

Lost Perfection

Drawing and Dreaming

in the Art of

Margaret Priest

by E C Woodley

Margaret Priest, *Explosion at Sea 1945* (from "Destruction" series), 2010, pencil on handmade paper, 9 x 6.5". Source: wwn photo archive. Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

Margaret Priest's drawings remind me of something the Russian poet Alexander Vvedensky wrote in the early 1930s during the period of his imprisonment and exile: "Our human logic...and our language skid along the surface of time. One can't compare three months gone by with three newly grown trees. The trees are present, their leaves glitter dimly." In Priest's work, illogically, perhaps, yet beautifully, time has become language. Her graphite and paper translations of Modernist buildings and their phenomenological vistas play out a dreamlike syntax that seems almost as linguistically present as it is materially evident.

Priest's most concentrated and recombinantly dreamlike drawings have often been compared to the paintings of de Chirico and Magritte. Freud writes in *On Dreams*, "Every situation in a dream seems to be put together out of two or more impressions or experiences." In Priest's work, one often finds two or more exquisitely granular and penetrating shadows that subtly belong to more than one time period but fall across the same floor in what seems to be the same moment. In the "Immurement" series of the late 1980s, working from Heinrich Helfenstein's photographs of Adlo Rossi's Gallarate residential unit in Milan, Priest produced images of three imaginary institutions,

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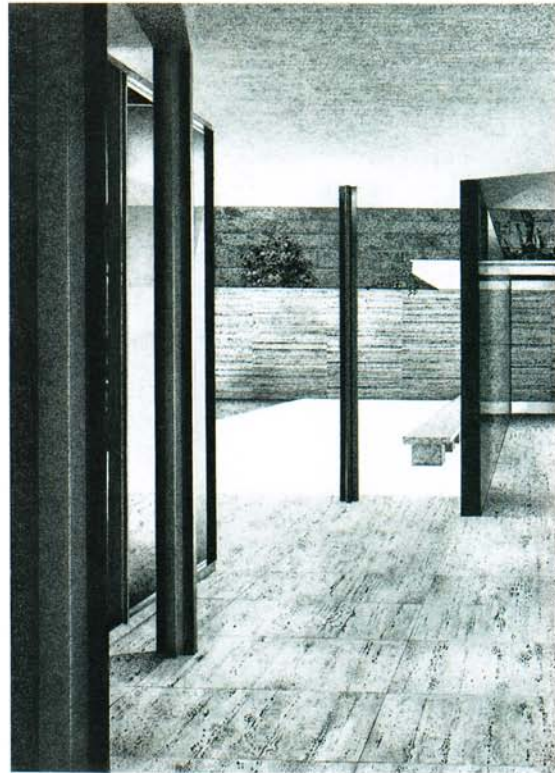


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The Museum, The Prison and The Hospital. In this series, the post-war Modernist housing interior has become a rarefied prison, “cooled out Piranesi,” wrote a British critic, linking Priest’s work to the 18th-century Roman engraver’s “Imaginary Prisons,” the *Carceri d’invenzione*. Extraordinarily present yet seemingly independent of any one specific time or place, each of these drawings belongs as much to the world of matter as to the mind and the emotions.

My experience of Priest’s pencil drawings is that, for an astonishingly animated moment or two, her images can seem as present as an actual lived moment. This makes a critical case for Priest’s choice of a small scale and humble materials. Using graphite to exquisitely and carefully represent stone, marble and concrete, Priest is capable of conveying reality more potently than the hyperrealist spectacle we are subjected to in contemporary advertising. She gives us what at first and, perhaps, even deeply seems to be an aspect of the real, yet we are also aware that we are standing before a small window on paper formed of “pencil dust,” as Priest calls her primary material. Referring to her work as “pseudorealism,” she explains, “Utility doesn’t interest me. I’m interested in a syntax and structure which conveys the amorphousness of longing and feeling.”

