Blueprints

"To be in the blue is to be isolated and alone. To be sent to the blue room is to be sent to solitary, a chamber of confinement devoted to the third degree. It's to be beaten by police, or if you are a metal, heated until the more refrangible rays predominate and the ore is stained like those razor blades the sky is sometimes said to be *as blue as…*"
--William Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (1976)

Blueprints is a remarkable set of seventeen works by Sean Smuda produced largely between 2007 and 2011 (with a reprise of one piece in 2016) that in many ways chronicles the dislocations of that era of economic crisis and technological mobility. Each piece has a poetic text in a different language embedded in it, whose title is its translation. Their general theme is of transportation and the problem of grounding, or in Smuda's terms the 'entropic' relationship between 'nature' and 'human production.' Each presents what appears as a kind of totem in a landscape, some anthropomorphic and some anthropocenic. In many of them, one sees echoes of Albrecht Dürer's "Melencolia I," (1514) with its strange beacon in the sky and despondent array of tools and technologies. Following Dürer, there is something of the *Meisterstiche* or "master print" to these images, and what Smuda refers to as an 'elusiveness of reproduction' that suggests the "end and beginning of the world."

In their grandest form, Smuda's images allude more directly to the techniques of early nineteenth-century photography—the blue of the cyanotype and the copper base of the daguerreotype—without being either. Instead, the process of printing on aluminum gives the images a furtive quality from an oblique view, disappearing into a kind of pure abstraction of light or black. There is a play with design here, composed during the years in which thanks in part to the iPhone (2007) images became radically mobile. In this context, the concept of *Blueprints* seems architectural, heavy and even nostalgically utopian in a constructivist sense. But this heaviness is one indication of an important historicity in these superficially ahistorical images. As with print, this is also a historicity of photography. One is reminded of the work of Anna Atkins whose *Cyanotype Impressions* of algae produced similar branching images and of John Herschel himself, who invented the cyanotype as a method of cheap reproduction similar to the photocopy. Tellingly, the technologies of photography have changed so much by the early twenty-first century that Smuda could no longer find printing shops in Minneapolis to do traditional blueprint work.

This question of problematic materiality suggests reasons for the self-conscious *chinoiserie* at work at the level of authorship, a faux chop with the character 闪 ("lightning" or *shan* for Sean) and another invented that in combination create a kind of false signature. The pieces themselves are collaborative in hidden and even post-human ways—collages of images, translated poetic snippets in different languages, the use of Photoshop (1988) itself, which by 2005 had become part of Creative Suite (2003) and included the possibility of vector-scalable "smart objects."

Such an approach to authorship then trickles into the images themselves, including one of the earliest, with its Maoist bicycle-ship on a mirror surface, entitled "碟之轮，旋之心，净而无" or in translation "Butterfly wheel, soaring heart, no pollution." It brings to mind the sail-wagons reported by Marco Polo that became in Milton's *Paradise Lost* the "Wagons light" of Sericana, a way-station on Satan's flight to Eden. The blue-and-white is thus both mythic and porcelain-like —a transcultural surface of

mashed-up and overlaid images that like Smuda's "Universal Capital" series has echoes going back to the seventeenth century. And the "butterfly wheel" (literally butterfly's wheel) reminds one of both Duchamp and Zhuangzi (369-286 BCE), the latter uncertain whether he is a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a man. Is "soaring" here an Icarus-esque mistranslation or a deliberate propagandistic obfuscation of "旋," which means revolving or whirling? In these gaps and juxtapositions, the blueprints are dream-images asking us what would a great awakening of the heart-mind (*xin* 心) mean at this moment?

The images and history surrounding them, when published as a volume, offer a kind of anatomy of method. Chronologically these works begin in 2007 as the foreclosures on subprime mortgages, the collapse of the shadow banking system and the failures of the "Global War on Terror" began to make themselves felt. In addition to the Chinese-titled piece, Smuda composes a military-media fusion of an American helicopter dangling a person over a cityscape ("Sky bivouac, hubris tour, drop ceiling"); an airplane tree with roots or a cloud with lightning dangling, Icarus-like in German ("Wirt deinen Kopf an die Sonne, zum den Friedhofsgarten zü befruchten, in der Stadt in der du stehst"), and a globalist French weather balloon over a partially frozen landscape ("J'ai gonflé mes amis avec des biscuits du beurre de cacahouètes remplis d'hélium pour voir le monde"). These early pieces are remarkably aerial, yet in tension with the ground, flights of imagination that remind one of the ballooning housing prices and atmospheric ambitions of late twentieth and early twenty-first century globalization and neo-liberal thought.

