NECKWALL, footscreen, sleeper

Peter Shelton

NECKWALL, footscreen, sleeper takes as its subject the structure of space and our psychophysical response to it. Two screened platforms, elevated 7 feet above the floor, are separated by a wall through which passes a bridge connecting these structures. Upon entering the front room of the gallery, one first sees the smaller platform which supports a small room (sleeper) containing a bed. Passing through the gallery dividing wall, the viewer encounters the larger footscreen platform that supports the NECKWALL. A single ladder and trapdoor lead up through the footscreen. Leaving the NECKWALL via a small door, one may either pass through the bridge to the sleeper or traverse a 21-inch wide catwalk around the perimeter of the NECKWALL. The overall length of NECKWALL, footscreen, sleeper was 36 feet and it stood 12 feet at its highest point. Made of muslin, steel tube and screening, it was installed for four months in the Malinda Wyatt Gallery, Los Angeles in 1981.

Dreams have helped me establish a tone, scale and sometimes even a structure in my work. Their greatest value to me is their ability to define a peculiar time and space and to elicit a sense of “other.” My dreams aren’t so interesting in and of themselves as when they are woven into the larger fabric of sources and interactions that go into my work.

I view my work as a primary reality not a secondary one simplistically abstracted from another reality, conscious or unconscious. I’ve never been interested in using or illustrating dreams literally in my work. To accept a dream at face value as a sole subject for a work is a little like thinking you’ve got the elephant by grabbing its tail.

NECKWALL, footscreen, sleeper is physical imagination, a concrete dream. It is not directly based on the following dreams, only associated with them.
January 31, 1974
I awaken suddenly. The air is totally charged, electric as it is before a storm. I run outdoors and discover a big white stallion charging around the cornfield behind my house in Ohio. His eyes are bulging and nostrils flared with fear. He charges the enclosing fence, then abruptly turns at the last instant, clawing out large pieces of earth. I watch in awe and horror, unsure how to appease this wild horse. A friend and I crush some corn husks in a circular pan and offer it to the horse. He eventually eats some corn. I wake up after the dream, unable to remember whether the horse remained a horse or became a rabbit.
THE DYING MACHINE DREAM

October 31, 1974
It is night. I enter an abandoned factory like those where I worked in Troy, Ohio, my birthplace. I come upon a man in a small room who tells me he operates the “dying machine.” The machine seemed a simple, but odd, contraption. A kind of stretcher or cot, only skeletal. He said I had to lie down on it above a piece of fabric stretched on the floor beneath it. I have no choice but to go through with it. He explains that if I die properly, the process will create a beautiful stain of a particular kind on the fabric. He warns that if I don’t die correctly, the cloth will turn grey or remain blank. I lie down.

PETER SHELTON
November 30, 1975
I rub dirt on myself—on my face, smudging it all around. It seems that I don't have enough on my face so I go to a place below my studio which is a small dark room with a low ceiling where there are piles of dirt and dust on the floor. I lie down on my stomach and roll around covering myself with dirt.
WATER EDGE DREAMS

December 10, 1975
The terrain is the very familiar Arizona desert of my childhood. It is near a large body of water like the artificial lakes in Arizona. At first it seems like we are high up in the desert mountains or cliffs with the water winding through the canyons below. I know this place from before. I’m telling a friend about a house a friend has just bought that I think is very special. The house is apparently built next to or on the water, so we go down to the water’s edge. We see houses built on stilts as in some parts of Asia. We notice that the water is polluted in the area as if the people were dumping refuse in the water. I explain that the water is not always this way, but is perhaps seasonal.

I am with my old grade school class out on a field trip. On our way home we start down a hillside path. We run down in a friendly competitive way. I find it easy to stay ahead of everyone. At the bottom near a pool of water, we all dance. We all join arms in a semicircle, and I teach everyone how to dance like Buddha—a dance in which you stick out your stomach, raise your hands and feet sumo style, and advance forward. The scene is joyous.

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