Priest’s “pseudorealist” approach, her insistence on merging interior and exterior worlds, links her to a chain of Western thought that begins with Augustine’s collapsing of psychological and historical time. Before Augustine, time was something



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belonging to external states, but when he wrote, “It is in you, O mind of mine, that I measure the periods of time,” he interiorized time. He saw it as the world of flux where the heart of man “flies about in the past and future motions of created things, and is still unstable.” Like Plato and Aristotle before him, Augustine dialectically opposed this flux to eternity, which he brilliantly and domestically described as the state of a single “day” that is “not recurrent but always today.” There is an aspect of Priest’s work that is concerned with a Modernist tradition that belongs not only to architecture and visual art but also to British writers such as Virginia Woolf and T S Eliot, who are concerned with the relationship between time and the self. For example, Augustine’s “eternal present” as woven into Eliot’s *Four Quartets*: “the intersection of the timeless moment/Is England and nowhere. Never and always.”

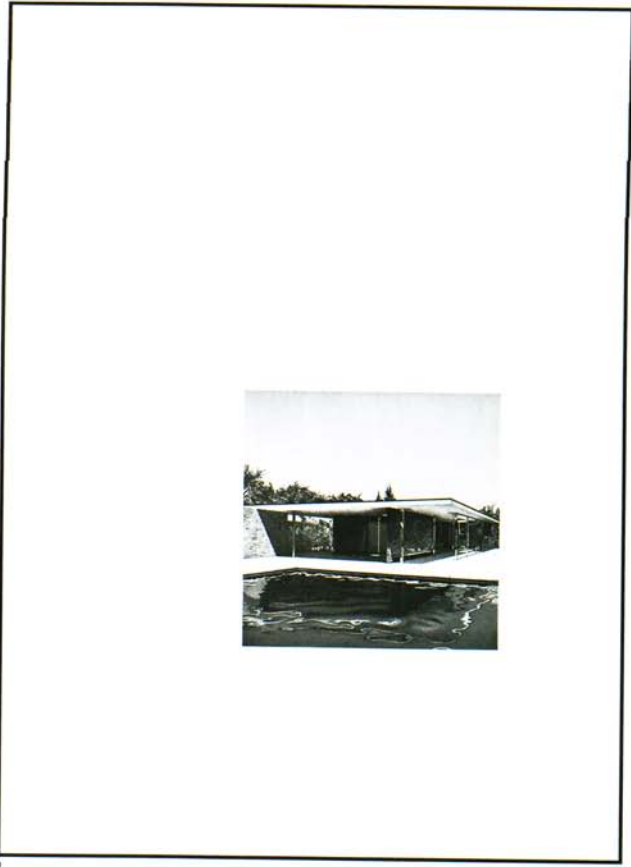
Priest’s infinitely subtle and ineluctable shifts in tonality establish with authority the surface of the material or geometric structure they define; yet simultaneously and paradoxically, these same places can appear granular, ionized or seemingly

1. *Barcelona Pavilion II* (from the "House" series), 2009, pencil on handmade paper, 9 x 6.5". Source: Mies van der Rohe's original 1929 German pavilion. Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

2. *Barcelona Pavilion II* (detail, from the "House" series), 2009, pencil on handmade paper, 9 x 6.5". Source: Mies van der Rohe's original 1929 German pavilion. Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

3. *Barcelona Pavilion I* (from the "House" series), 2008, pencil on handmade paper, 9 x 9". Source: Mies van der Rohe's original 1929 German pavilion. Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

4. *Barcelona Pavilion I* (detail, from the "House" series), 2008, pencil on handmade paper, 9 x 9". Source: Mies van der Rohe's original 1929 German pavilion. Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.



in the process of being unmade. Priest's approach in playing "surface affirmation," as she calls it, against "surface denial" conveys a profound sense of *here and no place, never and always*. In its extreme form, it's a stunningly brilliant use of the bare whiteness of paper, where, for example, "the white column is not a white column but the white surface between two drawings."

One of Priest's most astute critics, Ihor Holubizky, once wrote that her work, like the spaces of James Turrell and Robert Irwin, "can slip through time and bring the empty room to the edge of timelessness." A room on the edge of timelessness can be beautiful, but it is a lonely thing. Some of the complexity of the isolation communicated by Priest's work may be partially associated with the period of her childhood, and later life, when she underwent treatment and a number of operations for severe scoliosis. Illness necessarily puts a person at an existential and physical remove, where everyday time is elsewhere. Space without

time is the space of illness. Time plays out beyond the inhabited room, perhaps seen through a window like the chaotic weather systems viewed beyond Priest's Modernist terraces. Interior space is literal and imaginative, a very real dream that cannot be occupied as if time were unfolding in its intended sequence.

