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Ruth Cleland
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I'm writing a history of the world…

It is in her final days, whilst confined to a hospital bed, that Claudia Hampton, a popular historian in Penelope Lively's 1987 novel *Moon Tiger*, announces to a nurse: "I'm writing a history of the world… And in the process, my own."[1] Though the narrative, one equating her own story with that of human history, will be partial and eclectic, it will nevertheless range "from the mud to the stars, universal and particular, your story and mine." She strategises, preferring the "interesting heresy" of a kaleidoscopic view rather than a linear history. "Chronology irritates me. There is no chronology inside my head." Hampton commences with "the primordial soup," she ponders:

> Now since I have never been a conventional historian, never the expected archetypal chronicler, we'll set out to shock. Tell it from the point of view of the soup, maybe? Have one of those drifting floating feathery crustaceans narrate. Or an ammonite? Yes, an ammonite, I think. An ammonite with a sense of destiny. A spokesperson for the streaming Jurassic seas, to tell it how it was.

To Hampton, the prehistoric is just one shake of the kaleidoscope away from early fossil-hunting missions with her older brother Gordon on beach-side cliffs of blue-grey rock, an acquisitive and competitive search involving bashing at seams of Jurassic mud with a shiny new hammer. Casting her mind back, Hampton transports herself through geologic time, journeying along layers of rock, following the seams of the earth through epochs, eras and periods until she reaches the "enticing curls and ribbed whorls" of an ammonite. Tracing the spiralled form of an extinct marine mollusc with the fingers of her mind, geologic time periods become conflated with personal stages of life, memory is concretised into stratified layers of rock that can be smashed through with the bright hammer of recollection.

on the smell of refrigeration

Yesterday, I found myself staring absent-mindedly at the floor of the bathroom of my rented flat. I had never noticed before that it was covered with linoleum very similar to commercial flooring captured in the *Floor* paintings, prints and drawings by Ruth Cleland from 2018–2022. There is the background colour, in this case a greyish-brown and then patterning, a trick of depth and recession, repeated. It looks as though it has been embedded with small pebbles in white, grey, beige and brown, but of course it isn't, it's just a smooth, plasticky surface. It reminded me that the very first supermarket I went to with my mother had lino-covered counters with wooden frames at the check-outs rather than conveyor belts. I recall the sound that aluminium cans made as the checkout operators dragged them along the worn surface. There was the smell of refrigeration, bins of dried bananas and apricots, various-sized wedges of cheddar, oily in their plastic wraps. High up on the walls were massive, lurid photographs of sheaves of wheat and baskets of tomatoes and fruit. At the checkouts there were rows of large stainless steel shelves on wheels, carefully labelled with different suburbs, on which deliveries could be placed. I remember the odd sensation of sitting on the bottom row of one while waiting for my mother, ducking my head beneath the next shelf, the gridded steel pressing into the flesh of my thighs.

Cleland, like Lively's heroine, is in the process of creating a kind of material history, though she does so via fragments of built environments: a supermarket's synthetic floor or the reinforced concrete ceiling of its car park, complete with radiant fluorescent lighting and sprinkler heads as in *Ceiling, Floor, Grid* (2018). Indeed, my own first supermarket possessed a massive underground car park. I am still haunted by a re-occurring dream in which I run around its endless dark-grey floors, quickly passing massive concrete pillars, until I finally fall through a massive,

Notes

1. Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger* (London: Penguin Books, 1987).
2. Edward Lucie-Smith, *The Thames & Hudson Dictionary of Art Terms Second Edition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984 & 2003) 214.
3. Ilka and Andreas Ruby (eds.), *The Materials Book* (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2020) 322.
4. Simone Cinotto quoted by Reina Gattuso, July 15, 2019 https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/where-did-michelangelo-get-his-marble *Atlas Obscura* "The Tuscan Town Famous for Anarchists, Marble, and Lard" (Accessed Friday 17 September, 2021)
5. Lively, *Moon Tiger*, 9.
6. Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Places* (London: Penguin Books, 1974 & 2008), 50.
7. Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Places,* 50.
8. Ruth Cleland, email correspondence with the author, Friday 14 January, 2022.

unexplained and dark void before waking with a start. What I'm trying to say is that I find Cleland's meticulous renderings of isolated, specific details to have overwhelming affects. When I gaze at them, I am flooded with felt sensations, memories, attraction-repulsion and fascination. Perhaps it is the compulsion with which her artworks zoom in and focus upon minutiae that create such strong and paradoxical reactions for me, whether it be the comforting recollection of childhood or the nightmarish aspects of suburbia.

meat breathes marble

Returning to geological matters, what exactly is terrazzo? It is a mixture of marble chips and cement, used for flooring. It is laid *in situ,* ground smooth and then polished.[2] Basically terrazzo is made of waste, of bits and pieces. In the 1920s terrazzo floors were made from leftover rocks from quarries, they were a common, cheaper alternative to stone floors. In places like Europe and the United States they are an expensive flooring choice, however in countries with high-unemployment, terrazzo is a viable option that creates jobs.[3] When I think of terrazzo floors, my hips ache, I am brought back to the hours spent standing on such a surface whilst minding art galleries as an intern in a European art centre. It was forbidden to sit down, there was no-where to sit anyway, so we spent the long winter days mostly alone, pacing patterns upon terrazzo floors. That was the first time I really encountered environments where marble was endemic, I saw that it could be manipulated, tiled, butterflied, carved, used on the external elevations of churches.

