

Paul Ferman

Shelter (2008)

The Immolation of the Followers of St Motorino (2009)

by Jonathan Turner

The ten panoramic photographs which make up Paul Ferman's Shelter series reveal a fractured sense of time and space. The initial imagery was completed during different train trips, in 2005 and 2007, from London to Paris and from France to Germany, during which the artist sat by the window with his camera and photographed road bridges from below as the trains hurtled to their destinations. Later in his Sydney studio, Ferman created new diptyches from these photographs, manipulating the colours, reversing the imagery, creating mirrored compositions from similar-looking railway bridges in different countries.

The bridge has long been used as a metaphor, but instead Ferman focuses on the disparity of usage, specifically the hidden spaces below bridges. This is the underbelly of contemporary engineering, looking at the negative spaces aligned to transport and commerce. These are non-spaces, used by people forced to the edges of society and at the margins of architecture. Ferman's is a social comment, in which nothing is presented as real, where the colours are exaggerated to signify a surreal vision of nature and unhinged space.

"The real idea is how our idea of space and real estate changes, from a time when an overhanging rock or a cave was seen as first-class accommodation at the early stages of man's development, to a time when similar structures in the urban landscape - the under sides of bridges - have become shelters for the homeless and the fringes of society, spaces used for semi-legitimate reasons, for drugs and prostitution" says Ferman. "The sheer scale of the bridges and the brutality of the shapes, the black concrete masses next to tiny trees, pylons, cables, metal stanchions and dark, threatening spaces, create an almost prison-like atmosphere."

Shelter is characterised by strong diagonals and parallel power-lines. The camera captures many spatial planes - flares on the glass, reflections of the lights inside the carriage, sunlight, skies and shadows blurred by speed. Some colours seem to be solarising and blowing out, with the pink and yellow clouds purposely referencing the paintings of Tintoretto, as a historic link to the Renaissance scenes of moral upheaval beneath turbulent skies.

"When traveling at 350 kilometres an hour, forms outside the windows are

elongated and distorted. The incredible sense of visual pace changes what is recognizable. It is similar to the way in which many people view the homeless - you don't see them even though they are there."

This exhibition, Ferman's second solo at the King Street Galleries, also presents three works from his recent series, *The Immolation of the Followers of St Motorino*, conceived in Rome. In these statuesque portraits, Ferman mixes the sacred with the profane, contrasting faith with fable. The works are inspired by the myth of the virginal nymph Daphne fleeing the lustful advances of Apollo. Out of pity, the gods turned her into a laurel tree at the last moment. Virtue is a woody prize. The remnants of what Ferman sees as a wholly implausible fate can be seen in his manipulated photographs.

The white marble statues guarding the bridge leading to the Roman fortress of the Castel Sant'Angelo have been morphed with the burnt remains of a group of torched Vespas he photographed in Piazza Farnese. Just as in mythology when Daphne was transformed into a tree, as represented by the famous early 17th Century sculpture by Bernini from the Borghese Collection, in Ferman's religious iconography, his mock saint is posed on a pedestal made from the burnt relics of his fervent followers. Their "charred bones" (in reality scorched brake coils, mudguards and gas-tanks) slowly merge with the draped clothes and feathers of the angels, soft forms represented in hard stone.

Each angel holds a piece of pivotal evidence directly related to the Crucifixion - a nail from the cross, the shroud of Jesus, the crown of thorns. In an ode to transformation, mythical beings, sacrificed believers and religious messengers meld into a single form. In this way, just as in his *Shelter* series, Ferman seamlessly blends several social hierarchies and forms of representation. His is a world simultaneously capturing the ancient and the contemporary, the angelic and the violent, the dichotomy of faith and myth.