Drawing is a more solitary activity than any other visual medium. Like the solitude of the writer, it involves sitting at a desk and, in the case of Margaret Priest, working for months with the aid of magnification, pouring over a small window-like rectangle of imagery offset on a larger sheet of white paper. Her sources are photographs, often in old books that have a particularly strong meaning for her as objects and as journal-like artifacts of her past.

Many of Priest's current concerns can be traced back to the period of her post-graduate work in late 1960's London at the Royal College of Art. *CINEMA III*, a screenprint based on a drawing, depicts a dynamically looming and lonely interior geometry. Not only does this work show Priest to be a colourist of considerable ability, but it also situates her in haunting lineage with pre-war British printmakers such as Sybil Andrews and Cyril E Power, who took the Modernist built environment and its effect on individual souls as their subject matter.

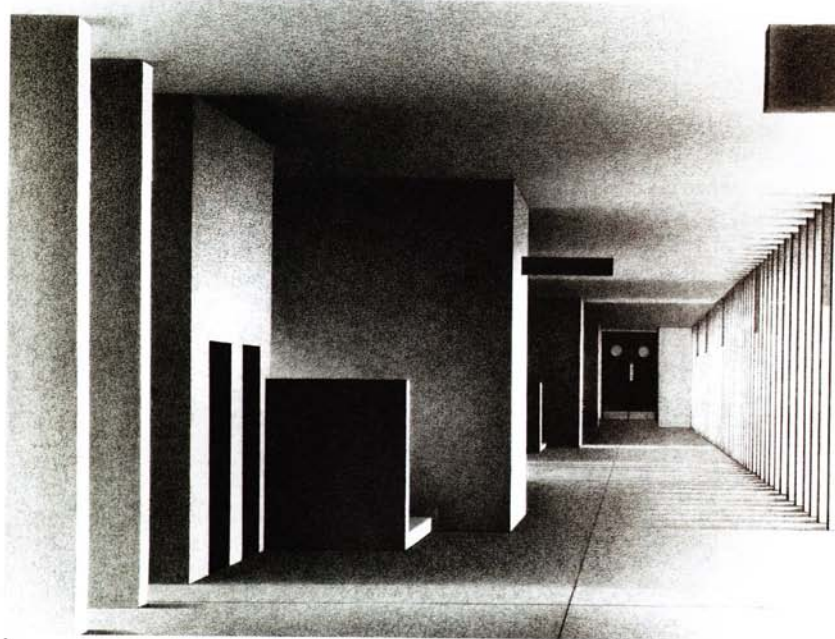
Priest was raised in working-class Dagenham in the docklands of East London amidst contemporary, but dismal, workers' row housing and the architecture of a 1930's neo-Georgian civic



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1. *Vitrine*, 2006, glass and aluminum shelf containing four elements, mixed media, wof, pencil on handmade paper, size of each element: 14 x 10 x 1.5". Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

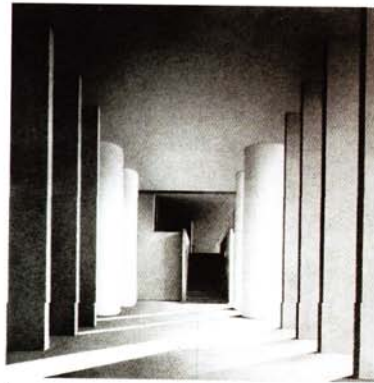
2. *Vitrine (detail)*, 2006, glass and aluminum shelf containing four elements, mixed media, wof, pencil on handmade paper, size of each element: 14 x 10 x 1.5". Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

3. *The Hospital* (from the "Immurement" series), 1989, pencil on handmade paper, 8 x 11.13". Source: Aldo Rossi's Gallarate Residential Unit. Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