What is the connection between marble and meat? In Carrara, where marble is quarried, workers make themselves *lardo di Colonnata*, the back fat of local pigs is cured in caskets of marble and seasoned with special herbs foraged for that purpose. Marble has veins and lardo does too, there is a resonance between meat and marble, a living connection, forged by the labour of quarrying, then imbued into lardo through the method of curing. "Lardo breathes marble."[4] Perhaps that is why the chips of marble in terrazzo remind me of the rounded shapes of gristle suspended in slices of salami. Marbled meat, small goods, charcuterie brings me back to the smell of the butchers stand at the market and the scent of refrigeration. Chips of stone remind me of the unforgiving asphalt we played on as children, when running too fast there was always the risk of tripping, falling, tearing stockings and skin, revealing a blooming red, glistening wound or sore from which the grit had to be carefully cleaned. Once when a particularly violent accident occurred in the playground I hear one witness gasp "I could see the meat of her knee."

Ceiling, floor, grid

Stone-chips, knee-bone, meat and marble. It is important to note that the surface Cleland paints and draws is in fact Terrazite, a thin surface made up of synthetic resin and stony aggregate, used on the floors of her local supermarket. The puncta of her terrazzo works is the joins of metal strips and grouting, off-white and marked grey, patched repairs in contrasting patterns, scuff-marks in black and blue. There is something transcendent about fluorescent lights in cool blue, yellow and pink reflected in the shiny waxed surface of the floor, as seen in the large-scale acrylic on linen work *Floor 6* (2022). I ask myself; how often do I look down and really examine the surface I am standing and living my life on? For more than a decade, I too frequented the very same supermarket Cleland based these works on. Her acrylic painted floors are varicoloured and complex, the terrazzo patterns are satisfying, even mesmerising. Cleland has devoted herself to meticulously capturing the visual complexity of the small, sharp, irregular shapes on the neutral-coloured background.

Ceiling, floor, grid. Silver, floor, grid. A slip of the tongue takes one from ceiling to silver, the titles are not as bald and banal as they first seem. In Cleland's triptychs her painted panels become tiles, ones that she playfully arranges alongside one another, contrasting ceiling/silver, floor and grid. Tiles are in fact grids, and it is grids that Cleland uses to transfer and enlarge her paintings and drawings square by square from photographs. In painting and re-presenting grids, viewers and beholders are privy to Cleland's meticulous practice, in a daring, self-reflexive way she displays the elements that make up the very construction of her work, pulling back the curtain, laying her process bare for all the world to see. The grid, the tile is firstly a framing device, a way to manage or edit reality, then there is the photograph, within which Cleland creates her composition. There is the painted panel, the paper that has been drawn upon, and all of these panels/grids/tiles are then tiled, displayed in the space of the gallery in another kind of grid.

Let me contemplate myself within my context.[5]

Terrazzo itself offers a mixed chronology, there is geologic time in the stone chips of marble, the sand in the cement and then industrial time when they are all jumbled together for an architectural purpose. The time of industrial design is also alluded to with the patented processes and synthetic substances that make up Terrazite and the site of the suburban supermarket. Just as Hampton commits the interesting heresy of conflating geologic and personal eras, many different temporalities are activated by Cleland's own personal time, the time she spends making art and the way she delays or freezes this in her artworks for all to see. The precise, photo-realist nature of her paintings, drawings and prints means that Cleland dedicates immense amounts of time and labour to each artwork, to ensure they are absolutely accurate. There is the artist's labour, that of the workers in the marble quarries, those who lay commercial flooring and the idea of terrazzo as a way to stimulate the economy and create jobs. Indeed, the sheer amount of effort and virtuosity Cleland confers onto her subject matter, essentially familiar yet generally overlooked bits of building, seems to give it a bewildering amount of importance. I have been quite indulgent in my own reading of these artworks, I can't help but be wildly associative, but now I wonder, are they really all about work and labour?

Apply yourself. Take your time.[6]

Recently Cleland has been closely reading about the importance of observation, as articulated by French writer Georges Perec. She sends through to me some phone-scans of his texts and I can see why they are compelling and generative for her art-making. Perec asks "Do you know how to see what's worthy of note? Is there anything that strikes you?" He entreats one to "Force yourself to see more flatly."[7] He goads one on: "Carry on / Until the scene becomes improbable… question the habitual." Following Perec's theories I can see that Cleland is responding to his idea of speaking of "common things," giving them a meaning and tongue so that they might speak of what is and what we are. Perec says we must question our teaspoons:

> What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us…

Cleland reflects that "Perec believed we could only truly understand our place in the world by engaging with or questioning the everyday – details that have become invisible to us as we go about our daily routines."[8] There is a strong connection here between Perec's entreaty to meticulously probe one's surroundings and Hampton's desire: "Let me contemplate myself within my context: everything and nothing." In her repeated looking, framing, photographing, transposing, painting, drawing and printing details from how she spends her time – whether it be gazing through the blinds of her window, walking around her New Windsor neighbourhood, parking her car or shopping in her local supermarket – Cleland is in fact creating a brief history of the world, and in the process, her own.