

## Remembering Space

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It feels impossible to look at these paintings of residential interiors without entering them, and each time I do, it feels like a form of secret escape; a retreat into a small crevice of calm where no one will find me until I am ready to come back out. I like to imagine padding silently across one of the velvety floors, running my fingers through the long tendrils of plants, watching the lattice of shadows play across my feet, or listening to the gentle lap of water in the sky-blue Hockney-esque pool. Most of all, however, I long to sit in one of those low plush chairs and simply immerse myself in the unique sense of stillness.

Stillness seems a strange word to apply to these works, composed of a teeming juxtaposition of colours, geometric lines, shapes, textures, patterns and plant-life. Yet, despite the detail and vibrancy, this is the impression they invite. There are different qualities of stillness, however, and in this case, I mean a very specific kind. Rather than frozen or static, each scene seems momentarily held or suspended in time, silently engaged in its own internal conversation. Like a film or a stage-set in-between action, quietly existing in its own palpable way before human life returns to fill it. The best way I can describe this rich, layered, 'active' kind of stillness is by clumsily borrowing from outside of my Anglo frame of reference.

The word *ma* (間) refers to the Japanese concept of negative or in-between space (whereby space and time are a unified idea and experience). It relates to all aspects of life and has hundreds of applications, but, to my understanding, can essentially be either literal empty space (such as the space-time between two objects) or the perception of a space, gap or interval. It has a sort of invisible weight or energy to it; a meaningful emptiness or absence. Examples often given include the silences between the notes that make music, or the pauses in conversation that convey more than words. In design-terms, the contemporary architect Kengo Kuma positions the void space, or *ma*, of a building as the most important element of traditional Japanese architecture, as it is here 'we can feel the change of light, the change of time, the change of smell, the change of temperature.'

Although Charlotte Keates' paintings primarily consist of domestic architectural elements, it is the in-between space that these elements create, the embodied experience of it, the *ma*, that strikes me as the true subject of the work. These are not real spaces but evocations of space, based on a fusion of distilled memories and impressions of the vacated homes she visited during her six-week research trip to Japan, Singapore and Bali, later recalled from the twilight of her East London studio. This becomes clear as soon as your eye begins to wander through the interiors. Convincing to begin with, they quickly become disorientating and unnavigable; stairways abruptly dissolving in mid-air, floors effortlessly punctured by tree trunks, walls melting into windows that are in fact outdoor space.

The memories that these paintings are rooted in exceed the purely visual. In a manner that seems to resonate with Kuma's words, Keates describes how many of the works originally stem from the recollection of a particular sense or feeling triggered by a place, the time of day or season in which she experienced it, or a thought or phrase it produced in her mind, which she holds on to whilst she paints. These stimuli are often reflected in the titles. *Sweetness After the Rain* (2020), for example, conjuring that brief, delicious moment when a long overdue downpour finally clears, a weak trickle of milky sun begins to penetrate, and the rich, earthy smell of saturated soil and plant-life fills the air. Yet the same effect is also achieved independently of words. Something of the wavering quality of the dense backdrop of foliage beyond the architectural divide speaks of drenched vegetation; you can almost hear the occasional drip of water bouncing between leaves onto the forest floor, the gradual return of bird song and the buzzing sounds of innumerable insects. The colours are heightened, rejuvenated. The light has that faltering, transitional quality of shifting weather, captured in the dramatic symphony of shadows cast by the window, pillar and screens of the built-foreground.

A brief pocket of stillness, of in-between space and time, is often needed to notice the poetry of such a moment as in *Sweetness After the Rain*, and to allow for a deeper, richer quality of experience to unfold. (Earlier variants of the character for *ma* were written with the sign for 'moon' (月) under the sign for 'gate' (門), ostensibly depicting 'a door through the crevice of which the moonshine peeps in'.) Instances of this can seem few and far between amidst the hurtling rhythms of daily life, but on the rare occasion when some small detail does manage to pierce through the fog of distraction and capture one's attention it can be quite striking; enough to stand out and form firm roots within the mind.

Keates works in an unplanned, organic way, guided by intuition and this constant hum of memories; seeking to recapture something of the magic behind each fragment. The process of remembering is reflected in the work, for example in the abstract, swirling backdrops of chalk ground gesso (an in-between material, in itself) that read like regions of missing information; the use of numerous framing devices and generous foregrounds that make the scenes seem as though viewed from a remove; the way the images make sense until you look closer. You could interpret these paintings as exercises in what it is to remember a space.

But primarily each work is about recreating the experience for the viewer; bringing it back to life in a way that captivates and transports us, like a portal. Light (and its counterpart) plays a key part in this. Without human actors, the paintings are dramatized – activated – by various patterns of shadow and dappling, sunbeams bouncing off glass or water, the shimmer of caustics across a wall, or the surreal merging and layering of spaces (particularly indoor and outdoor) caused by reflective surfaces. It is easy to get lost in these odes to light and shadow; to become fully present in the captivating moment they inspired.

