



▶ THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

In the 18th century, well-heeled British tourists completing a Grand Tour of the Continent developed an infatuation for The Claude Glass. Named for the landscape painter Claude Lorrain, whose work exemplified the effects of its use, this convex, smoked glass mirror, aided artists in composing picturesque landscapes with a soft and even tonal range.

To use a Claude Glass, you faced away from your subject, which you viewed through the mirror as you sketched. Its convex shape drew more elements of a scene into focal range than a flat mirror, or our own eyes could; its smoked tint lent a scene a romantic haze, which came to be as recognisable to 17th century art aficionados as Instagram filters are to social media users now.

Further, as contemporary tourists are lampooned for their habit of viewing famous sites and even artworks solely through their phone cameras, so tourists then were derided for their comical habit of facing away from the very thing they had come to see, as they sketched and documented the site through the reflection of the glass.

I thought of the Claude Glass when looking through Lizzy Sampson and Shae Rooke's developmental blog, a documentation of the artistic process that has led them to this point. Not only are there visual allusions to it – photographs taken through a magnifying glass, recalling both the look and distorting effects of the Claude Glass – but in concept too, as they circled around a starting point of viewing devices, perception and communication. Crucially, Lizzy and Shae seem to be interested in the social dimensions of spectatorship, of visual technologies like the Claude Glass, whose historical significance is composed equally of its technological, affective and social contexts.

▶ BLIND VIEWS

The windows in BLINDSIDE's Gallery One are an unavoidable feature of the space. Working there, you must address them either directly or indirectly, embrace them or mask them out. The gallery itself has prevaricated over time in how to deal with them – at one point building a complicated false wall to cover them completely, later removed.

Throughout the course of the residency, Lizzy and Shae have variously found inspiration in their sweeping views, or felt oppressed by their constant visual dominance. Browsing their Tumblr, it is interesting to note the many approaches they have taken in relation to them: mitigating, ameliorating, accommodating, denying and finally incorporating this elephant in the room.

In one exercise, they have drawn over features of the cityscape seen through the window, coloured some in, blacked others out. In the process a very personalised and idiosyncratic map/image accumulates – a residue of intangible light rays, now caught on the glass as a filter for others to view the same scene through.

▶ TENSION AND ATTENTION

An inherent tension between inspiration and production underscores every artist residency. Being tasked with using a given space in a given time to “come up with something” on the spot, you must be willing to let your imagination run free, be open to unfamiliar inputs, follow ideas down blind alleys. At the same time, having a deadline and a public outcome for which a reasonably finished product must be completed, also presumes some rules and focus must be enforced.

As Lizzy pointed out to me when discussing the work and this essay: “If I was in my studio, I could just play and let things drop and start other things”. These germs of unrealised artworks are put on show less often than fully finished pieces, but they are uncommonly appetising morsels, imbued with levity and suggestion.

Lewis Hyde's book *The Gift*¹, points to Walt Whitman's poem *A Noiseless Patient Spider* as an analogy of this part of the artistic process:

*“The soul, reaching, throwing out for love,
As the spider, from some little promontory, throwing out filament after
filament, tirelessly out of itself, that one at least may catch and form a link,
a bridge, a connection....”*²

In this heightened environment, this sound stage stand in for a studio, you must play with purpose; try to force inspiration's attendance. To use a camera analogy, you open the shutter full wide, using the iris to direct the stream of thoughts, ideas and images you have taken in.

The ideal result is several small, but intriguing steps, which might at first lead you away from your purpose, but eventually double back and hone in even more acutely on what you want to achieve. As Lewis Hyde puts it: “most of us cut a thousand pairs of shoes before the elves begin to sew”.³

▶ COLLABORATION

An extra layer of complexity and potential conflict is introduced when attempting to direct two separate artistic visions, temperaments and habits to a single purpose. The conceptual exercises which Shae and Lizzy have subjected themselves to are a way of building a communal fence around their separate promontories, in the hopes that their filaments will eventually cross paths, weave into one thread and form a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

They are also drawing on a rich history of Fluxus, Dadaist and Surrealist artists who established the almost perverse practice of trying to focus artistic inspiration through ritualised, perfunctory, almost bureaucratic tasks.

In one such task, Lizzy – hanging out the BLINDSIDE window with a large orange arrow in hand – directs Shae on the ground at Fed Square, who has a corresponding novelty sized orienteering marker in hand. Their strangely beautiful, at times awkward performance takes the ordered, anodyne, bloodless technologies of contemporary way-finding, and restores to them a human dimension: chaotic, risky and striving for connection and communication.

For Lizzy and Shae, this is the moment the elves take over, and the swirling maelstrom of noise resolves and focuses into the next solid image for them to contemplate and pursue.

▶ THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

*“One of the most important nineteenth-century developments in the history of perception was the relatively sudden emergence of models of subjective vision in a wide range of disciplines during the period 1810-1840. Dominant discourses and practices of vision, within the space of a few decades, effectively broke with a classical regime of visibility and grounded the truth of vision in the density and materiality of the body.”*⁴

So Jonathan Crary argues in the first chapter of *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*: we no longer trust the eye of the beholder. The adage ‘seeing is believing’ has been complicated by scientific and psychological insights into subjectivity and relativity, and deeper understandings of the complex and highly variable bodily systems upon which our reliable perception and navigation of the world rest.

The image of the artist we are still commonly presented with, however, as the seeker of truth and beauty, is a painter. Facing their subject head-on, they are seen to record, or bear witness to its essence, via a first person perspective. The Claude Glass user, facing away from its subject, looking at it literally through a glass darkly, seems to embody Crary's point and is a more apt metaphor for how artists approach their subjects now. And indeed, how Lizzy and Shae have approached their collaboration – looking to each other askance, from the peripheries, underneath, through lenses and filters, and from multiple platforms – by means of finding a common vision.

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¹ Hyde, Lewis 1983, *The Gift*, Vintage Books (New York)
² Whitman, Walt 1900, *Leaves of Grass*, David McKay (Philadelphia)

³ *Ibid.* i, at p. 195.

⁴ Crary, Jonathan 1999, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, MIT Press, p.11



BLINDSIDE SUMMER STUDIO

Lizzy Sampson & Shae Rooke

Opening Night: Thursday 31 January, 6-8pm
Artists' Talks: Saturday 2 February, 2.30pm
Project Dates: 31 December 2012 - 26 January 2013

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