

Exploring the metaphorical terrain.

I circle for a time, finding my bearings. The trestle tables – a landing strip of sorts – draw me nearer and certain features are revealed: dark blots or shimmering planes snag my gaze, and an archipelago of smudgy islands come into view before the surface empties once more into space mapped only by vacant grid squares. The horizontality, so different to the usual wall-based presentation of prints, pulls me down: I soon forget the bigger picture, and instead I'm captivated by the topographical detail of a strange landscape. I know that I ought really to be looking at the subject matter of the images Traci Kelly has laid out before me – a female body sustaining various performed postures – but I keep on getting sucked in to the minutiae of their particular surfaces: the thickly inked blacks, the wrinkled skin of gold leaf, glittery explosions, the cold blue-ish gleam of a mirror.

The lighting is difficult here, directional. As I move around the prints, the spotlights repeatedly cause my shadow to blot out the very things I'm trying to see. It's necessary to rotate my position, to look at everything upside down, so that I do not eclipse the illumination falling upon surfaces I want to scrutinize. I seem to be orbiting the work like a satellite. It's dizzying. I've a slight sense of vertigo as I lose track of what's near and what's far away, which way up things really are and what their scale might be.

Taking up the tools Kelly has provided – the mirrors, lenses and loupes that can further magnify what lies before me – the lighting continues to determine what and how I see: I note how prismatic rainbows come momentarily into being as light is split and bent, and how certain devices reflect little patches of brilliance, or cause a host of elliptical flares and flashes. I tilt the camera as if it was a telescope gazing out into astronomical space in order to capture in its viewfinder the light refracted from various lenticular forms. Even when I focus back upon the inky paper itself these metaphors remain: as I inch slowly and painstakingly over this small terrain I find myself thinking about the mechanical rover crawling its way across a distant Martian surface. I begin to imagine my own progress as a sort of stumbling into craters, skirting around impact sites and gazing at the vast deserts that stretch away to the horizon...

Invited to the project as a researcher, the usual expectation might have been to think hard about getting to the bottom of something, but instead I had decided to take a determinedly superficial approach, that is, to concentrate upon the material surfaces laid out around me. I would pay close and careful attention to carbon-black dabs of ink, scrutinize the ragged smears of gold and follow the tracks of irregularly printed lines... I wanted to take explicitly the invitation to be a 'seer' and therefore simply to look very hard at what was before me.

Of course, looking is never simple, never neutral. As James Elkins memorably puts it: 'When I say, "Just looking," I mean I am searching, I have my "eye out" for something. Looking is hoping, desiring, never just taking in light, never merely collecting patterns and data.'¹ So, I was indeed looking quite selfishly for what might catch my eye, even if initially I found it hard to articulate what exactly it was I sought, or to explain why that might be interesting.

It transpired that what I had my eye out for were those aspects suggesting planetary surfaces or glimmering stars – neither having much to do with the ostensible subject matter of the work exhibited. Despite the seeming irrelevance, this metaphor persisted to such a degree that it surely required reflection. It took me to an article by Linda Pacifici and Jim Garrison, who note that for formal logicians, 'metaphors are category mistakes' but for those able to 'live awhile with the tensions occasioned by poetic tropes' metaphor, metonymy, simile and synecdoche have a paradoxical quality that can change what and how one thinks. This is encapsulated in their memorable phrase: 'Paradoxes break the bowl of ordinary thinking.'²

Pacifici and Garrison draw upon the Pragmatist ideas of John Dewey to think about the role of imagination in inquiry and it is this interrelationship that the Seers in Residence project has brought into focus for me. On the face of it, making things up – imagining prints as planetary surfaces, for example – sits uncomfortably with that species of academic research in which specific questions lead to measurable outcomes and where clear goals can be identified at the outset. But, as Gregory Currie points out, 'in imagining things, one might thereby come to know (possibly other) things,' so in the current project, for instance, imagination has unexpectedly directed my critical attention to the role of metaphor and other poetic tropes within artistic research inquiry.³

Although I had certainly not set out with this intention, I now recognise that the particular metaphor emerging from my time as Seer can be redeployed to describe the interrelationship of knowledge and imagination. I visualise that knowledge and imagination could be said to exist at the poles of a planetary body, sited opposite one another, but everywhere connected by the terrestrial surfaces from which they emerge. It

also strikes me now that this bipolar image, replete with its connotations of a powerfully oppositional magnetic charge, can evoke that sense of alternation so often figured by artistic research – the ‘push-me, pull-me’ of a journey involving making and thinking, and the attention to – the staying with – inconsistencies and contradictions.

The research discourse is full of metaphors – paths to be followed, windows opening onto new perspectives, flashes of insight, as well as the project-specific imagery each researcher uses to conjure for others exactly what they’ve tried or discovered – but these are frequently passed over as mere figures of speech, and even, in certain disciplines, seen as potentially dangerous or distorting factors. ‘The choice to use metaphors should not become a self-serving attempt at creativity that supersedes subject and substance,’ as one study of healthcare research sternly warns its readers.⁴ I’m curious then, about what can happen when some type of creativity is itself the disciplinary subject and substance (and indeed the *method* of the research.) The Seers project to date has allowed me to begin thinking about what the category error of such poetic tropes might bring to considerations of artistic knowledge. In order now to develop this further, I realize that I need to journey out once more from my rational earthbound existence and investigate – that is, imagine – for a while longer my metaphorical planet and its multitude of radiant stars.

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¹ James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On The Nature of Seeing*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1996), p. 20.

² Linda Pacifici and Jim Garrison, ‘Imagination, Emotion and Inquiry: The Teachable Moment’ *Contemporary Pragmatism* Vol. 1, No. 1 (June 2004), pp. 119-132 (p. 120).

³ Gregory Currie, ‘Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction’, in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. by Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 161–81 (p. 161).

⁴ Jacquie Carpenter, ‘Metaphors in qualitative research: Shedding light or casting shadows?’, *Research in Nursing & Health*, Vol 31, Issue 3, (June 2008), pp. 274–282 (p. 274).