LONDON

THE METAMORPHOSIS

Liber Visionis

Art & Prose — Anna Keen

Critical Essay — Edward Lucie-Smith

UNICORN

Critical Essay
by **Edward Lucie-Smith**

This book offers a very personal look at one of the world's metropolises. Like all great cities, London is continually in a state of change – rising up in one place, crumbling away in another. As the city changes, its inhabitants change as well. New populations flow in, others flow out. The drawings by Anna Keen illustrated here do not cover all the aspects of contemporary London – how could they? They are the work of a single individual, an artist, moving around and recording what she sees. Most of all, recording her reactions to what she sees.

Topographical series of this kind have a long history in Western art, certainly from the time of the Renaissance onwards. One of the most famous, dating from the seventeenth-century, is Claude Lorrain's *Liber Veritatis*, once in the collection of the Dukes of Devonshire and now in the British Museum. In this work the great French landscapist recorded his principal compositions. On the back of these drawings, the artist added a note giving the subject and the name of the patron. Sometimes he also added dates. He made the series as a record, to guard against other less distinguished painters trying to pass off their work as his – hence the title. Another collection of this kind is J M W Turner's *Liber Studiorum*, a collection of prints recording his early landscapes and seascapes in etching and mezzotint, recording what the artist thought of as being the best of his work up to that point in his career.

Other artists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century made their own long series of drawings recording both townscapes and landscapes. Examples that come to mind are the drawings of Venice made by both Canaletto and Guardi, and also, perhaps especially relevant here, the set of etchings of the River Thames by Whistler, which were published in 1859, very shortly after Whistler's arrival in London.

These etchings seem like a particularly relevant comparison to Anna Keen's drawings reproduced in this book, since here too, there is a fascination with the cityscape of London as defined by the great river that flows through it. Many generations of artists have felt this: Monet's is another name that comes to mind. What particularly interested the great Impressionist master were the fogs, rarely seen in London today, which often enshrouded the city in the second half

the nineteenth-century. 'Without fog, London would not be beautiful,' he said, when visiting London to take refuge from the Franco-Prussian War. Monet, like Whistler, was also particularly interested in making views of London in relation to the Thames.

In a certain sense, however, Anna Keen has been liberated from the preoccupations of these predecessors by the fact that photography freed contemporary painters and makers of drawings from the need to record the physical appearance of London, or indeed any other city, in a systematic way. What matters now is not so much the factual identity of what they are looking at, as the way in which what is seen resonates in their imaginations. There has, of course, always been an element of this in the images of great cities made by artists in the past, but now it is much more dominant than it used to be.

What she offers in this book is a series of emotional reactions to things she has seen and experienced as she moves through the city. One notes, for example, that it is not essentially the famous monuments of London that interest her, although sometimes she does find monumental forms in unexpected places. What fascinates her instead is how strange, unexpected visual aspects of the urban landscape of London resonate with her own sensibility. It is not going too far to say that, for her, London is a world of dreams, of strange forms, shifting spaces, sudden voids.

In this respect, the name from the past that comes to mind, much more insistently than those of Claude or Turner, is that of Piranesi, who creates a fantastic personal world. While we can find in all the scenes offered here visions that fully exist in the constantly changing entity that is London now, a place leaving behind the past as it goes forward into the future, we are also invited to experience London as a visionary city, one that exists in the artist's head.

One point that is of special importance to her is the gradual de-personalisation – if one can call it that – of the London cityscape. Talking of an image, early in the sequence she offers the juxtaposition of the Shard, one of the city's most prominent new skyscrapers, with a view of St Paul's, as these are seen from Parliament Hill on Hampstead Heath. She notes that, 'At sunset the Shard suddenly catches the light and reflects it, and just for a few minutes seems like the cathedral to a new god, in the way that the temples of finance now outshine the old churches.' She also notes, with reference to an image of the Greenwich

CHP (Combined Heat and Power) Energy Centre, a structure clad in lenticular dazzle camouflage designed by Conrad Shawcross RA, the youngest living member of the Royal Academy of Arts, that 'Everything in the city seems to be becoming part crystal or crystalline. Everything that was clay is becoming glass. No humanity left. All for show, with something sinister behind it.'

Sometimes, the effect of these new surfaces is to dematerialise what is seen. Another London landmark, the Telecom Tower, appears only as a reflection, shimmering in vast sheets of neighbouring glass. Or, alternatively, the effect is disorientating: we can't believe in the evidence offered by our own eyes. An image from the North Bank of the Thames showing the Emirates Air Line cable-car across the river to the O2 Dome, shows the Dome reflected but the reflection transposes things. The Dome now seems to be on the wrong side of the river. Anna describes this as being like being a performer in a circus: 'It also seems like you've suddenly arrived in the future.'

