

Empire and I

Terra Incognita, Pitshanger Manor and Gallery,
London, 22 January–13 March 1999

Empire and I is an exhibition of nine visual artists, who, in the words of its press release, ‘have been commissioned to respond to the impact of colonial thought and history on contemporary ideas of “race” and nation.’ Situated in Pitshanger Manor, Ealing, West London – which, as the guide book will tell you, is the historic home of John Soane (1753–1837) ‘architect and surveyor’ to the Bank of England from 1788 to 1833 – *Empire and I* attempts to challenge a British cultural heritage laced with colonial racism from within its heartlands. Indeed, surveying the work and its attendant theorization, *Empire and I*’s relation to its site is typical of a strategy of immanent critique, of an attempt to uncover the excluded at the source of its exclusion.

If *Empire and I* can be said to have a central premise motivating its commissioning and curation, it appears to be that the experience of racism is not something external to a national(ist) culture, but internal to it. As Juliette Brown notes in her catalogue essay, ‘Thinking about “Race” and Nation’, via a quotation from Ruth Frankenberg, ‘any system of differentiation shapes those upon whom it bestows privilege as well as those it oppresses.’ The form of cultural identity which is indicated here, and which the exhibition attempts to elaborate, is constituted through and in terms of what it marginalizes. However, the perhaps surprising, even ironic, condition of this site in which the margins are folded into the centre is a cultural experience which is in a certain sense *common*: that is, both shared and everyday. In Catherine Hall’s catalogue essay, ‘Empire and Us’, she writes of the ‘post-colonial’ moment as the encounter between the ‘erstwhile colonisers’ and the ‘once colonised’, in which the encounter changes both groups, forcing both to take on new identities through their recognition of each other. Hall claims that this legacy is ‘lived in the everyday’ and, following Toni Morrison, suggests a ‘memory work’ as ‘the work of remembering what has been forgotten but never erased’.

Thus, what emerges as the project of *Empire and I* is an immanent critique of the heritage of colonial racism through the unearthing of traces which are already present in the everyday, but repressed. That these traces are in fact already present is the crucial precondition for this immanent critique. That is to say, the form of their absence is perhaps repression or forgottenness, but they are not absent in the sense of being radically external and needing to be imported from outside. The strategy of investigation which is both enabled and demanded by this immanence of the traces of racism is thus a certain *self-reflection* on this common heritage.

While some works seem to have a more ambivalent relation to this self-understanding, and sometimes in critical ways, almost all of the artists have responded to the commission through this strategy of uncovering racism as a repressed

subtext of everyday or typical cultural forms. Thus Erika Tan's installation 'From China to Chintz' attempts to make explicit the habituated orientalism of the apparently quintessentially English wallpaper print of pheasants which decorates one room in the manor. The juxtaposition of various oriental imports suggests a heritage of appropriation and naturalization. In Anthony Key's sculpture 'Free Delivery', a map of the British Isles is covered with small red flags to mark (apparently) every Chinese restaurant in the country, suggesting a parody of colonial territorialization which simultaneously parodies hysterical fears of an immigrant invasion.

Recent debates around visual art attempting to deal with issues of raced identity have tended to focus on the conjunction of identity politics and avant-garde art. Generally the resolution of the antipathy of this conjunction has been found in the confluence of an anti-essentialist politics with an anti-conventional art. *Empire and I* is typically engaged in the investigation of this confluence. It's avant-gardism emerges in its deconstruction of conventional cultural artefacts, although some works are less successful than others in mediating these tensions. However, what distinguishes *Empire and I* in this context is how its relation to the notion of empire displaces the constitutive aporias of 'attempting to represent otherness, without reduction to the hegemonic representational order', which have often been seen as fundamental to the problematic at stake in the negotiation of this confluence of avant-garde art and identity politics. *Empire and I* displaces this aporia by tacitly presupposing the cultural totalization assumed by the notion of empire. With the presupposition of this totalization the issue of identity is no longer situated externally but internally. Imperial totalization is both the impulse of oppression and repression, while retroactively providing a common heritage in which raced identity can be investigated through self-reflection on that heritage. The issue of raced identity is therefore investigated within the immanence of this heritage of empire, rather than as a problem of otherness external to it.

The problem that arises with this displacement is the extent to which it colludes with a closure towards the exteriority of a culture's limits, and therefore the extent to which it uncritically accepts the only guarantee empire gives against this closure: the fantasy of bringing all cultures into its imperium, and thereby



claiming a total culture. What is interesting about *Empire and I* is precisely the way in which it posits the socio-political figure of empire as a form of the interiorization of otherness, rather than any simple theoretical injunction that otherness is unthinkable. However, if the issue of cultural totalization raised by the question of empire is to remain critically formulated, the question of its limits must remain constitutive. One work from *Empire and I* makes this problem explicit. Alana Jelinek's 'The Spectators' is a rather blandly painted picture of a group of tourists, seemingly assembled after the manner of tourist/ethnographic representations of the 'native group'. Representing the 'native' has been displaced by attempting instead to present the tourist culture to itself, through the 'cultured' medium of painting. And yet this displacement is marked, negatively as it were, by what has been displaced.

Nonetheless, despite traces of awareness of this problem, *Empire and I*'s self-theorization tends to negotiate it, rather dubiously, through the concept of post-colonialism. Within Hall's brief account of post-colonialism the cultural totalization of empire is tacitly assumed as something which is over and which now provides a ruin to be reassembled in the constitution of post-colonial cultural identities. The question of imperial totalization becomes reduced to the question of a post-colonial Britishness. Rather than question the limits of the assumption of imperial totalization, this reduction tends merely to assume a more modest scope. This leaves critical questions obscured, not only about the extent of this totalization, but crucially about alterations of its form. Thus, what threatens to be concealed in this reduction is precisely the issue of persisting forms of colonization, particularly forms which proceed through the ideological manipulation of the idea of post-colonialism, such as the pursuit of apparently more purely capitalist forms of colonization, lubricated by an ideology of a post-colonial multiculturalism. This ideology not only misrecognizes persistent forms of capitalist colonization, but also tends to assume that these forms no longer function through the systematic exclusion of certain cultures. Again, there is one particular work which exposes this problem. Shaheen Merali's "'dig." Native' presents various objects in which racial types have been appropriated through their commodification as ornaments and toys, suggestive not only of a cartoonesque banalization of racism, but equally of the contemporary emergence of a multicultural capitalism as a persistent form of colonization.

The self-reflective investigation of the tension between I and empire can only function critically if it involves an explicit problematization of the limits and forms of cultural totalization which characterize colonization. If empire is reduced to the afterlife of its specifically British form, then the rearticulation of repressed forms of identity which 'post-colonialism' hopes to seize on threatens to take place in oblivion to persisting forms of colonialism, which are then themselves repressed. If *Empire and I* deals with this problem only inadvertently, it is perhaps because it does not recognize that it has even raised it. It thinks that its relation to empire is merely to the historic British variety. But then perhaps this is exemplary of Juliette Brown's poignant remark that '*Empire and I* is not a sideshow in which audiences come to enjoy the spectacle of political work completed before their arrival and presented for their consumption. We come here to imagine different ways of seeing, our attention is drawn to what is unseen.'

Stewart Martin