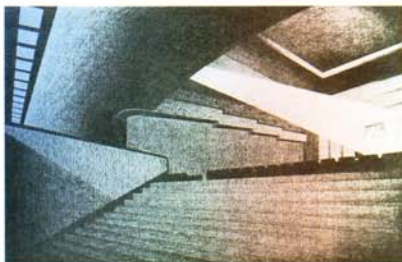
4. *The Museum* (from the "Immurement" series), 1989, pencil on handmade paper, 7.75 x 7.75". Source: Aldo Rossi's Gallarate Residential Unit. Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

centre raised to near fascist proportions. In this context, Mies van der Rohe's German pavilion for the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, a subject she began working with in 1969 and has returned to in her most recent work, represented "a dream object" to her, an imagined place "where we could go if we got out of here." (This work will be included in an exhibition at Georgia Scherman Projects in April 2011.) Originally commissioned to represent liberal democratic Weimar Germany's pacifist, culturally progressive openness, the Barcelona Pavilion was destroyed in 1930, all too soon becoming a thing of memory, "a dream of lost perfection," in an increasingly Fascist Europe. By committing the building to paper, the place of its material origins in the form of Mies's delicate pencil drawings, she seeks to restore it as a meaningful site that is both separate from the reconstructed, often photographed, fetish object of the 1990s, and apart from the corruption of its ideals as seen in a multitude of quasi-Modernist post-war buildings.

In *Barcelona Pavilion 1*, 2008, Priest makes the water surface of the pavilion's pool into a small carpet of absorptive movement capable of leading the viewer mesmerized, beyond the surface of the paper and into an actively interior world. The production of the extraordinarily present, almost cellular-like, travertine flooring in *Barcelona Pavilion*



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ii, 2009, involves a “stabbing and breaking down of the paper...a lack of control (in sympathy with) the extraneously controlled making” that occurs in the genesis of actual stone. In places, Priest builds up the paper surface completely, masks it with paper and uses erasure to bring it back to emptiness. This becomes “a prepared ground that picks up the dust of the pencil.” She says she relates this area to a stain in clothing that is removed but returns or is always there, having an effect on that same place in the fabric even if it can’t be seen.

In an astonishing, recent drawing, *Explosion at Sea*, 1945, 2010, Priest has imbued a photographic image of a Japanese marine-based bomb test with an ornamental element that makes reference to the legendary wood block print *The Great Wave*. Rendered in greater complexity and delicateness than its referent, this work has more the vertical form of a mushroom cloud than the arching curve of Hokusai’s wave. In its intricacy, it is reminiscent of 17th- and 18th-century “Floating World” Ukiyo-e images: fabric or flesh or coils of cloud forms, strangely static but living. The sea as sea-creature, as dream-like composite structure. Places of dark, impenetrable sheen contrast with small frilly areas of mostly bare white paper that seem to lead beyond any surface. Surrounding this ornamental, interior violence is a granular mist of sea, air and clouds that invokes all of the viewer’s senses.

Priest seems always to have worked in a complex way with ornament and structure. Although in Modernist visual discourse the relationship between the two is not clear cut and has only recently begun to be studied, ornament was often considered opposed to structure, feminized and hence marginalized. Priest has heightened the sense of



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ornament as structure in the innately ornamental patterns of the ancient Miesan marble she often transcribes. She has worked with a series of elaborate ornamental flooring designs found in Vermeer paintings. In an early drawing, *The Stairwell*, 1969, the base of an almost generically modern stairwell is completely covered with writhing snakes of three dimensions that thin out to two, as if they had become the structure of the floor.

There are also the mimetic stone patterns Priest inscribes on the surfaces of some of her drawing-based sculptural work. When I first viewed one of the triangular fragments usually set between display glass as part of her *Vitrine*, 2006, it seemed to be a piece of polished concrete. One corner was ground unevenly, a thin edge of stone that had met with a drill bit. But when I looked more carefully, its concrete surfaces morphed into graphite. Movingly, this strange object seemed to be an incarnation of Keat’s writerly concept of negative capability, a desire to become the thing one is describing, like an actor completely present in a role. ■

E C Woodley is a composer, artist and critic based in Toronto and Amsterdam.

1. *Cinema III*, 1969, photo lithograph from pencil on handmade paper, 6 x 9.25". Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

2. *The Stairwell*, 1969, pencil on handmade paper, 7.75 x 7.75". Source: Mies van der Rohe’s Crown Hall Stair, III. Courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.