Interview with Ian Kiaer and Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith

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You have frequently used specific projects in the history of utopian or visionary architecture as points of departure for your own art works. Could you say something about your relationship to this history and your perception of its relevance to the contemporary moment?

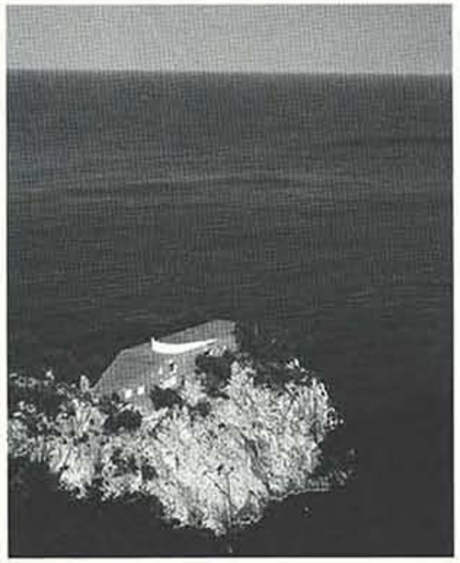
I think what has interested me is the circumstances under which many of the projects were realised. In 2001 I spent six months in Seoul and kept coming back to a particular painting in the national museum by the 16th century scholar Yang Paengson. He'd been exiled for his involvement in a political uprising and had a house built for him where he remained from then on, painting and writing poetry. Since then, many of the projects I've focused on – for instance, works responding to Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's architectural treatise *L'Architecture* or to Konstantin Melnikov's cylindrical house studio, and to an extent Casa Malaparte – have looked at this relationship between a protagonist's social, political involvement and their subsequent exile. In each case, these architects have presented proposals that have been visionary but by necessity quite hermetic.

Bruegel project / Casa Malaparte, 1999. Installation view Manifesta 3, Ljublijana, Slovenia, 2000

I'm not sure about the relevance of this to the contemporary moment, but at a time when assumptions regarding the need for a conventional working space are being questioned in favour of perhaps a more nomadic working practice that emphasises production, I've found the idea of involuntary isolation within a particular building a useful scenario. It makes one more aware of the inherent tension that can occur between aesthetic reflexivity and social engagement. I think it has been helpful for me, while remaining very much in the studio, to think how work and ideas figure outside. For instance, how something that gradually takes material form through a reflexive process of experiment and play then begins to find its place of influence in the world.

If this contrast between hermeticism and engagement is what interested you in the lives and work of these historical figures, how do you think this might be played out in the present moment in your own work? Or indeed in contemporary art and architecture more generally?

It's looking back that always makes things seem clearer than they actually were and it's also probably the case with this notion of hermeticism. An early influence on my practice was encountering a Rem Koolhaas exhibition at the ICA in London in the late 1990s. On the ground floor he presented some of his already existing projects alongside more playful experiments. Many of the models were roughly cut out of styrofoam and crudely glued together. There was an energy in the amount of ideas that could be contained in such an abbreviated form, and although quite makeshift, there was also a delicacy and an attention to the tone of each proposition. It made me think about Giacometti, which seems absurd, as their intentions are obviously so different. But there was something distinctive about the unease that these models could achieve while still remaining informal.



View of Casa Malaparte, Capri

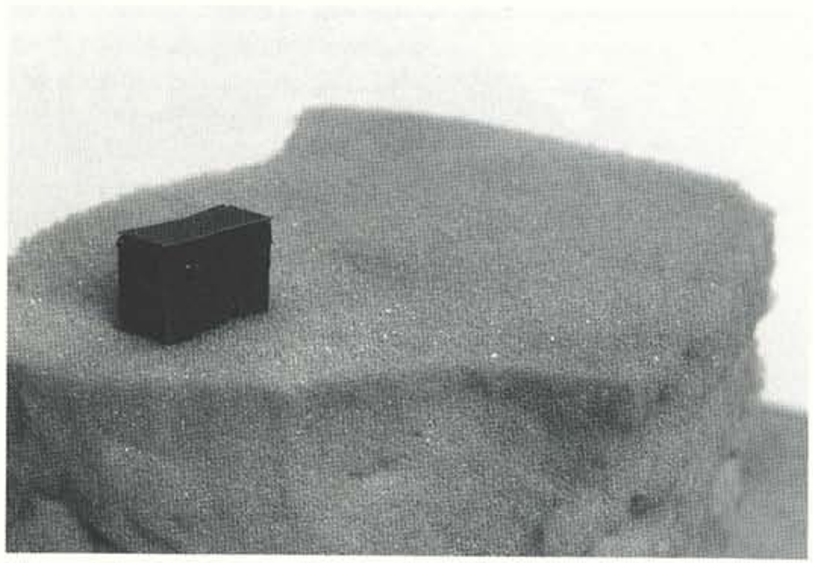
Maybe also because of this I started to consider how a rather private studio practice might have some relationship to a more expansive and collaborative activity. One building in particular, which I think began life as an opera house, when rejected was improvised into a family home. I liked the idea that something could be so contingent, retaining certain forms and ideas from one work's proposed context and function to another. Before then, my concern was primarily painting, and the architectural model seemed to provide a means for opening up my understanding of what painting could be. It was also at this time that I was coming across shows by people like Manfred Pernice and Thomas Schütte, which were making me think about how different kinds of constructed models could operate within an art work.

