

Carmel Wallace

the art of the façade

We all travel; of course we do, we're Australian. So all of us must share something of a common experience, which is, perhaps, the source of that unfulfilled desire of which travel is the expression. Travellers are outsiders who long to gain admittance. In Italy we have all caressed those picturesquely peeling façades with our vision, façades behind which, we know, the life of the city is *really* being lived. We cross-examine these surfaces, longing for them to yield their secrets, their beauty, their history. They remain bafflingly impenetrable. When we travel the façade is the focus of all our attention, and all our frustration.

Carmel Wallace takes this as the proper subject of an artist's response to the romance of Italy, which she explored in her recent exhibition of works on paper, *dai marciapiedi italiani* (from Italian footpaths), derived from travel to Rome, Florence and Venice. She has reconciled herself to the need for an uncompromising encounter with the surface, choosing to make a souvenir of the façade.

The resulting works mirror Italy in all the melancholy of its picturesque decay. Souvenired torn poster-paper, scrounged from overburdened walls, along with other found papers, newspapers and rubbings were collaged and veneered onto their supports in such a seamless way that it was difficult to perceive the joins. The pressure of the etching press was used to meld this diversity into a new unity.

Paradoxically, this acceptance of the impenetrability of the city has enabled the artist to give the Italian idyll a physical presence in the gallery. The artist takes us on a journey into the dwelling-place of the overlooked. And here we walk, walk ceaselessly, walk until we are exhausted. The Italian footpath — hellishly narrow as in Florence, slogging up and down the Roman hills, through the Venetian *calle* and *sotoporteghi* — that surface which the foot encounters — was part of Wallace's vision.

This body of work also had an aural presence. In the *Roma* series (2005, collage on paper, 107 x 78.5 cm), for example, big sans-serif letters stood out in white on a solid red ground. The scattered



Carmel Wallace *Villa Adriana 4*, 2006, collaged billboard posters on canvas, 45 x 45 x 3.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Gallery 101

phonemes — *zio... sieme... tro... cia* — give the presence of the city an operatic quality, just as in Bertolucci's film, 'The Spider's Stratagem' (1970), the citizens of Tara are mesmerised by 'Rigoletto' broadcast through the twilight streets. Likewise the sound of text — the robust Italian vowel sounds, orotund Os and As — haunts the *Lupa* series (2006, collage, 60 x 45 x 3.5 cm), itself haunted by the image of the she-wolf, guardian spirit of the city. Both these series are in a colour key: *Roma* in vermilion and *Lupa* in that honey-ochre which is the characteristic timbre of Rome.

The *Marchiapiedi* (2006, frottage on newsprint on ply, various sizes) and *Diary* (etching, 43 x 61 cm) series used rubbings from utility access covers — *illuminazione pubblica, servizio acque, Comune di Firenze*. These overlooked signposts to the internal and subterranean machinery that makes the city work had an unexpectedly decorative quality, a remnant of the celebratory impulse of nineteenth-century engineering. These works mixed rubbings, newspapers and magazines, to make both a

physical collage and a collage of experience. Others such as *Random news 1-13* (2006, collage on board, 38 x 27 cm) were composed of colourful, playful fragments including the sort of nostalgic found images reminiscent of Dada.

It was the face of Petrarch, peeking out from behind torn posters, who had the last look. He stood as witness to the obscuring layers of time and change, captured in this rich encounter with the façade of the city.

Caroline Durré, is a Melbourne artist who works in painting, drawing and printmaking. She is a lecturer in the Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University, and is currently completing her PhD on the representation of deceptive and invisible spaces. Her website is <http://carolinedurre.com>

dai marciapiedi italiani (from Italian footpaths), prints and collages by Carmel Wallace, was exhibited at Gallery 101 in Melbourne from 31 October – 25 November 2006

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