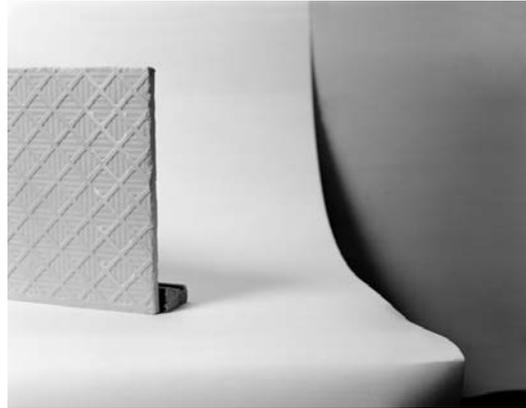


David Penny, *Fragments, Monoliths, Portals*

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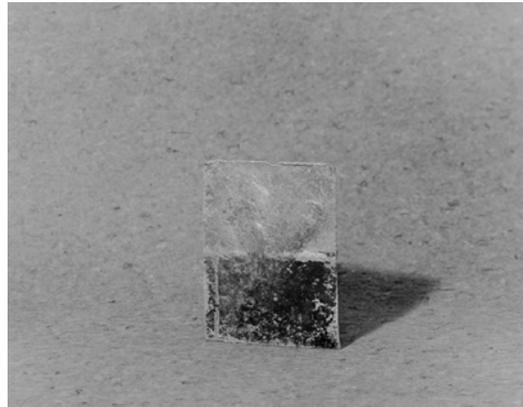
Lucretius' *The Nature of Things* has been called the loneliest of Latin poems since verse had long been abandoned for prose as the form of philosophical discourse. It is characterised by an acute observation of physical phenomena and surprises the modern eye in its materialist vision of a cosmos of atom and void. The work retains a poetic sensibility. The movement of the night sky, for example, is pictured as flocks of stars 'wandering where appetite entices each to go' as they 'graze the pastures of the heavens'. It is as if a mind searching for the laws of nature can be freshened in different ways when released from dogged assumption.

David Penny's photographs contain a similar sensibility. They reveal a close, intense scrutiny of solitary forms. These are cast into being through soft light and a rich tonal scale. The life of the studio and its props is made evident. Creased sheets, smooth backdrops, mirrors and lens tell of a working of light as if it were a language. Shadow is

to speak of the limits of perception, luminance as the form of knowledge.

The title of this work summons a tension at the heart of the project. Fragments posit an unseen image of the whole, the monolith stands assured and the portal promises a realm beyond. The still image is in perpetual suspense between these states.

This is achieved in a number of ways. A thin stone slab, for instance, is rendered precious through the sheer clarity of a focused close-up. It attains a status akin to that of an object in a museum display case. However, it is devoid of context and is but a mute artefact. Just as it is silent, it is as equally insistent.



The top edges of several photographed objects are almost parallel to the upper frame of the photograph whereas the corresponding lower edge is diagonal to the lower frame. A consistent ambiguity is thereby maintained between the flatness of the photograph's surface and depth of field perceived therein. The photograph is at once an image and a place.

The cubic form made from several slabs reveals in this space. An initial glance would accept a regular performance of light in terms of the laws of physics. With further attention, coherence quickly crumbles. A virtual horizon is posited and a virtual space is created within the photograph. The world is presented as enigma and mystery.



Clearly, historical echoes can be found in such an approach. Persian miniature painting, for example, is also characterised by a tension between two dimensional planes and three dimensional space created on the material surface. The tension distinguishes the space therein from everyday life beyond. It frames an intermediary or 'imaginal world' which in Islamic philosophy defines the second of five levels of the Divine Presences. By these means, the Persian miniature retains a contemplative aspect in the mundane whilst a higher mode of consciousness is simultaneously envisioned beyond it.

Similarly, it is acknowledged that the Persian garden performs as an idealised image and an actual place. It serves as a microcosm of a grander cosmic order. It is an enclosed space, separated from the rest of the world. The idealised place is present within, yet separate from, worldly affairs. It can only be a presentation. Perfection is

visualised but ultimately voided by its deferral to an other realm.

Michel Foucault cites the Persian garden as an example of a heterotopia: as an existing space enacting utopian visions of otherness which in turn reflect back upon the culture from which they spring. It is Foucault's point that despite attempts to appropriate and formalise space, it is still nurtured by the 'hidden presence of the sacred'. This is seen to be a point of resistance to prevailing power.

Penny's work also has an affinity with the still life paintings of Juan Sánchez Cotán. These are remarkable for the intense contrast of illuminated objects and the blackness of the background against which they are set. These works have been linked with Cotán's monastic seclusion and the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola. In the course of the subject's retreat, a prolonged scrutiny of everyday forms should lead to an exalted imaginative realm (godliness) as the eye is finally purified from habitual assumption.

Despite shared terrain with theological concerns, Penny's work is only ever to hover on this point of becoming other. If there is a drive beyond, it will continually loop back to its material base. The outward journey holds the promise of the transcendental. It is an expanse that can include Plato's notions of ideal Form or the modernist dream of pure form for that matter. It is Foucault's point that for otherness to be perceived 'it has to pass through this virtual point which is over "there"'. The sombre tones and solitary space of Penny's black and white images create this other world. It is not quite of ours and yet the indexical property of the photograph will return the image to material

circumstance. The journey demands an ever fresh vision of things as they are while holding the pleasures of how they might be otherwise. Herein, between matter and the heavens, lies the poetic. Such is our nature in things.



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