

“Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future.” - Robert Smithson¹

A massive stone arch looms in the near distance, framing a cerulean blue sky. All around is a decaying mass of rotted, ravaged, and seemingly abandoned slats of wood. This building is shattered. The scene contains two overlapping senses of time. The time of the stone is heavy and permanent; one feels that these walls have already survived many turns of man’s fate and will continue to stand through much much more. The wood feels recently purposeful. Now destroyed, it will be easy to move and to forget. Above, the sky has its own timelessness, a sublime beyond the bounds of man’s construction.

This is the scene depicted in Maysey Craddock’s painting *Whisper in the Stones*. Craddock’s image captures a world that has fallen down. She shows us the destruction of forces unknown. Be the cause nature, war, or mere neglect, man is no longer present in Craddock’s realm. Although these scenes are carefully rendered from the artist’s own observation and documentation of real life disaster, her structures possess a symbolic tone. Without the presence or image of people, these paintings exist in their own wrinkle in time, and their metaphors transcend the particularity of place and instance.

But these destructions are only *images*. Craddock’s paintings are also *things*. And what are they? Not just canvasses stretched tight over a neat support or a sheath of perfectly smooth paper. Craddock builds her surface. She collects and connects countless scraps of brown paper bags. She stitches these together with silk thread to create her substrate. But this is not the elegant handwork of a proper Southern young lady. This is a desperate manhandled stitch. This is the stitch of necessity. Beautiful on their own, these supports are built from what is available. They convey the dire physical need that arises as the result of past—or worse, ongoing—disaster. It seems Craddock has painstakingly constructed these objects, only to conceal them in the disguise of ruination. Imagining the numerous hours Craddock spends stitching, inspires a sense of inventiveness and optimism. Imagining her, then, carefully covering her accomplishments in destruction is curious. Perhaps, she is suggesting that we are locked in a cycle of building and destruction. Perhaps, her painting is just a folly— a destructive disguise sheathing something precious from view.

Constructed ruins abound in the history of Western art. Ruins allow us to linger in lost pasts and also allow us the liberty of succumbing to greater powers—realizing our own humanity in the face of forces that exist beyond our control. It is interesting to learn that after the fall of Rome, the ruin of the Coliseum remained the largest “architectural volume” in the world until the building of the Crystal Palace in 1851. “Any visitor to Rome in the fifteen centuries after its sack by the Goths in AD 410 would have experienced that strange sense of displacement which occurs when

we find that, living, we cannot fill the footprints of the dead.”ⁱⁱ How odd to live in a world where the *largest*—a quality easily substituted for *greatest*—work of man lies in ruins. How could one not feel that the past held greatness now lost when the folly of the old still casts its shadow of morality over the industry of the present?

Lord Byron was so affected by seeing the ruins of the Coliseum that he dedicated several verses to it in his marvelous narrative poem “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”:

A ruin--yet what a ruin! from its mass
Walls, palaces, half-cities have been rear'd
Yet oft the enormous skeleton ye pass,
And marvel where the spoil could have appear'd.
Hath it indeed been plunder'd, or but clear'd?
Alas, developed, opens the decay,
When the colossal fabric's form is near'd:
It will not bear the brightness of the day,
Which streams too much on all--years--man--have reft away.ⁱⁱⁱ

So why linger in these ruins? According to eminent garden historian John Dixon Hunt, “For what attracts one to ruins is their incompleteness, their instant declaration of a loss which we can complete in our imaginations.”^{iv} For the optimistic heart, ruins offer an opportunity to build. And this is exactly what Craddock does. Remember that the Visigoths didn’t just sack Rome, they used the ancient stones to rebuild a new empire.

Craddock’s images allow us to view the past. She invites reflection and guides us to understand where we have been. We see the sad potential of man’s destruction and the awesome ability of nature to run its course without us. But these are merely views. We gaze at a distance. There are no paths into these images and there are no welcoming guides: all the inhabitants have long gone. Craddock allows us to linger, but she doesn’t allow us to stay. There is no place for us here lest we trap ourselves in a perpetual cycle of building and ruin. And so with an instructive tone, she pushes us out into the world inhabited, where we must build, live, and move forward.

- Lauren Fensterstock

Lauren Fensterstock is a studio artist based in Portland, Maine. Her artwork, writing, and curatorial projects have been featured internationally.

ⁱ Smithson, Robert. *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), page 11.

ⁱⁱ Woodward, Christopher *In Ruins* (New York: Pantheon Books a division of Random House, 2002), page 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Baron George Gordon Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, first published 1812-1818

^{iv} Dixon Hunt, John. *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), page 179.