

Thermal Landscapes

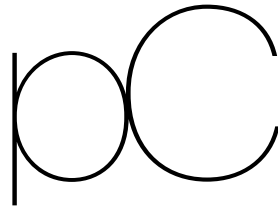
Gina Buenfeld-Murley

In the vast collective effort that brings architectural megaliths into existence, the aspirations of societies are given form. Prevailing through time, these buildings will populate the urban skyline for generations to come, carrying the values of an epoch into the future. The medieval churches that still populate London's urban landscape speak to a pre-enlightenment consciousness that embraced mimicry as a form of worship; in their ornamentation and glass windows the shapes of nature were mirrored. So, what of this era, of environmental devastation, economic inequality, and the large-scale movement of people out of continents that will soon be inhabitable?

The socio-political issues that characterise the artist Cui Jie's earlier bodies of work, concerned with histories encoded in public sculpture and architecture, give way in *Thermal Landscapes*, her most recent series, to an environmental politics – specifically, the relationship of human civilisation to nature, and the looming global catastrophe of rising temperatures. This bold new group of paintings draws inspiration from the shimmering surfaces of iconic buildings located in regions of the world that are warming up to temperatures that breach the threshold of human habitability. Characterised by highly reflective, tinted glass and steel facades, these architectural superstructures, which epitomise the contemporary concern with spectacle, rely on materials that are themselves exposed to temperature extremes in their production – at significant carbon cost. On the outside, they mirror the environment around and about in an act of mimicry or assimilation. Inside, microclimates optimal for human life are cultivated with environmental controls, air-conditioning and artificial light, which in turn contribute to the chain of global warming. They are the technologically advanced architectural descendants of the Victorian greenhouse – perhaps the first industrially manufactured microclimate. Rather than harness the ebbs and flows of the environment, these buildings stand defiantly as thresholds, or containers of protection, between us and nature, ultimately entrenching a fundamental, and artificial, separation. The Industrial Revolution accelerated this alienation, but the direction of travel can be traced back through the Judeo-Christian tradition to the elevation of man, made in God's image, above the other creatures of the Earth. This is the foundation of modern-day anthropocentrism – humanity separated from, and superior to, the non-human world, and a permissive attitude towards its profligate use. But our hubris now faces a reckoning – the values that once shaped civilisations are now causing their demise.

In her composite images, Cui draws topographic relationships between architecture and the organic forms of the natural world. In two paintings a pair of giraffes – one adult, one juvenile – appear, figured in a pose of care and nurturance, brought into a formal dialogue with the modular construction of the architectural facades that appear behind. The iconic markings on the animals' skin have evolved as an adaptation to environmental heat, optimising their bodies with a pattern of thermal windows that directs blood to the periphery – demonstrating an intelligence in nature that rivals the technologies deployed in the buildings framed in the background. Like air pockets inside termite mounds, and the irrigation of hives by water-carrying bees, our feats of engineering are governed by the same fundamental principles of nature.

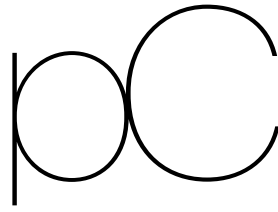
Elsewhere, other animals – kissing geese and a deer – as well as a flamelike motif symbolising the element of fire, are extrapolated from nature in exaggerated, sinuous forms. Foregrounded in Cui's compo



sitions, these figures derive from domestic ceramic sculptures popularised in China after the ‘opening up’ of the 1970s and 80s. Looming large, their scale distorted by the figure-ground dynamic, and imbued with a special aura, they are enlivened by a kind of animism that seems to challenge the assumptions that have prevailed in the West since the scientific and industrial revolutions: that nature is inanimate or purely mechanistic. Extracted from the banality of their domestic or market contexts, in the space of the painting these ubiquitous craft objects are elevated as effigies or objects of reverence. They carry a kind of melancholy, signifying an appreciation of nature mediated through mass production and the consumer market – the inescapable forces driving capitalist societies. Created with the earthly substance of clay fired at extreme heat, the ceramic objects are characterised by a distinctive cracked surface. Once considered a mistake in the glazing process, it has since become a distinguishing, celebrated feature. Mistake is a natural part of nature’s expression – evolution is driven by errors in the reproduction of the gene expression of DNA. The idea of a faultless, immortal structure is unnatural, deathly. Like the aesthetic principle of wabi-sabi, these ceramics recognise beauty in the natural flaws of their making.

Begun during the pandemic, *Thermal Landscapes* was conceived against a crisis that gripped the entire planet as one unified, yet differentiated, organism or habitat, making plain the intrinsic entanglement of life. Caused by the encroachment of urban life on nature, a tiny micro-organism crossed the species barrier and forced a transformation in existing economic and geopolitical behavioural norms. The global climate system is also forcing an awakening to our dependence on the wellbeing of the natural world as the foundation for all life. While the climate crisis is a global issue, it will be felt unequally – where the wealth of industrialised nations mitigates the environmental cost with air conditioning and sea defences, those living in poorer nations – generally in the regions where temperatures increases will be the most life threatening – will have few options other than migration. Like the cracks that open up in a scorched earth or desiccated ground, or the heat-fired glaze surfaces of ceramics that appear in Cui’s paintings, so too do great fissures between the winners and losers, between the privileged regions of the world and the poorest.