It was something to do with the model's physical presence, which by its nature is intimate and dependant on an interior space and yet metaphorically always tends to imply a wider proposition for society. I suppose in that sense, the model can work in the space between hermeticism and engagement; it has a place in both.

You say that the model opened up your 'understanding of what painting could be'. Does that mean that you considered your

earliest work, in which the model featured, as an expanded form of painting? If so, is this still how you view what you do? Perhaps you could say talk a little about what you consider in retrospect to be your first 'mature' work or works.

'Expanded' in that it moved beyond the frame, yes. I was finding any attempt at conveying notions of time and narrative within a single plane unconvincing. I found that the unity that this implied was problematic. Thinking about painting in relation to the model was helpful because it allowed me to suggest different modes of time and approaches to representation within one work, in a way that didn't seem forced. One model can sit beside another and yet remain particular in the information it holds, whether experimental or descriptive or propositional. Yet I'm not sure whether working in this way is an expanded form of painting or whether it moves painting closer to



Bruegel project / Casa Malaparte (detail), 1999

the model. It tends to emphasise the making of a painting rather than the painting of it. It's one step removed. While working as a stage hand, I'd become interested in theatre models being concerned with pictorial illusion and at the same time put together very practically to serve a purpose. In part, I used this approach to painting, which I found took away some of the historical burden from the activity so that it becomes more pragmatic.

Maybe the first piece where I felt this was beginning to work was *Bruegel project / Casa Malaparte*, in that it operates in both a pictorial and a matter-of-fact way. The theme of *Manifesta 3* in Ljubljana in 2000 was to do with crossing borders and I was interested in how I could draw narrative associations with a journey that Bruegel might have made to Rome via Naples in the mid 16th century and the house that Curzio Malaparte had built in the same region in 1941. My work is quite simply made up of three elements: a watercolour of a windmill on a rock that lies in the background of one of Bruegel's paintings, an imprecise sponge model of Malaparte's building placed on a

stool, and a styrofoam model of a rock. I was interested in how one could present a relationship between these two buildings in a way that left the viewer enough room to build up their own imaginary through the fragments. A certain distance between each motif is important. For instance, that the stool should remain a stool and that the image of the windmill should not seem to be too persuasive, but keep its reticence.

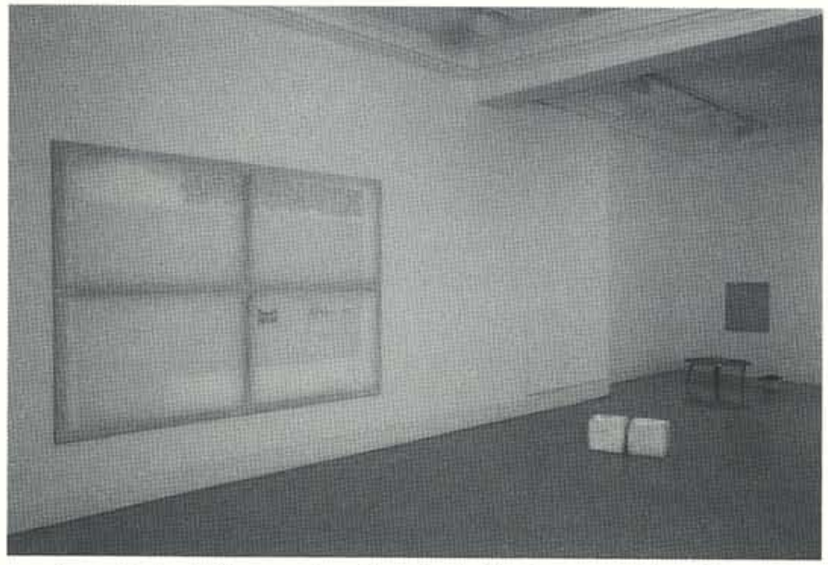
You talk of drawing connections between disparate 'fragments' and offering the viewer the formal and imaginative space to do likewise. As the orchestrator of these juxtapositions, you obviously have your own reasons for suggesting a relationship between, in this instance, Bruegel and Casa Malaparte. How closely do you expect the viewer to follow your research and reasoning in his or her response to individual works? And, on a slightly different tack, what are your thoughts on the significance of the fragment, and fragmentation in general, in modern and contemporary art?

