

If Walls Could Talk: David Tremlett

David Tremlett creates spaces using the ephemeral pigment of pastel crayons. A trained sculptor, since the end of the 1970s he has been working directly on the wall. His wall drawings, in museums, private and public buildings, sacred spaces or ruins, are inextricably bound to their spatial context, forming an entity. They trace the volumes, rhythms and proportions of the pre-existing architecture and comment on them or reconstruct them, by adding autonomous structures to the spaces, structures which through their placement either reinstate a lost architectural element, or allow a new, imaginary architecture to be created. With these interventions the artist achieves the poetic completion or reconstitution of the spaces he works in.

Although Tremlett sees himself clearly within the wall painting tradition, which in the case of frescoes aims for permanence, he has chosen to work in a fragile, transitory medium. It is exactly the ephemeral quality of pastels, appearing to contradict the traditions of the genre, which appeals to him: *In my eyes the permanence of the work is in the idea.*¹ As a sculptor he is however at the same time fascinated by the malleability of the pastels as he rubs them into the wall.² *I am actually building something in my wall drawings, but within the surface,* he has said in an interview.

Tremlett is continually creating new, site-specific wall drawings. In each case the vocabulary of forms and colours is inspired by the particular place he is currently working in. His forms consist of lines and irregular, geometric shapes, often reminiscences of ground plans he has seen – doorways or signs abstracted into stylised, imaginary plans and architectural forms. His palette ranges from earth tones³ to strong colours like red, yellow, turquoise, blue and green, but is always attuned to the pre-existing surroundings.

It is clear that Tremlett has a certain affinity with abandoned, forgotten, derelict buildings, such that he could be seen to be involved in a 'recherche du temps perdu'. His quiet drawings, on disintegrating walls, hinting themselves at their own eventual decay, underline dereliction in a double sense; their formal references to a once-intact architecture emphasise emptiness and loss, while at the same time their material, pastel, is faded and rubbed away by weather and time. Together with the surfaces on which they are made, the wall drawings create a new temporary entity; In Tremlett's words, 'these deserted surfaces became sculptures and drawings for another time'.

Sabrina van der Ley

1 *David Tremlett: The Turner Prize 1992* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1992) un-paginated leaflet.

2 'Pastel falls somewhere between mouldable materials, like plaster or clay, and painting; because pastel can really only be applied with the hands' David Tremlett interviewed by Doris von Drathen, only published in German translation: 'Gebaute Linien', *Kunstforum*, vol. 104 (November–December 1989), p. 325.

3 'I tend towards black, grey and a kind of terracotta; coloured fields are created, relating [. . .] to natural colours, using sand, earth or clay. These colours [. . .] are found in building materials, in slate, brick, metal, sand or plaster. I do actually build something in my wall drawings, but within the surface.' Ibid.