

Recent works by Christopher Cook, made with liquid graphite on paper, are both composed and disconcerting. They seem to derive closely from modern experiences and understandings, but it is not immediately easy to say how. They present specific, not generalised, landscape-type events, but look closely and you cannot be sure what the details actually explain or identify. Gravity is not consistently acknowledged, and the angle of view may shift or reverse within the same image. Black and white become strangely suggestive of harsh light and heat. Diverse pictorial traditions (Symbolist graphic art, Chinese literati painting, Persian miniatures) cross-fertilise and contaminate each other, but it seems clear that these works are made in the present rather than the past. In contrast with the disturbing calmness of Carol Rhodes's paintings, which show views of human intervention into landscape as seen from a low-flying aircraft, we are in the presence of something involved and immediate. The unusually hard, unyielding surface of the paper makes the liquid marks volatile and restless. Volatility might be a good place to start. Substances such as the white spirit the artist uses rapidly give off their vapour; situations that are volatile may develop or change as you observe them. You cannot be sure what you are looking at but it seems to *matter*, to be more than a game, that you grasp it. The images rely on chance for aspects of their manufacture but are far removed from a feeling of arbitrariness in their final effect.

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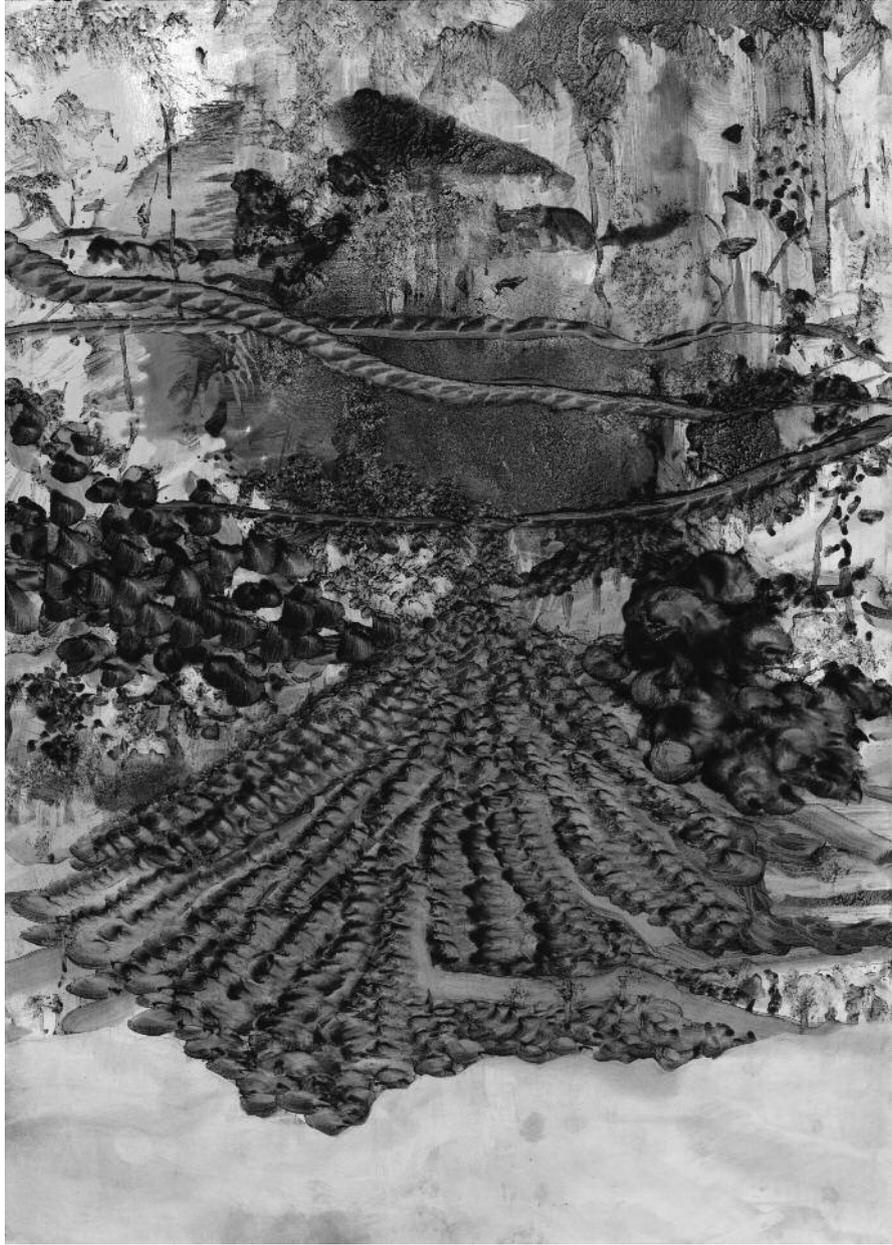
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Despite their relatively contained scale, these images are suggestive of dangers. They form traps, or at least uncertainties, for the viewer who chooses to look into them and participate in co-constructing their possible spaces. Areas of mass and conglomeration appear unexpectedly high up, allowing light through beneath. Suggestions of landscape and of human structures that respond to it (terraces, paths, scaffold, ropes) are real, but they can rarely be resolved with any consistency into a fully legible space that the viewer can enter. The images are made with a formidable pictorial intelligence that does not survey all that it beholds with any final satisfaction. They suggest, instead, that contemporary spaces and places present us with true difficulties of interpretation. The artist's interpretation of the image as it emerges – of the blots, wipes and marks – offers a pattern for the viewer's act of interpretation, looking over the artist's shoulder at what he chose to develop or leave.