Bruegel project / Casa Malaparte (detail), 1999

There will inevitably be a gap between my intention and thinking around a work, and the viewer's initial encounter. I hope, though, there will be some kind of response and recognition on the viewer's part as to what might be at play. Often, I think what I'm doing is quite evident in placing one element next to another, inviting reflection as to their relationship, whether these models are particular to a space in terms of their placement or in what they represent. I hope there would also be some response to a work's material gesture and what this might imply, whether an object or image is very precise in its description or left more open. This kind of encounter between the viewer and the work should be possible with very little additional information.

Then there will be a moment when this is not enough and more prompting is needed. I think this is where the issue of the fragment comes in. There's something inherent in the fragment that both gives and withholds its content, and this is important to me and is to do with the question of naming. I really want to resist talking about a work in a way that seeks to pin it down: labelling each element until one supposedly understands it. The way a fragment works is to draw attention to what isn't there whilst remaining very specific in itself. In that way, a work can be kept open and asks an investment of imagination from the viewer that they may not want to give.

How much information one gives is particular to each work. In the case of a project like that on Yang Paengson, there were different levels in operation. For instance, on the invitation for the show that featured that work, at aspreyjacques in 2001, there was a poem taken from one of his paintings describing a landscape and his desire to be left alone. Then there was a large watercolour painting of a banner in contemporary Korean advertising print positioned next to some polystyrene boxes for storing fish, and further on there was another work that more directly referred to the relationship of his house to his writing table within the landscape. Each element builds up a picture of the scholar's life and concerns in relation to the painting I'd been looking at. Maybe if one can read Korean one has further access to the work, and yet being able to read something is not necessarily the point. What is presented is the opportunity to think around the



aspreyjacques, 2001
Installation view

work, and the different signs involved; for instance the relationship of text to something found, or the relationship of something I might have made to an existing piece of furniture. I think this should be enough.

I find it difficult to talk more generally about contemporary art and the fragment because it feels like it so easily becomes conjecture. I think that since Novalis and Hölderlin the fragment has always signified a relationship to the whole; from that point, historically it became difficult to assume that representation of the whole was possible, and so the fragment was a means of inference. Walter Benjamin followed this, though with different concerns, in works like *One-Way Street* and his Arcades project by using quotation almost as a method for opening up the immediate past for attention. These are two respects in which the fragment still functions. I think it's difficult in contemporary art to trust anything that presents itself as intact or complete. What's left seems to be in pieces.

'What's left'? Do you see yourself working in a moment of aftermath? What role, if any, do you think nostalgia plays in your work?

I don't mean that this situation is necessarily negative, or that nostalgia is an appropriate response. Uncritical idealising should be avoided. The way Benjamin used quotation was not to transmit the past so that a reader could relive it; rather it was to pull the fragment out of its context so as to use it as a means of critical reflection. The fragment can be used in that way to question received canons. I'm thinking of the way Liam Gillick might use a minimalist language to defer attention from the object towards the importance of exchange, or of the way a Luc Tuymans painting might assume a relationship to history by quoting from a particular photographic image. I found it useful when Tuymans talked of 'historical forgery' almost as a strategy, by which he meant that he did not feel bound to respond to the immediate past as it had been presented; rather he could imagine, pretend even, an alternative. I remember reading that one time he pretended that all work after 1940 hadn't happened; this was a kind of game that allowed him to make the painting he wanted. Yet this is different from nostalgia, since there's no sense of sentimentalism.