The transportive power of shadows, in particular, is well recognised and plays a central role in traditional Japanese architecture. They are actively invited into the home, for example, through shōji screens (paper translucent walls) to create a sense of beauty and atmosphere. But they are also used as objects of meditation and repose. The writer Jun'ichirō Tanizaki describes this in his essay, *In Praise of Shadows* (1933), taking the alcove of a tastefully built Japanese room as a primary example. These empty recesses are deliberately cut off from light to create what he describes as a 'world of shadows... of mystery and depth superior to that of any wall painting or ornament.' He need only to pause before one and would 'forget the passage of time'. Likewise, I can imagine losing a whole afternoon transfixed by the grid-work of shadows in *So Many Ways to Make Those Hidden Things Found* (2019) as it slowly travels across the floor in-line with the sinking sun.

The irresistible charm of Keates' paintings rests upon more than just light, of course. Other aspects – such as the dramatic use of perspective, the immersive scale, the inclusion of Japanese painted screens (paintings within paintings), and the sensuous combinations of colour – are also used to draw our attention ever deeper into the space of each scene and the reality it presents. At times, you could almost imagine looking for too long and becoming trapped inside one of these fairy-tale works, only to eventually re-emerge years later, wizened and old.

I began by describing the seductive air of tranquillity that pervades these paintings. Yet, there is something about them that can at times feel unsettling. Where are the people who would normally occupy such residential spaces? The creeping encroachment of plants and the very occasional discarded item (a book or a coffee pot) carry a hint of abandonment. The plants even have a vague gigantism to them, as they disrupt building foundations and begin to take possession (there is perhaps a tight-rope sense of both living in harmony with nature, and of being locked in an ongoing struggle with it), while the positioning of the furniture gives off an oddly staged or theatrical ring at times. I wonder what it would truly feel like to be inside one of these paintings for any length of time. Would the perfect stillness and utopian setting grow oppressive after a while? Or eerie? When would the spell begin to break? Utopia (etymologically rooted in Greek, ou 'not' + topos 'place') is a no-where place, and these are idealised spaces. But how might it have felt looking around the real homes that inspired them, pristinely maintained by the servants and maids of the more affluent, absent owners?

This subtle impression of disquiet is not entirely abstract. The paradise realm of 'A Constant Hum' is intersected by another (rather different) kind of shadow at points. It occurs quite specifically each time you pass through and find your journey briefly interrupted by the dispersed handful of paintings of elevated black and white houses. These stand out from the rest of the series in multiple ways. For one, they are depictions of actual buildings, shown in their entirety from an external, removed position – a significant compositional shift that seems to signal a need for distance or caution. Secondly, the architectural style is entirely different; the modernist/contemporary aesthetic of the majority of the spaces replaced by a fused lexicon of

mock-Tudor, Arts and Crafts, and Art Deco references. The titles similarly reflect a shift in tone. *Something sinister that was once making a noise was now holding its breath* (2020), and, *Haunted By Your Beautiful Ghost* (2019), for instance, affirm the need to be wary.

Architecture can both contain as well as inspire memories, and these are buildings with a dark and troubling past. They belong to a great number that were built during the 19<sup>th</sup> century to house European colonial and wealthy expatriate families, particularly in the Southeast Asian colonies of the British Empire. Commonly referred to as 'Black and Whites', many examples can still be found in Singapore today, and Keates came across several during her travels, including a small group that became embroiled in the 1942 Battle of Singapore when the Empire of Japan invaded the British occupied territory. Most have now been converted into highly sought-after luxury rental properties (complete with swimming pools), many of which are owned by the Singapore government and leased for private use – primarily to affluent members of the expatriate communities wishing to enjoy the 'charms' of these lavish, period-style villas.

These buildings are fantasy spaces in a different way to the rest of the paintings in 'A Constant Hum'. The sunny, aspirational bubble in which they exist sits entirely at odds with the traumatic legacies of the colonial project to which they are attached. They also belong to the wider tradition of colonial architecture, which draws upon a series of signs and signals that are familiar to the coloniser and intended to create the illusion of home-away-from-home, whilst simultaneously engaging in part of the invasion and destruction of the home of the colonised.

Without background context, the inclusion of these paintings alongside the others in 'A Constant Hum' can initially seem incongruous. Yet, once you begin to excavate the history of the buildings to which they are attached, their presence becomes highly significant. These works present a very different, parallel line of inquiry into how we remember spaces. And they serve as a poignant reminder of the need to always question the surface impression of perfection and harmony that seemingly-idyllic worlds invite.

Keates is mindful that she was merely passing through the countries and the spaces that 'A Constant Hum' is rooted in, and there is as much a feeling of remoteness to the manner of her (often framed) depictions as there is an immersive quality. Similarly, we, the viewers, are visitors within the world that she has created in paint, and there is an equal need for us to remain ever-conscious of this fact. As on-lookers, in whatever sense, it is important to always keep some distance; to remain in-between, to resist ever being fully seduced by either representation or the rose-tint of memory. Perfection, after all, can never truly exist.