This feeling of future travel, or at least of motion towards a not necessarily better future, is something that also, for Anna, pervades the experience offered by Anish Kapoor's Orbit helter-skelter, a relic of the London Olympic Games of 2012, now stranded dolefully in the Olympic Park. She isn't surprised that attendances for this haven't lived up to expectations. She comments: 'It seems designed to make you feel insignificant. Also, like one of a whole group of people who are going to be sacrificed to an Aztec god. The city, it tells you, is all about huge companies doing huge deals.'

Anna Keen is also fascinated by the way traditional aspects of London are fighting back against what is undoubtedly new, but maybe also dispiriting. Sometimes the fight is not successful. The Cutty Sark, raised on air cushions from the river that once cradled it, now seems to her like a toy. 'It hovers just over your head. It's no longer a working boat. You go to it to be entertained, not to learn anything profound about the past.' She comments further on this, following up with an image of Alice in Wonderland, wearing a model of a ship as a decoration on her head. And at the end of the book, by a portait of a London down-and-out in the Tottenham Court Road. 'The tramp seemed to me as British as Alice in Wonderland, and as much a part of the universe of greed as the crystal towers.' This is reinforced by another image of Tottenham Court Road underground station. 'Looking up,' she says, 'you see something quite different from that which meets you on the ground.'

She is always very conscious, not only of the contrasts that London offers in visual terms, but also in purely historical ones. Hawksmoor's church of St Mary Woolnoth features in T S Eliot's poem The Waste Land:

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

In Anna's drawing, the tower of the church is contrasted with the looming image of one of London's brasher new skyscrapers, nicknamed the Walkie-Talkie because of its resemblance to a gigantic mobile phone. The website insider-london.co.uk says of this building that: 'It bulges out of the heart of historic London, to some literally sticking out like a sore thumb.' Insider-London also comments that: '[It] has certainly left an indelible mark on London's urban fabric for better or worse.' The building has recently been valued at £1.3 billion.

In these drawings London's urban fabric presents itself in paradoxical and ironic ways. For example, the now-hidden and culverted-over River Effra, once a tributary of the Thames, was, during the Victorian era, incorporated into a sewer that now drains effluent from much of Peckham and Brixton.

Anna also notes that even aspects of the city that are now in ruins can present themselves in strange combinations. For instance, she contrasts the Roman monumental arch at Pegwell Bay, with the adjoining power-station, both now in ruins. Although Pegwell Bay is in Kent, it wins a place here because it is intimately part of London's history. It is supposedly the place where in 54 BC Julius Caesar landed in Britain. It was also hereabouts that the Anglo-Saxons first arrived in Britain, in 449 AD under the leadership of Hengist and Horsa. Pegwell Bay commemorates this with a replica of a longboat in a nearby park.

She depicts immemorially ancient objects within London. An example is the London Stone, now displayed on a plinth in Cannon Street. Recent research shows that it is Clipsham limestone from Rutland – a kind of stone transported to London in Roman and medieval times for building purposes. The original

purpose of the block is uncertain, though it was evidently once part of some larger object. It has shifted position from time to time. Once fixed to the ground opposite what is now Cannon Street railway station, it was removed in 1742 to the north side of the street and was in 1798 built into the south wall of the Church of St Swithin. There it remained until 1962, when the church, bombed during WW2, was demolished. After this, a new home was found for the London Stone in an office building; in recent times it was hidden behind a magazine rack in a branch of WHSmith. It was rescued from this fate when the premises containing it were demolished in their turn. Put on temporary display in the Museum of London while building works were carried out, it was in 2018 returned to public view in a specially constructed niche in a new building.

Much mythology surrounds this ancient object. It has, for example, been claimed that the London Stone was a terminus, the stone sacred to Jupiter that stood at the centre of every Roman city, but there is little or no evidence to support this. The London Stone has, however, had quite a major impact on imaginings about London: for example, on the visionary poet William Blake. In Blake's Jerusalem and in his Milton, the London Stone is the geographical centre of Golgonooza, the poet's mystical version of the city of London. In that it marks the place where justice is delivered, and is where Los sits to hear the voice of Jerusalem.

Other images carry much simpler messages. There is, for example, a drawing of the Greenwich Clock Tower, which serves as a reminder that Greenwich Solar Time, or Greenwich Mean Time, is calculated from the Greenwich Observatory in London. The term GMT, while especially used by bodies connected with the United Kingdom, among them both the BBC World Service and the Royal Navy, is also employed in the nations of the Commonwealth, and in a number of Arab countries as well. And, perhaps surprisingly, the term is used in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Elsewhere it has been degraded to Universal Time.

