

Holly Davey: *Nothing is what it is because everything is what it isn't.*

National Museum Cardiff

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Nothing is what it is because everything is what it isn't is Holly Davey's reflection on the human perceptibility of everyday spaces. A large photographic collage of distorted imagery of the stairwell leading up to the landing space in the National Museum Cardiff, placed in the landing space itself, Davey's work disorients viewers and challenges them to think differently about the types of spaces they see or occupy regularly.

Ascending to the second half of the contemporary art exhibition, the solid stairwell reforms into elusive, intangible suggestions of stairs in the form of Davey's large-scale warped photographs, flowing around the space in front of you. The piece immediately invokes thoughts of M.C. Escher's work, with the impossible physics of refracted stairways flowing in multiple directions.

It is easy to find one's eyes tracing the journey up the two-dimensional, imagined stairs, walking straight before automatically clinging to the real architecture and turning as you reach the top, to avoid walking into the wall. In a kind of demonstration of the power or perhaps fragility of perception it creates a disorienting divorce between perceived and physical environments, achieved by an obliquely sensual aesthetic.

The cryptic title is an obvious reference to *Alice in Wonderland*, and straightaway the connection is clear. Mountainous, imposing imagery of warped stairways suggest an idea of change or transition, and the luring yet implausible cognition to continue climbing them straight up the wall, in some new, inaccessible dimension (much like Escher's stairs), reflects tumbling down the proverbial rabbit-hole.

Arriving in the landing space, the imagery continues over the adjacent wall surrounding you, framing the entrance to the next area of the museum, before flowing ominously back down the opposite wall and stairwell in a very fluid, pleasing symmetry. One's eyes scramble over the cluttered, disjointed imagery, searching for definition and solidity. The subtle, pure white structures of the venue entwine with the jagged, 2-D shapes and repeating patterns of the work in a juxtaposition of real walls and architecture, with perceivable or potential, but imagined areas. *Alice in Wonderland's* ambitious theme of dreams or imagination becoming reality meanders comfortably in Davey's work.

Holly Davey is a leading Welsh contemporary artist and uses performance and photography predominantly to explore our relationship with space, architecture and memory. It is clear to see these themes present in this piece. Davey interrogates the conventional function and experience of the stairwell, and encourages a greater appreciation or comprehension of the common and uncommon spatial environments around us. It is perhaps important to reflect on Davey's work through what you recollect of it whilst no longer in its presence, as one's understanding of it will be uniquely different.

The piece resides neatly in between the first and second floors of the contemporary art exhibition of the museum and provides an appropriate and effective transition through the distinctly themed artworks. On the lower floor, the exhibition is comprised of various paintings of small, seemingly sentimental objects or views, such as Paul Cezanne's apples. The works invoke a feeling of intimacy and personal value with these objects. Vibrant, warmly coloured or homely artworks, such as Ken Elias' friendly, childlike painting of the front of a house and David Hockney's surreal living room interior adorn the next room.

These works focus on living spaces and social, urban environments. Pertinently following this we are presented with Davey's stairway, a common structure of these settings, leading us up in an appropriate transition to the next area. More vibrant, expressionistic paintings are exhibited here, this time characterised by visually disorientating linear or geometric shapes, in a similar vein to Davey's work. Moving on through more abstract paintings we arrive at the final piece of the exhibition, Tim Davies' Drift. A film triptych inspired by the artist's experiences in Venice. The show is beautifully choreographed encapsulating the notion of personal, subjective experience, and Davey's wonderfully perplexing piece sits centrally in the flow of this diverse theme. It is a fascinating and compelling show, intriguing and enlightening.

Brady Knight