

review / SAM KEBBELL

# *Penumbral Reflections*

## Sarosh Mulla and Aaron Paterson

### Objectspace, Auckland

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Fig. 1 A big black egg in an orthogonal nest? [Photograph by David St George]

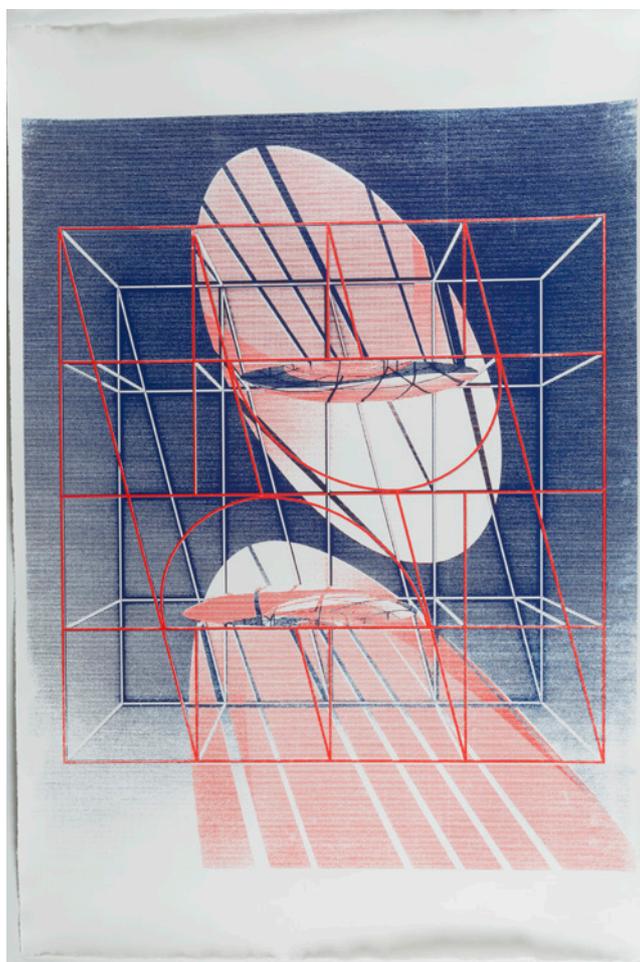
There is something slightly disconcerting about walking into an unfamiliar dark room, especially when there is a weird thing in the middle of it, but it also ignites my curiosity. The room, in this case, is the main gallery at Objectspace, and the weird thing was made by Aaron Paterson and Sarosh Mulla, both of PAC Studio and the University of Auckland School of Architecture and Planning. At first glance, it looks like a big black egg in an orthogonal nest, but it's not.

What is it? The big black egg is in fact a dark-tinted reflective disc. From the side at which I arrived, it is totally black, which is why it looks like an egg, but when I move around it I can see it has a slightly convex curve that distorts

the reflections of the projectors aimed at it. I read in the project description on the wall that it is a Claude glass. Wikipedia tells me that in the eighteenth century, a Claude glass was a portable black-tinted convex mirror that tourists and landscape painters used to turn expansive views of the landscape into an image, so I am looking at a Brobdingnagian version of that. The nest is not really what I thought either. As random as the framing appeared when I walked in, it is actually a finely made metal frame that forms a 3.6 x 3.6 x 3.6-metre cube with vertical members spaced evenly down each side and embedded within it is a slightly rotated framework of similar proportions. The shadows of the frame appear on the Claude glass and in the puddle of light in front of it. The rotated smaller framework sets up a diagonal geometry that also provides some lateral bracing. There are projections on the walls behind us too, which were produced in gaming engines as a digital simulation of certain visual qualities in the metal contraption.

