

Slow glass fast glass past glass future

Bob Shaw's 1966 science fiction short story, 'Light of Other Days', tells of a material known as 'slow glass'—a glass that takes light a very long time, sometimes years, to penetrate. In the story, consumers buy slow glass that has been pre-recorded, so to speak, with years' worth of pleasing vistas: beautiful landscapes or idyllic scenery. They plant this slow glass in their depressing households as a decoy, or a diversion. A look-away.

A new piece was always jet black because nothing had yet come through, but one could stand the glass beside, say, a woodland lake until the scene emerged, perhaps a year later. If the glass was then removed and installed in a dismal city flat, the flat would—for that year—appear to overlook the woodland lake. During the year it wouldn't be merely a very realistic but still picture—the water would ripple in sunlight, silent animals would come to drink, birds would cross the sky, night would follow day, season would follow season. Until one day, a year later, the beauty held in the subatomic pipelines would be exhausted and the familiar gray cityscape would reappear.

In the story, the narrator, who is trying to patch things up with his pregnant wife named Selina (a derivation of the ancient Greek meaning moon, light or to shine), pulls over to a roadside stall selling panes of slow glass. Whilst chatting with the proprietor, one Mr Hagan, they catch glimpse of his wife and a small boy inside his house. The visiting couple interprets the duo as blind, or at least utterly ignorant, for they do not respond to their calls or waves, and the woman seems to be dressed in clothes that are distinctly out of fashion. By the story's end, the narrator and Selina realise that slow glass works both ways: recording light entering *and* exiting a house. Hagan's wife and child have been dead for years.

"It wasn't my fault," he said steadily. "A hit-and-run driver got them both, down on the Oban road six years ago. My boy was only seven when it happened. I'm entitled to keep something."

Throughout the story, ownership and imagery are conceived as interchangeable. The thing, and the image of the thing.

Apart from its stupendous novelty value, the commercial success of slow glass was founded on the fact that having a Scenedow [*as opposed to a window*] was the exact emotional equivalent of owning land.

Image as property as reality.

In addition to travelling through space, or looking onto another place—one prettier, less oppressive than here—people in the story buy slow glass because it helps them travel through time. With slow glass, they can look out their window onto the past—affording the owner a sense of control, of a knowing what will come, and what has already gone. However, slow glass is tensioned by the expectation of the moment when the past stops being past, or elsewhere else stops being elsewhere, and opens onto something more depressingly reminiscent of the here and now. That 'familiar gray cityscape'.

Virginia Overell's *An end to all this water* performs a related maneuver to Shaw's slow glass. *An end to all this water* pivots on the act of looking at, or looking out of

windows. It comprises a low wall of water-filled plastic bladders piled up like wartime sandbags in front of West Space's first-floor windows, which usually look out onto the rear of Bourke Street. These bladders are separated from the viewer: first by wire fencing, and then by a sheet of cloudy builder's plastic, which together form a variegated lens onto the outside world. Entreating but really obstructing our vision.

Overell's windows are tensioned both vertically and laterally. The lowest-lying bladders in this wall are subject to great gravitational (or vertical) pressure, and risk bursting, like a dam. Meanwhile, looking out the window conjures the sense of an encroaching flood, of lateral pressure. Engulfment. This lateral pressure is informed by anxieties around global warming, of the polar ice caps melting, and the sea-line rising.

Overell has broached this perspective in past works. For the exhibition *held in a half globe, as if in cupped hands* curated by Kim Brockett at Vaerslet in Copenhagen in 2015, she created a site-specific work in which salt crystallised on the gallery's internal window panes—snowflakes that would not to melt, diluvial remnants, here rendered vertically as opposed with earlier salt- and indigo-washed floor works (like *The Lake* of 2014). Earlier floor works connoted a flooded bath; the window works something more severe, bigger, potentially taller than us. Again, more recently in *The Depth of the Problem*, her solo show at Punk Cafe earlier in 2016, Overell drew a parallel between the sea and the act of looking through windows. Here she projected YouTube video footage of people scanning the sea somewhat hopelessly, pointlessly looking for aircraft debris—any sign of the missing Malaysia Airways flight MH370, which seemingly all but vanished in March 2014. At Punk Cafe, the projection wall was separated from the viewer by three Perspex windows, each covered with loose grids of eBay photographs listed by user, happydadthree: exquisitely photographed vintage aircraft parts, like 'oxygen recharge valves', antenna, and 'reverse course datum boxes'. Here, the ocean was twice lost to the viewer: as glitching YouTube footage; as photographs of objects signifying the loss of the flight into the ocean. Mystery.

Overell's windows are not made of slow glass, filtering light from the distant past gradually into the present, but fast glass, conjuring an accelerated vision of the future. Earlier works, like *The Aloes Throw Indigo Shadows* of 2013 or *Explaining Roads* in 2013, have imagined this moment—when the ocean finally and ultimately and totally absorbs the land and all its peoples, cultures, materials. Spits it out again as crustaceous, barnacled artefact. A Solaris. The ironically-named ocean planet. Content merely to fuck with the minds of humans that enter its orbit. As if to say: 'The only thing you'll ever know about me is the depth of your *own* trauma, your *own* neuroses. *You*.' Like so much of Stanislaw Lem's science fiction, which pivots on the ultimate unknowable, incommunicable difference of humankind and the extra-terrestrial, Overell's work articulates this schism, this moment of breakdown, as video footage of the ocean disaggregates into pathetic pixels, and watery bladders cloud our vision.