. The first of the five identical units in the development project to be occupied.

Bright in its suave bounding-line, the beloved grid spreads horizontally, occupying and ordering every remaining margin. The spaces in which we live and work are divided into discrete, isolated cells, explicitly determined as to extent and function. Cells reached through networks of corridors and roadways that must be traveled at prescribed speeds and times. Methodical systems and tacit agreements are maintained but the loneliness/happiness problem remains unsolved. Smiles turn to bites, an embrace to a deadly grip. Beneath half-watt rays, her eyes turn topaz.

The massive scale of this new steel, glass and concrete conurbation, and its striking situation on a bend in the river, sharply separate the development from the vast, rundown area surrounding it. A wilderness of decaying 19<sup>th</sup> century terraced houses, the windows smashed or boarded. Empty factories and warehouses zoned for demolition. Vacant weed-filled lots and roads cracked and ruptured.

A hinterland of briars and thorny vegetation, which, from a distance, appears impassable. Roofs of buildings and a tall chimneystack peak from above the wild vegetation. Sunshine glows on red brick. Flourishes of yellow, pink and blue spray from stony rubbish. Aster and Asphodel. Sweet pollen carries on the warm air and dries on the lips. You run your tongue over them. Every woman you meet, every man too, must have these sweet lips.

*Pádraic E. Moore*  
Summer 2008

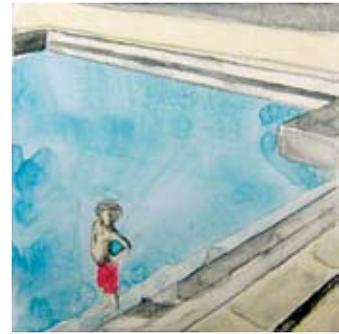
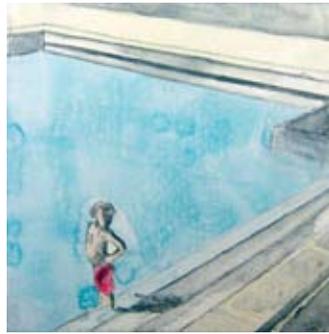


## Citadel 1

acrylic and graphite on paper

195 x 282cm

2008



**Boy Multiple**  
acrylic and graphite on canvas  
20 x 20cm (x5)  
2007



**Antigone**  
acrylic and graphite on paper  
160 x 132cm  
2007



Citadel 2  
acrylic and graphite on paper  
180 x 250cm  
2008



Untitled (blue)  
acrylic and graphite on paper  
107 x 100cm  
2006

## PLACE(S) WITHOUT PLACE

Clodhna Shaffrey

September '07



Untitled (yellow)

acrylic and graphite on paper

107 x 100cm

2006

Felicity Clear's large-scale works – graphite drawing and acrylic on paper – of high-rise modernist building schemes and open spaces of suburban parking lots with their expanse of low-rise trailer town sprawl, seem at once familiar, immediately recognisable, and yet, at the same time unfamiliar. They are of real buildings made strange. Isolated, distorted, distant. It is as if we have found ourselves in the midst of a dream, hovering at its rim, a feeling of uneasiness pervades as of a jolted shock at sudden unexpected recognition. Before us lies the unreachable city – outcrops of buildings, some still in the process of development – building sites with ghost-cranes, cut off behind hoardings, or walls; masonry islands surrounded by water, or barely visible in the distance through endless rows of regimented trees. The skies above always large, open, vivid – soiled yellowy sunsets, muddied clouds drenched through purple water-filled skies, or startling blues and greens, or where clouds are swept forth like alien spaceships emphasising a romantic torrid, a certain playfulness. Felicity's works possess a fictional quality of the fairytale but are imbued with a contemporary haunting, the possibility that here we are not on certain ground.

The picturesque of formal rows of dainty trees, enchanted forests and buildings that look like castles, and the perfect, detailed, drawing, so finely precise, so beautifully scaled, are thrown off kilter by warped perspectives, panoramic views, twisted and extended elements that lure and frighten. That odd flight of stairs that runs on the outside and halfway up the middle of a building in Fingal is here extended to the building's rooftop. Those 'endless' stairs, where do they lead? To the other side, into a void, to the nothing? The tilted island-building like a stranded cruise ship that cannot sail, its concrete base has anchored its position firm – yet, by what pathway can we reach it, how can its residents leave? Are we trapped somewhere between the romantic nightmarish painting of de Chirico's *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* and Etienne-Louis Boullée's gigantic hollow sphere – his *proposal for a Memorial to Isaac Newton* envisaging the majestic as ideal. Felicity's, though, is a subtler hand, for within the slippage between a dystopia and a utopia, a failed world of sorts, remains an idiosyncratic charm, and a sense of cheery homeliness pervades. Only slowly do we sense any unease, the possibility that we have been catapulted into a

nowhere - into Augé's 'non-lieux' or Garreau's 'nowherevilles', or loaded into Michel Foucault's 'Narrenschiffen'. A drifting 'place without a place, that exists by itself and is closed in on itself.'<sup>1</sup>