How do I look at it? If I was an eighteenth-century painter using this Claude glass, these projections are where the landscape would be. I would be using the Claude glass to look at that landscape, but here I am inclined to use that landscape to look at the Claude glass. Partly because I prefer to look at the finely crafted object and the complex play of light and shadow across it rather than the projected pixels on a flat wall. I circle it a few times wondering if I might stand in the puddle of light and take a good hard look into the Claude glass as

Fig. 2 Screenprint made as part of the design process. [Screenprint by PAC Studio]





Figs. 3-6 The Claude glass, the frame that supports it, and the various projections. [Photographs by David St George]

if staring into a giant eyeball. The gallerist senses my timidity and invites me to climb on in, so I do. I get very close to the Claude glass, but I don't touch it. I promise. It looks like polished metal, but the reflections make it hard to focus on the surface itself. It is more like peering into a strange phantasmagorical scene with my own eyeballs in the foreground. When I turn around though, I see my colleagues and a more prosaic reality takes over my mind. I start to think, if I had time, this might be quite a nice spot to pull up a few chairs and kick back with a drink. A sort of belvedere in a digital landscape.

I can imagine looking out at this digital landscape and pondering one of the fundamentals of our trade: light, in its various forms and with its range of implications. The way light and dark produces apparent depth, even if the surface is in fact flat. The way a complete lack of tonal variation produces a totally different kind of depth, the kind of infinite depth James Turrell has so often produced, and that the Claude glass is capable of here. It is a relatively



dark room to ponder light, but maybe that in itself is something to ponder. Even though light and shadow are a phenomenological couple, light has been the dominant partner under modernist regimes. In this sense, it is refreshing to wallow in the dark thinking about light.

This contraption is also a good vantage point to ponder the tension between realities and digital simulation, given that screens, projected images, and pixels are very much part of our contemporary reality. On one hand, I ponder the exhibit as a string of simulations: projected images that simulate aspects of a contraption, and a contraption that simulates certain architectural qualities. On the other hand, I am conscious that all these simulations form the reality of the gallery space I am standing in. So I think of it all as both simulation and reality; I am both part of PAC's architecture, and part of their thinking about it. All this serves to reflect on the creative processes PAC explore, and their relishing of the movement between different modes of architectural production.

Along this line of thought, it is hard not to consider PAC's built work and the frequent use of dark timbers, shadowy interiors, enclosed courtyards, and expressed framing. This room feels like an elaboration on those qualities but it pushes them to new extremes. It will be interesting to see if the built work also becomes more extreme as a result of this exercise. Pieces of this exhibit will be relocated to the Waikereru Ecosanctuary near Gisborne, and this might give us a clue to how this thinking will play out in larger buildings later.

PAC's buildings matter to this exhibition because for all the play with simulation, it remains committed to architectural experience. While the Claude glass does introduce certain narrative layers, the exhibition is not a representation of an idea that belongs outside of architecture. It relies less on some external narrative than on the attention I pay to my experience in the room, and the histories and potentials that surround that. Yes, the Claude glass is a historical device for looking at the landscape, and that's not what is happening here, but the mechanics of the device have been co-opted at an architectural scale to look at architectural surroundings. The Claude glass is not a metaphor here; it remains an instrument.

In fact, the whole exhibition is an instrument, a kind of multi-tool running on the fuel of light and shadow. I think it has less representational value than operational value. It is a contraption to produce depth, illusion, and distortion. It flips between reality and simulation, and it exposes creative fascinations with light and shadow. It is never quite what I think it is, and simple interpretations of it never quite resolve. But however much I slip off one idea and into another, I always feel immersed in architectural thinking: in drawing, digital modelling, experimenting with light, framing, looking, and fashioning some future situation.

At this stage in the reflections, sitting in my real-imaginary belvedere, I have been utterly drawn into PAC's web. The various modes that architecture must exist within cannot easily be pulled apart on a clear day, and this contraption tangles them up even more. It is full of rich ambiguities, and insights into their multi-modal practice. This weird thing in the middle of the room is a real thing, for sure, but it also operates between the realms of simulation, representation, and imagination. I have been invigorated by the exchange between them.