Hakp'o dang (black), 2001

Maybe saying 'what's left' sounds a little bleak, which I didn't intend. I just mean that there does seem to be a shift in how one negotiates previous movements that had in themselves a sense of linear progress, which no longer seems appropriate as a model for development. At present there might be something of admiration or even envy in play; once there was a confidence, or a genuine belief that one's work might contribute directly to society in a way that seems more complicated now. I'm thinking of the work I made on Moshe Safdie and his building projects in the 1960s. He was seeking to provide solutions to the need for high-density living, drawing ideas from D'Arcy Thompson's book *On Growth and Form*. He developed some very beautiful models responding to his childhood experience of keeping bees in Israel. In that sense, there is nostalgia at the heart of his work, yet it develops into something more progressive and pragmatic. He pioneered concrete modular building units that could be transported and stacked in differing combinations. Yet the implementation of these projects has also been seen to contribute to social alienation and disorientation. Again, if

one thinks of the specific meaning of nostalgia as a sickness for home, there are added complications with Safdie's, early commissions for Palestinian refugee housing. When making this work based on Safdie, I wanted to convey a sense of pleasure and play in finding solutions through memory and natural form as well as the unintended complication when such experiments impact on society.

Let's focus, then, on the formal specifics of the work you made 'after Safdie'. Apart from an obvious interest in drawing the contemporary art viewer's attention to a fascinating figure from recent architectural history, what informed your decisions as to the constituent elements of this particular piece, the choice of materials involved and the precise formal arrangement of this concatenation of elements? And in what way does your work register those 'complications' that divide our present moment from

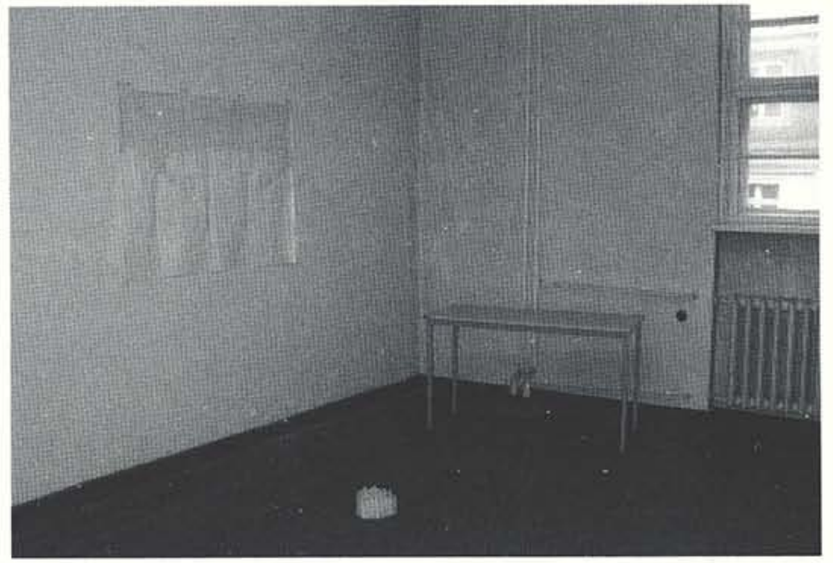
Moshe Safdie project / Silver, 2003
Installation view
50th Venice Biennale, 2003

that earlier moment of progressivist optimism inhabited by Safdie?

This work was made partly in response to the theme set by the curators that year at the Venice Biennale (2003). I was in the section 'Delays and Revolutions', looking at how previous ideas filter into the present in a way that is non-linear and always taking detours. I liked this notion because it acknowledges that the development of a work is never quite as originally intended, but is part of a process of chance encounters, decisions made consciously, reflexively, or determined by revision. In answering the 'specifics' of your question, it can be problematic to justify decisions in a way that makes them inevitable or suggests that others were not valid. I want to approach work always with an openness to the possibility of adjustment, though due to the necessity of actually presenting the work, at some point it does become fixed.

This also has implications for how a work begins. I like the idea of a work being part of a wider project, which allows one to play with the notion of a given. In this case, I'd already begun making modular

units for an earlier show and accepted the remainder of these as a way to continue. They were made of wood, as a light, practical solution that would reveal the structure of the beehive as well as the repetition that was so important to Safdie. I wanted the other elements in this arrangement to give more of an impression of a setting. The painting describes one of his buildings under construction, though as an object it feels aged. Another model is also structural, but it isn't clear whether it's incomplete or whether it's already a ruin. It's on a piece of silver insulation material, suggesting maybe some sort of reflective desert. The foam block is less specific; it both creates a sense of scale and remains as it is, a sponge block that might have been discarded. I wanted a certain ambiguity for the project, as to whether something is being proposed or reconsidered or perhaps presented as a curiosity having been recently discovered after a period



Alexander Beer project: playroom, 2006. Installation view
4th Berlin Biennial, 2006

of neglect. In this sense, it sets up a relationship to its original that's more cautious. The formal placement of the work is adjustable to the space in which it operates.

