Under the Skin

"The plan, the object and the image all have validity, each holding a truth about the sense of place, but each of a very different order" [1]

For the last 8 years of her life Shelagh worked extensively with digital media. In addition to digital photography and video she used graphics programs to morph the space of ground plans, which were then used, via a plotter, to produce stencils for sandblasting onto marble slabs. Many of the plans related to temples and other sites visited by Shelagh over 20 years of travel throughout Asia.

Often these marble slabs, hung floating slightly away from the wall, were shown as diptychs; a small photograph acting as a clue to the site (and sight) of the plan. In sandblasting, the removal of the surrounding surface leaves a "dry porous vulnerability and a relative lack of focus compared to the polished state"[2]. In this statement, photograph and stone surface become interchangeable, a confusion encouraged by the layering of images and the stretching and folding of plans often to compose them within the stains and swirls of the mineral impurities which cause the patterning of marble.

Footage exists of Shelagh experimenting with filmed images (captured on a small handheld DVD camera) of the Khajuraho temples she visited in Madhya Pradesh. She had spent a week searching the densely carved walls of the temples containing thousands of figures, to find the particular pair of entwined lovers, which had occupied a space on her wall (in postcard form) for many years. Jane Cina is re-filming these images from the screen of Shelagh's laptop.

Shelagh was alive to the nuance of the glitch. An unconventional approach to image capture sees her moving the screen of the computer around to confuse the camera filming it. Simultaneously she is moving through sequences of images delighting in the side effects caused by the inability of the camera to read the screen. Passages of what appears to be a digital effect turn out to be an off screen hairdryer blowing dry a film of water which only moments before had been applied to the marble surface with a soft wide brush.

From a digital collage of these experiments she constructed the video 'Under the Skin' writing; "It is cut to a track which although from a different culture, I chose specifically as it's use of remixing parallels my approach." [3] The images jump-cut from surface images of the Khajuraho temples, to ambiguous

[1] All quotes by Shelagh from her power point presentation notes for "Under the Skin" dated 27.06.03 and presented at Digital Surface within Fine Art Practise conference at Tate Britain 27-28 June 2003. This work was also presented at conferences in Bangalore and Seoul in 2004.

[2] Ibid 1

[3] [3]Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan remixed by Massive Attack.)

intensely coloured saturated details which are not from enlargement (in such small files this results only in pixilation) but from feeding false information into the images, a remix which creates density and the illusion of depth rather than disintegration.

This method was also used in the composite digital images Shelagh made to be shown as single Giclee prints. Here the temple plans fall on digital sandstone or marble not evoking the monumental but rather "…henna… tattoos…. the shadow of an insect".[4] Using a program called Xara she folded plans around the virtual forms of the photographed sculptures "The plan unites the lovers"[5] as it folds across a sculpted body or half hidden it glows from beneath a sandstone hand.

In this investigation into the different temporalities of the digital and the material, there is a sculptors desire to give body to the virtual image. Through this constant oscillating between the material and the immaterial (also present in the subject, in temples themselves) Shelagh created a sense of the transience of the viewer or viewpoint. Images on the marble often get lost as the body of the viewer moves, as also happens with many digital screens. The constant shifts of register in the videos seem to me to be a good example of Katherine Hayles's 'flickering signifiers'[6]. and her demand that we need to investigate changing experiences of embodiment ;

"Information, like humanity, cannot exist apart from the embodiment that brings it into being as a material entity in the world; and embodiment is always instantiated, local, and specific. Embodiment can be destroyed but it cannot be replicated. Once the specific form constituting it is gone, no amount of massaging data will bring it back. This observation is as true of the planet as it is of an individual life-form. As we rush to explore the new vistas that cyberspace has made available for colonization, let us also remember the fragility of a material world that cannot be replaced."

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[4] ibid 1

[5] ibid

[6] Hayles Katherine essay "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers" final paragraph