Felicity Clear's tightly conceived compositions - spare and perfectly structured are always dislodged, always left as if incomplete, unresolved, dirtied up - the messing up [is] in order to make mysterious again<sup>2</sup> Bravely she makes room for failure. Large expanses are left seemingly unfinished - acrylic onto unprimed paper, smudges and runs forming its own blotchy pattern and makes for a more fragile, transient scene, exposing the chaos behind ordering, the impossibility of perfection; the falseness in transparency. For here what might be transparent becomes opaque, impenetrable, untouchable, unknowable. Felicity's plan is to mystify, to touch into an impossible knowing - those invisible lines that keep the uncanny resurfacing. In a series of small paintings reproduced as multiples, each one the same as the next but different, a sense of déjà vu is intentionally triggered. Focusing on a single scene played over and over - an isolated tree in geometric concrete space, or of the solitary immigrant

trapped in the interior of her new found home, a glass prison of sorts; and the lone swimmer who clings ominously to the edge of the pool. What is happening? Repetition, the going over something again and again, which normally helps us work things out, won't make any difference here, for Felicity leaves us on the outside, on the edge of these worlds - contained, alienating, spatially misaligned, emptied - and we cannot enter. Her capacity is to gently plug us into a dark sense of unease, to bring us close to the uncanny. A fundamental insecurity with our world, a radical rootlessness as Heidegger calls it, and one in which every one feels fundamentally unsettled (unheimlich), that is, that human beings can never be at home in the world."<sup>3</sup>

Anthony Vidler in his introduction to *The Architectural Uncanny* suggests that there is no such thing as uncanny architecture but rather that architecture at certain times is invested with uncanny qualities that give rise to a sense of déjà vu or what Freud called the 'compulsion to repeat'. The problem with today's architecture for Vidler is that while it reuses the motifs and language of modernism, the appearance of a fulfilled aesthetic revolution is devoid of their

originating ideological impulses. Stripped of a promise of social redemption and the repression of the political, contemporary architecture presents an ostensibly nihilistic and self gratifying formalism. With the repression of the political there still lurks the ghost of the avant-garde politics, and one that for Vidler is proving difficult to exorcise entirely.<sup>4</sup>

For Clear, as for Vidler, architecture may not be uncanny but rather is invested with such unhomely qualities, a capacity to mirror states of our being, to bring things up again for us. Choosing to focus on the new apartment blocks of the current building boom, Felicity is not directly commenting on the alienating forces of contemporary urban building - often bland and phobic - but rather is attempting to touch on more general ideas of aspirations and failures. If behind the current building boom

is a nihilistic and self-gratifying drive, it also might be understood as an expression of a being out of control; the suggestion here is that these are doomed building schemes, they are simply not going to work. In their attempt to fill the void they somehow succeed in achieving the reverse so that these hollow spaces of capitalism<sup>5</sup>, bring us closer to the more shadowy paths of existence, a failing at the source. Felicity's work opens to states of unknowing, feelings of uncertainty, that are aligned to the not belonging, the unhomely, to being out of place. But they also, in their playful unresolvability suggest the Sartrian idea 'that we can never hope to understand', we can never be on certain ground. Thus the acceptance that some comfort may be found in the impossibility of solving the mystery behind this uncertainty, is at the crux of the making of this work.

1. Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces*, 1967 *Heterotopias*, [foucault.info/documents/heterotopia](http://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia). The reference here is taken from Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Life, Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Polity Press, 2005
2. In Conversation with Felicity Clear
3. Heidegger's *Discourse on Thinking* NY: Harper and Row, 1959, pp 55 ,as referenced in Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, MIT 1992, pp 7-8
4. Ibid 13-14
5. Ernest Bloch, *Building in Empty Spaces*, 1959 in the *Utopian Function of Art and Literature* pp 186-1999



**Felicity Clear** is from Greystones, Co Wicklow, she now lives and works in Dublin. After receiving a degree in Natural Science from Trinity College Dublin, she went on to study Fine Art at the National College Of Art and Design from which she graduated in 1991. In 2007 she received an MA in Visual Arts Practice from Dun Laoghaire College Of Art and Design. She has exhibited extensively nationally and has taken part in group shows in the UK, Germany, France, Italy and Poland. Since 1996 she has been represented by the Rubicon Gallery. Recent solo exhibitions: include. In Diamond Valley, Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray (2008), Recent Work, Galway Arts Centre, Galway (2008), Recent Drawings, The LAB, Dublin (2006), Dirty Pretty Things, Rubicon Galley (2006). Selected group exhibitions include: 10,000 to 50, (curated by Christina Kennedy), Irish Museum Of Modern Art (2008), There, Not There, (with Elizabeth Magill, Paul Nugent, Mark McGreevy and Orla Whelan, curated by Dawn Williams), Crawford Art Gallery, Cork (2008), Drawing Symposium, National Gallery Of Ireland (2008), Tulca - City Of Strangers, Galway (2007), Surprise Surprise, G126, Galway (2007), New Painting, Rubicon Gallery,(2006), ARTFutures, Contemporary Arts Society, London (2004).

***Installation, Mermaid Arts Centre: 7 Windmills***

acrylic and graphite on paper

180 x 310cm

2008

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*For Colm, Feargha, Ruairi, Conor and Helen*

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