Could you say something about scale in relation to your work and the intimations of dominance and control on the viewer's part that would seem to be inherent in the use of the model in various non-art contexts, from that of architecture or town-planning to children playing with doll's houses or toy forts?

The model introduces notions of the aerial view and miniaturisation, which as you say, bring up issues of control. Though I think that scale is just one element, and it needs to be considered in relation to the politics of illusion and other means by which a view is constructed and the viewer implicated, and this differs from work to work. I am thinking what a difference there is between the way a Bruegel painting presents a view from above and the way it occurs in one of Ledoux's etchings. The tone is very different. With Ledoux, the power of the architect as social engineer is conveyed to the extent that

it becomes almost repellent, whereas with Bruegel there's more of a sense that he's describing a world from observation and experience. There's that moment in Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris* when the camera pans across Bruegel's painting *Winter* and there seems no longer to be a distinction between the two media. The camera enters into Bruegel's world in a way that's entirely convincing. This seems less to do with control or power than with inviting the viewer's involvement.

Yet when a model becomes three-dimensional a shift occurs where looking includes not only one's eyes but a relationship to one's body; hence the potential implication for dominance. Yet I'd say again that this is a matter of tone. If something appears incidentally on the floor by a wall it may have the contrary effect; its gesture of informality might ask the viewer to tread carefully, both with their feet and in

Alexander Beer project: playroom (detail), 2006

their assumptions. I think this has something to do with the nature of the illusion. The aerial view has conventionally offered the idea of a unified reading of the world, a kind of Hegelian vision that seeks to master by its gaze. Yet if the gaze is broken or undermined in some way, dominance is also called into question. In his novel *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann sets up a situation where the residents of the hospice view Europe from above, as it's about to collapse into war. Though this happens from an elevated position up a mountain, much of their dialogue occurs while they are lying infirm on couches. In that way, the author employs a privileged view, but one that's reassuringly undermined by sickness and doubt. I like this idea of introducing both a horizontal and vertical possibility for both the work and the viewer.

Again, the notion of the fragment and the material nature of the model are relevant to the issue of control. The fragment inhibits the total view as well as frustrating the possibility for control by ensuring that it can only ever be partial. Likewise, if the material quality of a

model is in some way abject, it can undermine this sense of control in a way similar to how ill health operates in Mann's novel. The doll's house and the town plan are two instances where these assumptions can be employed and questioned.

Your work was included in the recent Berlin Biennial in a particular context that was heavily freighted with historical and political associations, of which the exhibition's curators and viewers alike were very conscious. Could you say a little, in conclusion, about your response to this particular remit?

My work was sited in the Jewish School in Auguststrasse, which had been built by a Jewish architect from Berlin, Alexander Beer, in 1927. It was closed by the Nazis in 1942, and after the war, reopened as the Bertold-Brecht-Oberschule until 1996, since when it has remained empty. I hadn't worked in such a charged space before, and first there was the question of how direct I should be in addressing the building. I felt that I should try to make a work that involved the theme of the building but also bring it out into a wider context. Initially, it was difficult to find much information on Beer, but a friend in Berlin helped me get in contact with Dr Inge Lammel, who's a musicologist specialising in GDR workers' songs. She had written the only book on Beer and gave me material, articles and photos of his different buildings. She lives close to the Jüdische Waisenhaus in Pankow, the orphanage also designed by the architect that has now been turned into a public library. Beer, along with many of the children both from the orphanage and the school, perished in the Terezin camp, whereas Inge Lammel escaped as a child to Britain for the duration of the war.

At the end of each corridor in the school were two rooms that were smaller than the classrooms. They had a domestic feel that was closer to the images of the Waisenhaus. I wanted something that worked between the two buildings. In one room, I made quite a direct model of the Waisenhaus out of paper, which is the closest I've come to something like a doll's house. I wanted this to have a relationship with the sink, curtain and very distinct floral wallpaper. There was also a watercolour. In the other room I included an orange table that had an institutional feel, a print of a wall painting from the orphanage, and a paper crown on the floor. There was also a paper circle with a watercolour of a children's game. With this work in particular I felt it was difficult to judge how much to include, and how much it should remain silent. In a way, I wanted the rooms to be the dominant presence, since it always seemed that this was the main part of the work.