Consider *each new encounter* – which, at first sight, is close to a version of pastoral. It is unmistakably suggestive of agriculture, perhaps of a ploughed field in a narrow and irregular dry valley. If this is an image of land, it is of land that has been carved into a satisfying emblem of production through centuries. However, this space of a field that you are apparently offered so straightforwardly – arranged so that the ploughed lines rush towards a perspective point at the dead centre – can also be seen as some kind of mound, stacking upwards. A doubtful aspect extends into the whole composition, and especially into the lines suspended over or through it. These are made in a similar way to the lines I have interpreted as furrows in the lower half of the image, with small transverse marks. The lines cannot be resolved into either tracks – that pick out the way up a hillside, and carve the topography of the valley into an interpretable way forward –

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**each new encounter**, 2013, graphite and oil on paper, 50 x 36 cm





or a rope bridge that hangs above it. The valley begins to resemble a quarry, a place from which building material has been extracted. The lines cross each other with no obvious spatial logic you can discern, and lead uncertainly beyond the space defined by one-point perspective. The illogicality is not blatant: we are presented here with a settled landscape, familiar, ancient and ordinary, but one which contemporary perspective cannot simply resolve. I began by saying that this is close to pastoral, but it is also immediately contemporary in its envisioning of how one place is necessarily and uncertainly connected with others. It embodies a duality: a contained and indeed sheltered landscape that is ambiguously connected to spaces sensed as outside it. In this way, *each new encounter* extends into a process of picturing the shared future of the planet, rather than looking back at its past—though it is a vital part of the artist's tact and thoughtfulness that the associations spread out from the image, and are not the result of an imposed programme.

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An obvious partner to it is *waterstair*, which movingly and memorably makes some kind of representation of a landscape that is being irrigated. It is difficult to interpret how these straight lines fit the assumed contours of the land, or with what we know about how water behaves. The contrast of blurring and sharpness in the marks throws in other levels of uncertainty. However, the illogicality is, again, not the final point. There is a hopefulness in the constructive effort here that needs to be acknowledged, alongside the visual contradictions. Rod Mengham has described the painter Laura Owens as denying the landscape tradition of '*natura naturata*, nature recast by man's desires: a California of the mind' and 'preferring the possibilities inherent in the concept of *natura naturans*, the concept of a nature still unfinished and developing in a way that is unpredictable and

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**waterstair**, 2014, graphite and oil on paper, 50 x 36 cm

beyond man's control' ('Agitpop', in *Laura Owens*, Kunsthalle Zurich, 2006). Cook's graphites share with Owens a deep appreciation of what cannot be controlled, but in works such as *waterstair* the topographic impulse, the desire to map and understand what we see, is acknowledged as an implicit aspect of the spectator's visual training, if not an entirely adequate one.

