

## Nogah Engler: Ashes on the Tuileries Gardens

In the opening pages of *The Rings of Saturn*, WG Sebald recalls his late university colleague Janine's passion for Gustav Flaubert, who she felt epitomised all that is great about the nineteenth-century French novel, with its predilection for obscure detail over intellectual hubris. As regards detail, Flaubert was, according to Janine, obsessed with sand and its capacity to conquer everything. He was crippled by phobias about his writing and the world around him, the effect of which he likened to sinking into sand. Sebald quotes Janine: '...vast dust clouds drifted through Flaubert's dreams by day and by night, raised over the arid plains of the African continent and moving north across the Mediterranean and the Iberian peninsula till sooner or later they settled like ash from a fire on the Tuileries gardens, a suburb of Rouen or a country town in Normandy, penetrating into the tiniest crevices.'<sup>1</sup>

Flaubert's poetic vision of a grain of sand, travelling across continents to fall by beautiful coincidence on the elegantly manicured Tuileries gardens in Paris, resonates strongly with Nogah Engler. In that vision, Flaubert pits the natural against the manmade, chance versus order. The analogy between sand and ash from a fire adds a morbid note: the idea of burned matter surreptitiously invading our everyday surroundings, of the dead mixing with the living. Indeed, Flaubert's quote is given greater poignancy when we remember that, between Sebald writing notes for his book while recuperating in hospital (from some unspecified condition that he puts down, in part, to 'the paralysing horror ... when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place'<sup>2</sup>) and his assembling them a year later, Janine had died – and this not long after her close friend's (another university colleague) sudden death.<sup>3</sup> It is as if a shift has occurred during these recollections, and Flaubert's fears have come to represent Sebald's.

As with Flaubert, Engler's paintings and drawings draw power from the tension between their surface beauty and an underlying sense of ominous disquiet. If she continues to use the forest as a motif in her recent paintings, its fairy-tale seductiveness is always undermined. Trees are barren, with dark, mostly branchless trunks that show possible signs of having been scorched. Engler's close cropping of her horizons that leaves very little sky visible – no guiding sun or moon – contributes to a feeling of being trapped in the scenes. I am reminded of the landscape in Cormac McCarthy's apocalyptic novel *The Road*, in which nature takes on the allegorical qualities of despair and brutality: trees are described as 'limbless' and, in an extreme version of Flaubert's dust clouds, ash has covered the entire country. 'Barren, silent, godless'<sup>4</sup> is how the boy describes the scene before him in the opening sequence.

Engler exploits the classic technique of chiaroscuro to juxtapose areas of dark, impenetrable shadow and swathes of eerie, bleached white that suggests, in *Emergents* most strikingly, that we are looking at the aftermath of some mysterious, destructive force (A fire? A bomb? An act of God?). Yet the stark effect is always

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<sup>1</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, Vintage, London, 2002, p. 8

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 3

<sup>3</sup> In fact, Sebald was also to die unexpectedly, in a car accident in 2001; this English translation was published posthumously the following year.

<sup>4</sup> Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, Picador, London, 2007, p. 2

softened by the addition of warm flesh tones and muted pastel shades in grey-blue and green. As well as the forests, Engler's new paintings contain a number of more abstract scenes, which, for the purposes of this essay, I'll call 'interiors', although their lack of explicit, real-life reference points implies that these are allegories – interiors as metaphors for psychic space. In some of the interiors, such as *Belongings 4* and *The corner* (all works 2012), the pink skin-tones dominate as if channelling the sensuous Rococo excesses of, say, Boucher. Yet there are no lusty nudes here, no people, only the remnants of civilisation.

Beauty, for Engler, has lost its innocence. It is no longer possible to re-create the idealised forms of beauty that have dominated Western art history. Instead, she collages passages of beautiful landscape from the heydays of the Renaissance and Romantic eras, which she borrows from the masters of the genre – Lucas Cranach, Bruegel the Elder, Leonardo Da Vinci, Caspar David Friedrich – as if beauty can only be quoted rather than directly represented. Yet Engler is compelled to sully even these quotations: by patches of over-painting or by adding her own passages of tangled abstraction into which figurative elements collapse or become fragmented into a Cubist kaleidoscope of entropic matter.

