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Passages, Shafts and Tunnels

Fiona Crisp, Subterranea
Baltic Gateshead

What do the Catacombs of Rome, a military hospital on Guernsey, and the Killhope lead mine in County Durham have in common? The title of Fiona Crisp's exhibition suggests the answer: they are all subterranean spaces. But they are also tourist attractions, open to paying visitors as testaments to various kinds of underground human activity. It is these three heterogeneous sites that form the subject of Fiona Crisp's large-scale photographic prints.

Crisp initially trained as a sculptor, and in an interview printed in the informative leaflet accompanying the exhibition, she stresses the 'sculptural dynamics of mass and weight' emerging from the dialogue between photograph and gallery space. And yet the way in which the images are displayed, hanging in a large and airy gallery space and each surrounded by large expanses of whitewashed wall, actually emphasises the two-dimensional flatness of the images, an impression reinforced by the pervasive use of deep focus, which does not differentiate between foreground and background. At the same time, the very structure of Crisp's underground spaces, which tend to be tunnel-like, invite a formal aesthetic that plays up the conventions of monocular perspective, providing as they do plentiful parallel lines receding towards ready-made vanishing points. If there is a sculptural dynamic at play here, then, it is in the intensified paradox between the two-dimensionality of the artefact and the illusion of three-dimensional space produced by the monocular perspective of photographic optics.

Much of Crisp's work over the past decade has been concerned with perspective. The series *Abteilung* (German for 'department' or 'section' and referring to the military hospital on Guernsey) is a particularly striking example of this. 'Series' is a decidedly apt

term for this group of images, since they are clearly following serial principles: the same symmetrical composition recurs. Looking down tunnels, the floors, sides and ceilings converge on arched end walls or simply on an arch-shaped black void as the tunnel changes direction. Light is provided by isolated bulbs or fluorescent tubes, and is sometimes reflected in surface water on the tunnel floor – a symptom of the persistent battle with ground water that tunnelling entails. The conspicuous formal similarities between the images also draw attention to their differences. These are primarily differences of surface (brick, raw concrete, painted concrete), the textures of which become part of the play of light and shadow which, in images such as *Abteilung Nr/W*, is reminiscent of Expressionist film sets. The *Abteilung* photographs (like all the other images in the exhibition) are devoid of the human form, eerily empty.

In the Killhope mine series images of manmade shafts, such as *Wheelhouse to Exit*, contrast with images like that entitled *Deep Adit*. While the former bear traces of human intervention, with pipes, cables and other services running along walls and planks of wood underfoot, the latter offer glimpses of narrow, barely passable passages that resemble fissures rather than mineshafts. The images are dominated by rich oranges and browns typical of lead pollution, and in the *Adit* photographs, the strange exposed surfaces of plumbiferous rock resulting from the mining seem to ooze dampness, while weird stalicitic forms hang from the ceilings.

Both the *Killhope* and *Abteilung* series are genuinely fascinating images, not least because of the refusal to supply contextual information. The absence of narrative offers scope for endless imaginings concerning the people whose labour has left its obvious traces in these subterranean spaces, and the lives that were played out within them. But there is also no spatial contextualisation. So while the images may, as Crisp says, bear witness to 'the ontological fact of the space', we are not offered any information that would allow

us to construct a mental map and thereby understand the position of each image as part of a much larger spatial construct. This produces a sense of vertigo: there might be endless miles of corridors and tunnels, adits and shafts, a vast maze from which there is no escape.

Fortunately, though, there are some images that do, after all, offer the promise of escape. The most intriguing image of all is *Exit #3* from the *Killhope* series. Viewed from a distance, it looks like the moon rising over a breeze-rippled sea. On closer inspection, it turns out to be a perfectly round exit, with wooden doors framing an open, quasi-rectangular section. Light from this open section streams across a rough (wooden?) floor and also illuminates a thin cable running along the right-hand tunnel wall. It is a mysterious and evocative image, and one that shows that beauty can be found even in a seventeenth-century lead mine.

By contrast, the *Catacomb* series is a disappointment. The richness of content in the *Killhope* and *Abteilung* series is not merely interesting, but also testament to exceptional technique at the moment of both exposure and printing. The *Catacomb* images may be as accomplished in their way, but they were taken with a pinhole camera in order, Crisp said, to avoid cliché. The blurred, grainy results feel like rather heavy-handed attempts to appear uncanny or mystical, and seem rather banal in the company of the other series, which are highly impressive, memorable, and well worth viewing.

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