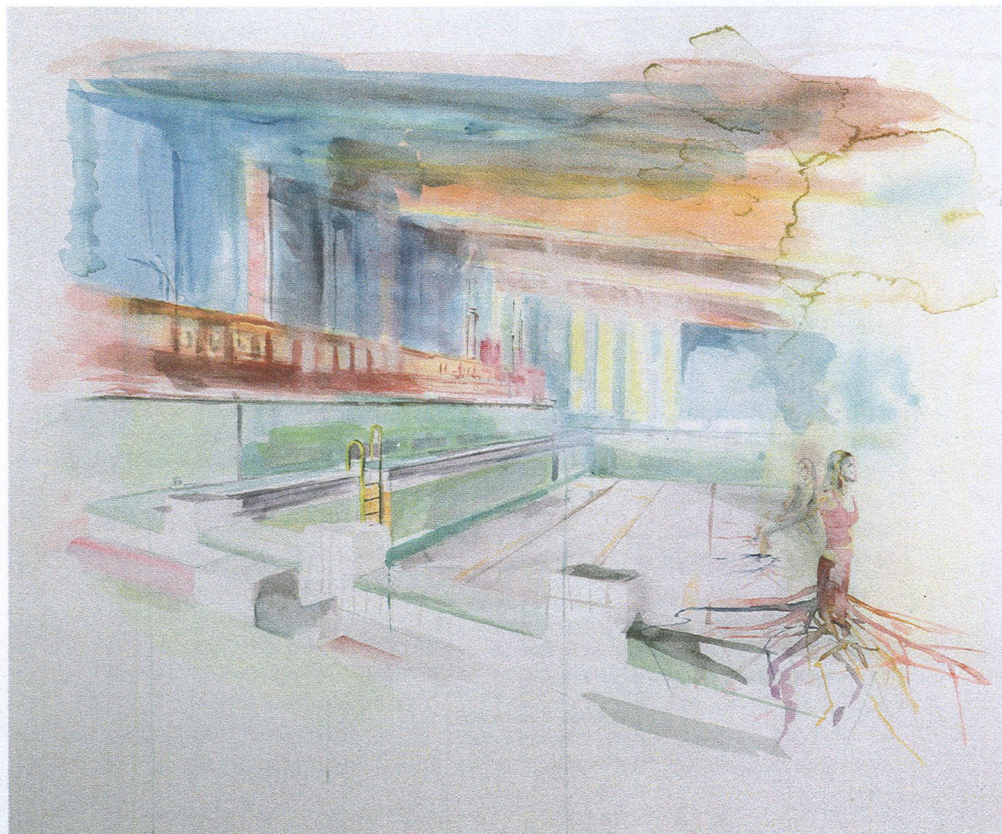


¹⁰⁴ *Diana Copperwhite*
of a

Eclipse
title



Diana Copperwhite
Slipstream
2008
watercolour on paper
127 x 151 cm
courtesy Kevin Kavanagh Gallery

Dreams are quite incapable of expressing the alternative 'either – or'; it is their custom to take both members of this alternative into the same context, as though they had an equal right to exist... But when in narrating a dream the narrator is inclined to employ the alternative *either – or*. 'It was either a garden or a living room,' etc., there is not really an alternative in the dream-thoughts, but an 'and' – a simple addition.¹

In Diana Copperwhite's paintings, there is always an 'and'. Images are drawn over images, and watercolour seeps into pencil sketches. A swathe of violet and yellow and pink is scratched away, revealing a ghostly figure, a television set, and a static test card pattern glowing through the ether. The outline of a circle is drawn over the figure of a young woman, who peers in turn at a modernist painting of a black orb hung over the mantle. There is a continuous shifting between surface and background, of uncannily familiar settings sitting side-by-side with patches of murky, muted colour.

In *Slipstream*, a central image of a drained swimming pool dissolves into something like a city skyline, a train engine, and a haze of watery brushstrokes, while a hybrid tree/woman sprouts from concrete and paper. The ambiguity of the scene evokes a number of loose associations, and recalls Copperwhite's own working process, of painting and painting over, erasing, obliterating, building upon a leftover fragment and initiating a new set of relations. The pool manages to convey, all at once, notions of abundance and abandonment, David Hockney's

idyllic Californian backyards and the bleary, bleached pallet of Luc Tuymans (who, through lack of adequate exhibition space, once hung his early paintings in a drained swimming basin), figurative emptiness and literal replenishment (in Copperwhite's saturation of the paper with watercolour paint), the reflecting surface of Narcissus and the frustration of that gaze – a sensation implied in another of the artist's paintings, of a rear-view mirror obscured by post-it notes. Is the trail of associations merely a lure, a false promise of 'discovery' that inevitably leads to a dead end?

Some clues linger, however. The anonymity of figures, the jarring collision of disproportionate and disparate elements, the flicker of an almost-seen object beneath and in-between layers of paint; Copperwhite's synthesis of appropriated imagery and autobiographical details leaves just enough space to find common threads, consistent themes. Language is an opening, for instance.² In *No. 17*, a page of newspaper has been smothered in strokes of brown, yellow and white, with the underlying text mostly illegible. Nevertheless, a few phrases persist – "the atmospheric", "Turner", "dashes of luminescence" – while one particular line speaks of "a fine, precisely-detailed rendering of..." before disappearing into paint and gesso. This gesture, the effacement and obfuscation of a seemingly straightforward description, serves as an apt metaphor for Copperwhite's practise (and may just explain the title of the exhibition). Similarly, the titles of certain paintings – *Inner space of an outer thought*, *Sleeper*, *Sleeping information retrieval II* – suggest an affinity with the concepts of condensation and displacement in Freudian dream analysis. The faces of Copperwhite's figures are blurred and indeterminate, as if two or more identities have been merged into a single persona, while recurring motifs

– mirrors, screens, doors – seem to constitute a personal symbolism. In one work, twin architectural columns float in space, over an ephemeral seascape and the enigmatic figures of a man and a monkey on a lead. These structures, while immediately reminiscent of Paul Delvaux or Giorgio de Chirico, have been borrowed from a painting by one of Copperwhite's friends. Again, just when we think we have a firm hold on the artist's practise, it turns out to be something (or someone) else.

Take the statement that her paintings represent the transmission of "signals and information travelling through the air."³ The works seem too innocuous and sparsely composed (perhaps even too traditional) to effectively suggest an overloaded, image-saturated society. And yet, the selectivity of Copperwhite's approach may merely indicate a vision of this society filtered through a subjective perspective, where that which is immediate or inessential refuses to register and where "consciousness as such receives no memory traces whatever, but has another important function: protection against stimuli."⁴ The television monitors that (re)appear throughout Copperwhite's paintings never seem to actually transmit anything; they are blank, they display colour bars or static. Like the drained swimming pool or the non-reflecting mirror, these screens exist only to deflect information. It makes sense, then, that Copperwhite constantly refers back to modernism, to colour-field and abstract expressionist painting. The seminal works of these movements also serve as a type of screen, an all-over and impenetrable surface that turns the determination of meaning back onto the subject. One is meant to stand transfixed before a monochromatic canvas or an 'action painting', contemplating one's own store of associations in the absence of either recognisable figuration or focal points.