As the crisis deepened, 2008 saw new pieces in Spanish, Russian, Polish, and Hmong; languages that seem to contain within them fragments of the wreckage of this same globalization, including post-Communism. The Polish image, of an oversized television satellite dish perched Vertov-like on a river barge, seems to offer hints of a focal point in the moving camera itself. (*Obrazy i zaniku traci sens, tylko ruch kamery posiada odsetek, w samym centrum burzy,* "Images fade and lose meaning, only camera movement holds us, in the center of the storm.") While the Hmong piece, a hypermobile shopping-cart cell tower suggests that assemblage or collage might be a strategy at the crossroads for buying time. (*Lub sij hawm dau los lawm zuiz, los lus yuav tsum loov mus, qhib lub tawb tsau dab, taug tus dej ntawm peb ibsab*, "Recycling words buys time, to open cages for ghosts, to walk the river beside us") The local allusion here, with St. Paul, MN having the largest Hmong population in the United States, also seems strategic, the refugee technologies of the migrant, the homeless and the pop-up artistic community.

By 2009 and into 2010, themes like the "obliterated self" in Japanese suggest a transformation in the artist and the subject. (*壊滅させられた自己が制御と名声を入れます、それが落ちる（とき・から・につれて・ように）それが再びそれ自身に会うまで、世界がエッジにおいて汚*, "Obliterated self lets in control and fame, as it falls, the world blurs at the edges, until it meets itself again"). The "falling man" in Objibwe, takes one back in a tower of blocks to one of the most powerful symbols of 9-11 (*Wayaabishkiiwed akwaandawebizo ajidin aapijishin*, "White Man goes up fast, holds it upside down, falls hard"). While the concept of maps erasing the past in Norwegian visualized as a television antenna drill, makes the viewer wonder if all grounding is false, radically disconnected from the surroundings of place (*Glimt og hjertet eksploderer, polarisere til ukjente kart, det sperrer inne hjernen,* "Blink and the heart explodes, polarized to maps, that erase the past").

What become the last two and perhaps most iconic pieces of the series, in Arabic (2011) produced in the aftermath the Arab Spring and in Korean (2010) during a heightened period of North-South tensions, seem almost apocalyptic. The Arabic piece, is the most Dürer like, with a black-hole sun in the upper left

corner of the piece. الأنى الفجر، في. طائشة رصاصات و المحتجين المحققين الإنصهار، مراكز الفوسفورية، التوقيعات.)

الحب مسيرات ضد قاسية العصابات بين الحرف تبادل مؤامرة.إليه الحاجة في مستقبل هندسة تشكيل يعيد الأدنى

"Phosphorous signatures, fusion centers, investigative protestors: At the global market stray bullets are recycled for geometry-of-need futures where conspiracy gangsters exchange blunts against vigils"). The Korean piece, with Jackson Pollack-like splatter surrounding an almost otherworldly and jellyfish-like energy blob feeding on power lines, likewise has a deep and oceanic ecological pessimism.

퇴각훈련이 중단되면 저승사자가 명부를 정리하느라 바다는 핏빛으로 타오른다.

"Cleaning up Heaven with number crunching holds retirement exercises at a standstill while the ocean burns blood"). From these iconic images the viewer may work backwards, like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, surveying the wreckage and perhaps finding ways to approach the cruel optimism of these years. A new piece in Esperanto (2016), not included in the original collection, suggests something else perhaps, more polyrhythmic than electric, like the poetic snippets that form the titles.

Lauren Berlant argues that "the energy that generates [the] sustaining commitment to the work of undoing a world while making one *requires* fantasy to motor programs of action, to distort the present on behalf of what the present can become." [*Cruel Optimism* (2011), p. 263] This requires what she calls a "surrealistic affectsphere" that creates the space for "bruising processes of detachment from anchors in the world, along with optimistic projections of a world that is worth our attachment to it." Bruises and projections, floating spheres in the process of detachment, Smuda gives us these vividly, electrically, fantastically, and in blue.

- Robert Batchelor, November 2017

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