There are few signs of life in Engler's work, other than the occasional glimpse of a deer or bat, or an unexpected burst of new vegetation poking through the forest soil in an otherwise inhospitable landscape. Instead, we find traces of ruins, shells of buildings just glimpsed among the trees (*Emergents* and *Hole in the fence*) or, in the case of the interiors, empty rooms or shelters where the barrier between inside and outside has collapsed – trees grow among the stacks of objects in *Belongings 2* and *Belongings 3*; one of the walls is missing in *Belongings 4*, as if to suggest an open stage-set.

If the animals and new shoots symbolise the cyclical forces of nature, the ruins likewise have their own cyclical logic: they remind us that all human activity will eventually fall into ruin, and that all ruining will be followed by re-building or new growth. As Brian Dillon points out in his 'Short History of Decay', the introduction to his edited volume of essays on ruins: 'The ruin, despite its state of decay, somehow outlives us.'<sup>5</sup> What is significant about our recent times is the speed at which ruins are created compared to the centuries it took for classical ruins to reach the aesthetic state that came to be so appreciated in Western art. Two world wars accompanied by technological advances in military equipment, together with low-cost, flimsy architecture have created the sensation of an accelerated mode of decay. 'We live now, though we might say that we have always lived, in a time of ruination,' writes Dillon.'<sup>6</sup>

Rebecca Solnit, included in Dillon's volume, makes the connection between ruins and memory: 'Memory is always incomplete, always imperfect, always falling into ruin; but the ruins themselves, like other traces, are treasures ... our guide to situating

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<sup>5</sup> Brian Dillon, 'Introduction: A Short History of Decay', in Brian Dillon (ed.), *Ruins*, Documents of Contemporary Art, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, London, p. 11

<sup>6</sup> op cit, p. 10

ourselves in the landscape of time.’<sup>7</sup> She cautions against attempting to erase those ruins (as she claims America does), which would be to ‘erase the visual public triggers of memory; a city without ruins ... is like a mind without memories’.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in Engler’s paintings, ruins are not memorialised or torn down but left to rot. They become skeletal, ghostly, but are never totally absorbed by the surrounding nature. Like memories, they never disappear but continue to haunt even as they grow less tangible.

Returning to Sebald, Engler is drawn to his skill at mapping the complex web of individual and collective memories, at recording how the trauma of historical events (particularly those of twentieth-century Europe) have left their marks on all our lives, whether directly or indirectly. As we saw earlier, it is extremely tricky to paraphrase Sebald: as soon as you try to explain a passage of his writing, you realise how far you need to re-wind in order to make sense of it. In his books, voices and time-frames shift constantly and become entangled in a cumulative knot of coincidences, memories and histories; everything is connected, everything has consequence. The title, *The Rings of Saturn*, is typically Sebaldian: it relates to the fact that the frozen crystals and meteorite particles that make up the planet’s rings are actually ‘fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect’.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, Engler’s paintings are difficult to fully apprehend at one glance: in some, the large scale is such that the edges fall into our blind-spot; in others, paths in the landscape (as with *Passing through*) seem to lead us in different directions, to lose us in the forest. There is no fixed focal point; our viewpoint is continuously fragmented as in a dream or fractured memory. Moreover, it takes a while for all the elements (Flaubert’s obscure details) – a bat, a building, a suggestion of a figure bending down but which may just be a piece of old cloth – to reveal themselves in among the different strata of the painting. Could we be looking at different topographical layers, or different moments in time represented simultaneously? In the interiors, framed images within the work could be variously interpreted as paintings, placards, mirrors, panes of glass or portals into another time or place. Sometimes, there are recognisable glimpses of quotes from Western art history – a section of a Roman frieze and a Poussin painting in *Belongings 4* – but mostly there are only suggestions of figures or landscapes in the same way that she offers suggestions of previous events or traumas. As Engler says, her intuitive approach, continual layering and fragmentation produce suggestions of definitions.

In Sebald, memories are reported not just first-hand by the author or second-hand by his acquaintances, but third- or even fourth-hand as these acquaintances recount other people’s stories. In this way, memories are kept alive but mutate and become tainted with others’ agendas as they become increasingly disengaged from the original source. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi knew only too well the dangers of the mutant nature of memory when he wrote in *The Drowned and the Saved*, his last book: ‘The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become

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<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Solnit, ‘The Ruins of Memory’, extracts from *Storming the Gates of Paradise*, 2007, in Dillon, p. 151

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> quote from Brockhaus Encyclopaedia, opening page of *The Rings of Saturn*

erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even increase by incorporating extraneous features.<sup>10</sup>

In Sebald, all paths eventually return to thoughts and memories of exile and the Second World War, whether walking along the east coast of England in *The Rings of Saturn*, or meeting fellow exiles in *The Emigrants*, or, like the protagonist in his last fictional book, *Austerlitz*, following a trail of photographs for clues to his family's past. Like Sebald, Engler is compelled to revisit her family's tragic history during the war, the trauma coalescing around one particular site that recurs in many of her works; either literally as the dense, brooding forest or abstracted into the psychologically charged interior scenes.