[8] The principles of Cook's project in this series can now be defined more closely. The artist stares at the space his image begins to evoke, and his practical task is to resolve it, as far as possible: to interpret it further with adjustments, clarifications and details, all the while withholding from the viewer any complete set of interpretable elements or associations. Tadashi Kawamata (co-curator of the 2005 Yokohama Triennale in which Cook's graphites were included) suggested to him 'that you are not only creating, trying to represent something, but trying to extract some images. Trying to create a scene, then some images are extracted from that scene'.

Sheets of paper retrieved from the studio floor or used for wiping off brushes may even catch his eye and provide a starting point for a work. But the accidents are then disciplined, to a considerable extent. The motile marks, stains, runs and deposits made by the liquid graphite must always evade his full control, but the activity of looking so strenuously at the image as it is being worked on produces an underlying robustness of structure. It is this that differentiates his approach from scenography. You are in the presence of an achieved idiom, not a set of cultural juxtapositions. The contradictions caught in these works may ultimately be social, as much as pictorial.

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**snare**, 2013, graphite and oil on paper, 50 x 36 cm





The graphites may be made with a wet medium, and therefore be more closely identified with painting than with drawing, but each is a conscious act of construction. Removal, wiping down and subtractive processes are equally a part of this constructive effort; and the material presence of the marks differs strongly from the virtuoso effects of classical Chinese ink painting. These subtractive processes became a strong part of Cook's practice in the period he began working on primed aluminium sheets, about which he said to Kawamata: 'Working on the aluminium each day means there is either a success or it is a rehearsal for the following day.' The evidence of beginning again and indeed of some kind of struggle with the nature and logic of the image is one of the ways his works communicate a seriousness of purpose to the viewer.

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This is so even in one of the strangest inventions in the group, *snare*. It readily suggests insect life and movement, conveying a sense of creatures busy in their world, as when you disturb wood lice and centipedes, and they quickly scatter. But these vivid associations, though accepted, are not the final point. The nearest shape or blot has been carefully extended with a curved line marked by dots, to ensure that we read the blotted deposit as some kind of beetle. Above it a group of smaller blots and marks are moving forward and upward, one extending a longer feeler or leg. The contour, perhaps of a rock, extends in the same overall diagonal movement up and to the left. An apparently cylindrical lattice structure, carefully made, confirms this perspective view; but on closer examination the cylinder is not a self-sufficient object. It is extended by dark liquid marks to make an irregular enclosed area of 'ground', within which dots provide visual accents—as though to provide different levels of noticing and recognition, some obvious, some highly subtle. This may be the snare of the title—a trap for the oncoming insect, and also

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**transit query**, 2013, graphite and oil on paper, 50 x 36 cm

for the viewer, anxious to seek interpretable narrative clues about what kind of ground this is. A small leaf form (one of the last aspects of the image you notice) is hatched like the inorganic cylinder, and is the sole element to point away on the opposing diagonal.

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The details matter, but don't explain the whole. It is the intensity of looking that the images bring about which appears to matter more than any specific interpretable signs. *Transit query* is crossed by a diagonal scraped line from which two ovoid forms hang, each made in the same way, to suggest that they have a dark interior. They must surely be some kind of cable car. But the frank way in which this interpretable aspect is given to you by the artist does not clarify the rest of the space. The dark horizontal lines suggest steps extending up high, perhaps into some distant arch. But how are the two large masses connected in space? What is connected to what? Lines that in the lower half suggest vegetation, in the upper half suggest paths, tracks and mapping. Plan view interferes with the perspective view. It is the spatial complexity of this hypothetical stacked landscape that absorbs you. The pods of the cable car, running right across it and out each side, throw in a sense of disconnection from ordinary modes of locomotion and spectatorship.

