

Peter Bobby: *High-rise*

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Tramshed

Throughout Diffusion Festival there's a sense of consciousness about time, with artists such as Elin Hoyland and Alicia Bruce exploring traditions and customs as they fade and change. *High Rise* takes a different approach, exploring a relatively new trend in architecture and leading us to question how modernity can feel just as unexpected, distant and even uncomfortable as the outdated and old-fashioned.

The buildings depicted here are someone's idea of cutting edge and represent a certain value of contemporaneity. But the necessity for comfort softens them, lessens the extent that they can really make themselves distinctive. There's a sense of placelessness, made most explicit in an image which shows an explosion on a news channel within a high rise building, in sharp contrast to the serenity of the city outside. Questions are raised about how we use media to connect with, or shut ourselves off from our surroundings, especially when that media is so densely layered. Does *High Rise* direct our attention towards an unpicking of these ideas of location, encouraging us to extract different ideas of place from images filled with self-effacing signifiers; or do we read these buildings as a plane of their own, a new kind of space?

Bobby's works are sympathetic to that desire for comfort and familiarity. The viewer is put in the position of traveller or tourist and surveying the exhibition feels not unlike browsing through a catalogue. One image in particular shows a toilet at the top of one of these developments, surrounded by glass. It's one way of confronting the notions of fantasy and luxury that these buildings perhaps endorse, combining aspiration and profanity with an Alan-Partridge-esque sense of humour.

The cities surrounding each building have an enormous presence in each image and while the sense of isolation, distance and urban disaffection is immediate, longer examination of the photographs encourages a creeping sense of vertigo. Extending a city upwards is very different from extending it outwards and the two are contrasted here with a keen eye towards the connotations of class and wealth that accompany such ambitions.

The secular cleanliness of these buildings omits the spiritual baggage often associated with ideas of ascension and rising: angels, church spires that reach towards heaven, the tower of Babel. Some kind of spirituality is restored (or perhaps remembered) in the photographs of the same buildings taken at night from outdoors. They're lit like constellations or halos imitating the shapes of buildings. When *High Rise* doesn't invite us in, it locks us out and leaves us to try and comprehend our own constructions. The sky is no longer a place inhabited by far away spirits and gods, we've successfully colonised it but under conditions that still attract attention and awe.

At the centre of the exhibition is the video work *Curtain*, which shows a curtain drawing across a window in one of these buildings, closing it off from the city outside. It's a motion representative of photography itself, slow enough and on a sufficiently large scale that we're led to consider the mechanical process of taking a picture, the autonomous work of a camera. *Curtain* seems to respond to the challenges of scale in photography, and may leave us asking if our twenty-first century self-consciousness about the size of the world really benefits our ability to see it.

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