The forest echoes the landscape around the village of Kosov in what is now Ukrainian Galicia, where her father, grandfather and uncle hid for two years and eventually escaped the Nazi occupation of the area during which thousands of Jews were murdered, including her grandmother. Engler eventually went to track down her family's hiding place in 2005, relying only on word-of-mouth recollections. Having built up the place in her imagination through a lifetime of being told about it, she was surprised by the reality she found: it was visually less dramatic (the mountain was not as dominant as she imagined), and life seemed to go on there as if nothing had taken place only one generation ago. How could people, so apparently hospitable, have been party to such barbarism? That duality of human nature, the propensity for man's inhumanity to man (a constant preoccupation of Levi's, too), finds its visual equivalent in the dichotomies present in all Engler's paintings: beautiful/bleak, light/dark, nature/manmade, interior/exterior.

Engler's vision of Kosov is not only mediated through other people's memories, her own imagination and later experience, but also through art history and photography. With hardly any family photographs of the area, Engler's imagination had been free to fill the visual void. But the fact that she took 600 photographs during her visit suggests that it was somehow impossible – too late – to compensate visually for the earlier void. It is tempting to see those areas of light and dark in her work as the painterly equivalents of photographic over-exposure or under-exposure – the failure of photography to adequately capture reality or memory.

Engler works through the problem of memory through the difficulty of its visual representation, both on the level of an individual trying to find an image or visual locus for a traumatic family event, and, on a wider, philosophical level, as a means of sharing experiences collectively and empathetically. Her paintings often contain traces of an underlying geometric or grid structure that provides an illusion of order. In the landscapes, a grid is created through the deployment of linear, leafless trees that act as symbolic markers of depth and space. In the interiors, order is created through the arrangement of existing infrastructure and objects – like corners, rugs or panes of glass – or the introduction of a geometric shape like the semi-circle that bisects *Belongings I* and neatly contains all the elements below it (an idea borrowed from one of Rembrandt's last self-portraits, *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, 1665-9). These grids suggest the process of mapping: not just geographical space or the changing of scale, but – as Sebald tries to do with words – the process of translating memory into

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<sup>10</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Abacus, London, 1989, p. 11

another, more fixed, concrete form. Engler talks of her grids as relating to the archaeology of the painting, as if the painting were an area marked out for a dig, each square waiting to be combed, its contents exhumed. Areas of densely worked surface invite the viewer to imagine what lies beneath; the swirl of mysterious matter that dominates the foregrounds of *The corner* and *Emergents* would seem to imply that the process of excavation had already begun, that a layer had been peeled back and we were faced with its as-yet unidentified contents.

In *Hidden ground*, a large pit appears in the middle of a clearing, at the very centre of the painting. Could it be the foundations of a new building or might it instead refer to the hiding place of Engler's relatives? The ambiguity points to a metaphorical reading: the black hole of memory and forgetting, a pit of shame, a godless abyss or existential void. It takes a while to notice the presence of a second pit further away – a spectral double or mirage. These voids are everywhere, unavoidable, threatening to swallow us, our memories, our images. Philosophers from Heidegger to Derrida use the ancient Greek word 'khôra' to describe this type of in-between, womb-like space that is able to receive all but paradoxically defies meaning.

In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida proposes the idea of the ruin as self-portrait. For him, the act of trying to capture one's own image is always already an act of memory; an 'impossible self-portrait whose signatory sees himself disappearing before his own eyes the more he desperately tries to re-capture himself in it'.<sup>11</sup> For Engler, memory defines us. Perhaps it is not coincidental that she chose to borrow a semi-circle from Rembrandt's self-portrait as an artist approaching old age and facing his own mortality. Although Engler never explicitly portrays the human form, her work is always an attempt to capture the bitter contradictions of being human and the final, impossible task of depicting memory.

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Memoirs of the Blind', extract from 'Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins', 1993, in Dillon, p. 43