Some images in the sequence are down-to-earth – for instance one shows a rusty Thames lighter, filled with scrap metal – a reminder that, in a major city, continuously inhabited, things often fall apart. Other images are intentionally mysterious. There is one of a large male head, described as 'Monstrous Cronus, primordial God of time, a destructive, all-devouring force.' We are left to work out the connection for ourselves. Later images in the book continue the series of contrasts described above. Very few of them refer to earlier presentations of the city, though there are one or two exceptions to this.

For instance, the view of Waterloo Bridge made from the Monet Suite in The Savoy – that is to say, from the rooms once occupied by the great Impressionist, when he was making his own series of paintings of the Thames. Others, like the image of Pegwell Bay already described, go well beyond the boundaries of what is commonly considered to be London. An instance of this is the image towards the end book. It shows the now abandoned sea forts at Red Sands in the Thames Estuary, built during WW2 to protect London from German bombers and V-1 flying bombs. These were constructed at a point where the land is distant, fading from view. There is nothing citified about them. Though the ladders that gave access to these isolated forts were cut off when defence forces abandoned them, as being no longer of use, the structures later played host to pirate radio stations. Those, in their turn, signalled the beginning of an era of social change. So the forts, too, though now abandoned and not directly part of the fabric of the city, did at different epochs play a part in making London the metropolis we know today.

Edward Lucie-Smith
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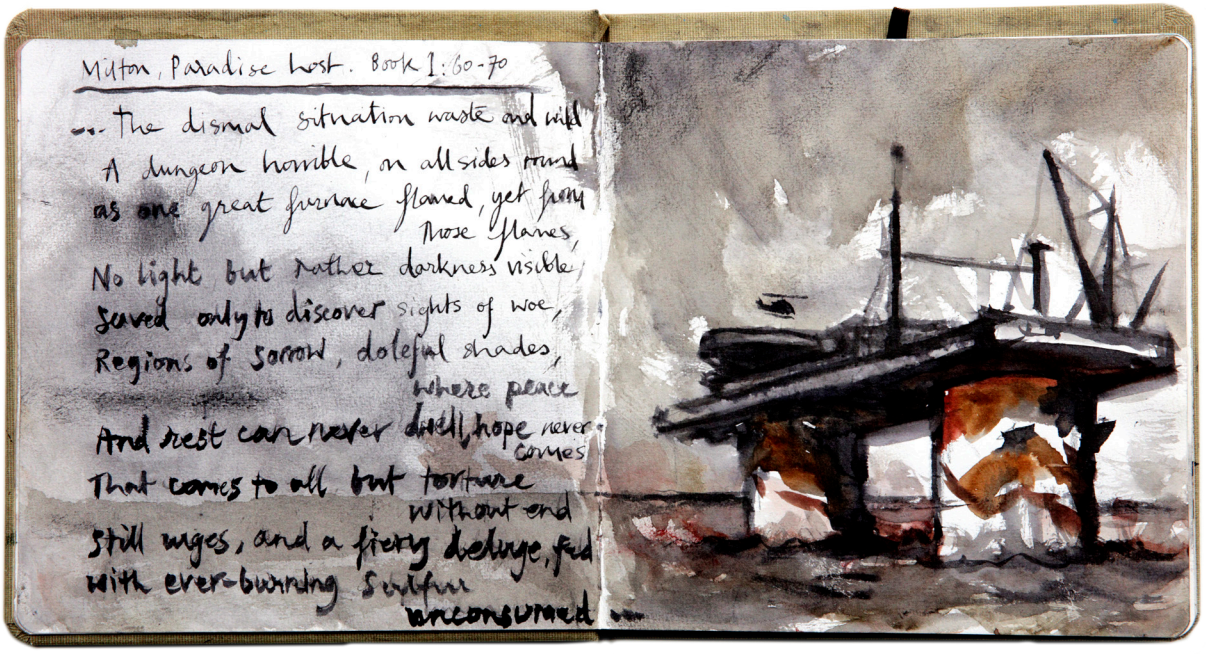

WW2 Fort Roughs Tower now The Principality of Sealand. It could hold up to 300 troops, with seven floors in each leg. Declared a sovereign, independent state in 1967 by Roy Bates from Pirate Radio Essex. Due to a loophole in the law, he proclaimed himself King, his wife Princess and his fifteen year old son Prince. This tolerated micronation's motto is *E Mare Libertas* with a flag, national anthem, postage stamps, currency and passports; they also sell cm^2 of land.