In some cases the mood becomes distinctly Piranesian. *Ways forward* contradicts the implied optimism of its title by showing vertiginous walkways that attempt to scale or make sense of an explosive, fracturing mass. A similar spatial drama is evoked by *the violet hour* which, unusually, is almost devoid of any obvious constructed details, or representations of human habitation and intervention. The bold marks and dabs can be associated only with vegetation and with trees, perhaps beside water. Here nature,

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**ways forward**, 2014, graphite and oil on paper, 50 x 36 cm





too, becomes expressive of a shared crisis. *Wistful one* resolves more completely into the figure of a single tree, though a tree that appears to float through the air, removed from the soil that would sustain it. The effect is not poignant, surreal or sentimental, partly because the artist has inserted a rectilinear 'window' against the upper edge of the paper. It's a distancing device: the image as a whole includes an inset self-reflection on its own purpose, and does not provide us with a simple view of what it appears to show.

According to Manfredo Tafuri, the space of Piranesi's prisons (the *Carceri d'Invenzione*) had strongly social connotations:

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'Here the destruction of the very concept of space merges with a symbolic allusion to the new condition being created by a radically changing society . . . In these etchings the space of the building — the prison — is an infinite space. What has been destroyed is the centre of that space, signifying the collapse of ancient values, of the ancient order, and the 'totality' of the disorder. *Reason*, the author of this destruction — a destruction felt by Piranesi to be fatal — is transformed into irrationality. But the prison, precisely because infinite, coincides with the space of human existence. This is very clearly indicated by the hermetic scenes Piranesi designs within the mesh of lines of his "impossible" compositions.'

(*Architecture and Utopia: design and capitalist development*, 1976)

Christopher Cook's recent group of works as a whole do not use architecture as their main metaphor, and they usually prefer curious scrutiny to high drama or polemic;

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**the violet hour**, 2013, graphite and oil on paper, 50 x 36 cm

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they favour left-over spaces and half-cultivated wasteland, in which new forms are emerging. But they do make something as disturbing, in its way, as Piranesi's interrogations of the dialectic of Enlightenment. Part of this disturbance is the way they make us question the simple function of a detail. The details do not explain the whole; the dots, striations and coded marks frequently appear to describe themselves rather than providing us with genuinely interpretable clues. *An isolated event* positions at its centre something like a Chinese philosopher's rock, a symbol for contemplation: the graphite has dried into an impressively reticulated, mineral deposit. But the unstable detail is the use of horizontal marks, that form the 'base' on which the stone is understood to be set. They are repeated and fragmented around the image and float upwards, knocked out of true. Their function as a description of a settled horizontal plane is disturbed, as is any hope for a peaceful and singular locus for contemplation.

Cook feels an affinity for Tadashi Kawamata's work, in which crazily improvised wood structures insinuate walkways, tree houses and confusion into the space of cities, in a manner that recalls (but does not repeat) the delicate balancing of human intrusion into nature in traditional Japanese thinking. Such interventions make something more complex than simple chaos, in that they appear to be falling apart at the same time that they are being built. They are spirited demonstrations of collective, capable effort, and of a kind of madness denied by the apparently rational spaces they colonise. This co-presence of lightness and seriousness, of constructive and deconstructive thinking, can be seen to connect with Cook's strenuous feats of ambiguous picturing. The lack of coherence his works demonstrate is not a simple stylistic gambit. The interpenetration of contradictory viewpoints and values is perceived, grasped and held before us as

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**wistful one**, 2013, graphite and oil on paper, 50 x 36 cm





some kind of defining hallucination of our time and of the material world we are making (and forced to observe being made). What I wrote first in my notebook was 'If this is a disaster, let's look at it'. After talking with the artist he wrote to me, on the subject of lightness: 'The drawings see-saw on a dilemma: that lightness, however desirable, is not always possible. To live lightly, without undue stress, may be desired, but we feel that desire most acutely when working in situations where weight, and conscience, cannot be avoided! The idea of living lightly represents neither withdrawal nor ambivalence: his images are manifestly open to the excitement and complexity of our globalised present. Perhaps it is the hint of a moral dimension in them that marks his work as European (or vestigially English) in his modes of openness to that present.

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**an isolated event**, 2013, graphite and oil on paper, 50 x 36 cm