Cui’s paintings sit at the intersection of environmental concerns and the motives of capital and empire, revealing cycles of movement, exchange and transformation on multiple registers. Just as meteorological systems cycle globally, so do migrations of people, the transfer of information and data through the internet, and the movement of capital and commodities through global trade. In *Thermal Landscapes*, buildings from oil-rich nations Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Qatar feature – all major players in the economic systems of exchange that map over the causes of global warming. Many of the artist’s architectural subjects are financial or trade institutions, including the HQ of the Bank of Central African States in Yaounde and the Central Bank of West African States in Abidjan and Dakar – buildings that dominate the city skylines of these African countries. Established in the 1960s and 70s, these metropolises are centres of power, symbolising the extraction of wealth in natural ‘resources’ from these regions to be cycled into markets of mass consumerism in developed countries (including China – a major player implicated in extractive industries in Africa, dominating for example, the mining of cobalt – essential to the production of electric cars – in the Congo). The ceramic objects that feature in Cui’s works continue a history of Chinese export porcelain – made almost exclusively for European markets – that stretches back to the sixteenth century. They contributed to a prosperous era of global export and trade following China’s economic reform of the late twentieth century, often known as the country’s ‘opening-up’, becoming part of China’s export to the world after years of being hermetically sealed.



Cui's paintings, permeated by the language of science fiction, project into a climate-changed future. Biomorphing figures loom like spectres from a time-past, holographic, miasmatic – seemingly real but just out of reach. They read as an augury of a post-apocalyptic landscape where a nostalgia for biodiversity and a world populated by non-human beings – those whose habitats will be decimated by climate change – is invoked. A melancholia situates them as immaterial memories in a future in which they no longer exist. The eccentric forms, uncanny representations of familiar animals seem to belong to the realm of science fiction, or perhaps climate-fiction. The paintings conjure the shimmering landscapes of the 2018 film *Annihilation*, or Tarkovsky's Zone in *Stalker* (1979) – strange, post-apocalyptic territories where the imprint of the human is felt under a spectre of something sinister and far more powerful. Cui's characters are sublime, the force of their scale overwhelming, towering as large as the buildings, a reminder that nature is fearsome and deserving of awe and reverence.

Lines of black and white alternate through the substructure of the paintings – a binary language of 1s and 0s. Delicate patterns trace networks in and amongst the elements of the composition as an asemic form of language – at times straight, parallel, rational; at others sinuous, organic, disordered, as if to demonstrate that the relationship between nature and civilisation is complicated, symbiotic. Also alternating black and white, they recall the woven patterns in Chinese silk fabrics made on traditional looms that have a close relationship to rudimentary computers, the earliest prototypes for our unfathomably complex digital world.

Cui Jie's formal language overlays depictions of the physical world with visions of the technological or digital imagination – a vertiginous impression of our alienation in an advanced techno-industrial age. Expressed with energy and dynamism, her paintings make palpable the lived experience of a natural world mediated through digital and consumer networks and speculate on the ecological catastrophe posed by climate change with a curious, peculiar vision. Cui seems to question the industrialised world's pursuit of aesthetics at an unjustifiable cost, inverting the Futurist's reverence for the industrial city as a symbol of humanity's triumph over nature by refusing to glorify modernity. In a sense, these paintings could be better understood in the Romantic tradition: in the tension between the sublime and the picturesque, between the rational forms of urban architecture and the organic forms of nature. The paintings are an allegorical form of eco-criticism: the new world signified by a modern architecture literally framed by ceramic animals that stand as cultural signifiers of a bygone age. Like so many lost utopias or fallen civilisations, the paintings are permeated by a certain nostalgia for a decline of empire, a lost arcadia, the ruins of humanity humbled, reclaimed, and perhaps even restored by nature.

Like J G Ballard's seminal climate novels, amongst them *The Crystal World* (1966), *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Drought* (1965), Cui's work explores the imagination's potential to envision the future and the possibility of recuperation. Her paintings are an augury of a tragic future shaped by the entanglement of economic, material, cultural and environmental exchange. Surface feels all important: iridescent mirrored glass facades that speak in the seductive language of modernity; the cracked glazed ceramics that lament a scorched earth; and the flat surface of the canvases that relates disparate elements through pattern and mimicry. There is a rhythmic movement across the fractured surfaces: shimmering dimensions and planes of light and colour. In a complex interplay of spatial relationships, of subject and medium, a kaleidoscopic immensity and strangeness comes forth – one that feels faithful to modern life, a complex reality in which past, present and future, digital and material, culture and nature, bewitchingly collide.

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