

Chris Doyle

Apocalypse Management: Telling About Being One Being Living (2009)



There is an unexpected and disconcerting quality to Chris Doyle's immense and provocative video installation, *Apocalypse Management: Telling About Being One Being Living* (2009). Presented on a very large screen, the projection is impossible to take in at a single glance. Scanning across the landscape, we find scene after scene of crumbling and destroyed buildings, fallen bridges, burned out cars and upturned roadways. So much is familiar. It recalls so many of the images that have flashed and streamed across our television and computer screens in the past several years, and that too many of us have lived. But something is somehow wrong. Is this one place or many? We know one building, but surely that bridge belongs elsewhere. We are clearly not quite where we think we are. We are, in fact, lost. And that effect is even more unsettling than the images of destruction themselves.

Doyle dispenses with the points of the compass. In fact, he has based his animated landscape on a whole array of disasters, natural and otherwise. He has merged Sichuan, China and New Orleans, Louisiana; Gaza and the Republic of Georgia; Banda Ache, Sumatra and Baghdad, Iraq; Kabul, Afghanistan and northern renaissance paintings. The synthetic landscape recalls the semi-imaginary, panoramic landscapes of Hans Memling, where the stories unfold simultaneously across the space of the painting. The carefully rendered destruction recalls the *Purgatory* of Heironymus Bosch.

Grasping for signposts, we find them awry. We are disoriented. The touchstones of place – landmark buildings and avenues, the line of the shore and the course of the river – are all missing or misplaced. Doyle has created an anti-geography: a geography that aides only in helping the viewer become lost.¹

The question, then is why has he done this? Why create, in lavish and compelling detail, a geography that disrupts our sense of place, leaving us disoriented and unsettled? Perhaps feeling lost is a more productive state than it generally gets credit for being. In

¹ Robert Abrams, "Image, Object, and Perception in Thoreau's Landscapes: The Development of Anti-Geography", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Sep., 1991), pp. 245-262.

Walden, the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau argued that being lost was an indispensable condition.

. . . and not till we are completely lost, or turned round -- for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world -- do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature. Every man has to learn points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are . . .²

So perhaps Doyle is not just being geographically devious. Perhaps it is like the language games played by Gertrude Stein, from whom Doyle lifts his lovely sub-title. It is easy to be lost in Stein's prose. Here, we find ourselves searching, longing to place ourselves, to put points on our compass. But the scene is vast and strange. We must spend more time with the images, scan them more carefully and make sense out of the senselessness and placelessness.

Slowly, deliberately, we are drawn to characters, some so small they could easily be missed amidst the rubble. They are so much more debris in a cascade of wreckage, but we find we need them. We need to re-build and so too do these climbing, grasping and moaning people. They strive, and we search. We all find strength and a purpose, and a self, we did not expect to find.

Following the video as it loops, we are confronted first with a crushed and moaning man, a singular character isolated in a field of white. He appears to be compressed beneath a pile of boulders. As the tableau slowly dissolves into focus around him, we can see he is buried beneath a ruined building. His plaintive cry is oddly operatic, compellingly musical, yet clearly one of both physical and emotional pain. Spinning at his side, like a secondary saint in a side panel of a medieval triptych, is a lost soul impaled on what may be a tree or a broken telephone pole. There is no question as to the physical condition of the saint, but in his struggle there is the suggestion of flight, of transcendence. This idea is quickly and beautifully reinforced by the startling emergence from the wreckage of a crow, gloriously black and off in flight almost before we sense his presence.

The entire projection then begins a slow progression, scanning across the fields of debris, passing more struggling victims of the earthquake or war, tsunami or bombing. Some cling to girders, others hide beneath rubble, but all of them strive, try and struggle. For some it is clearly hopeless, yet they hope, and seek and try nonetheless. It is impossible not to be moved, not to join them.

The triptych is soon completed by a third panel on the left, which is filled by a young woman who is stuck at the bottom of a pit who achingly reaches for a chain and hook that remain just beyond her grasp. Over and over she leaps, never quite reaching her goal. There is pathos here, but hope and admiration swell inside us as well.

² *Walden*, Ch. 8, "The Village".

Eventually, from the depths of the debris, there rises a mournful yet expectant song. There are no words, only beautiful, gripping and undeniable tones. If the impaled saint was our first landmark, this sorrowful yet unbroken diva, a Madonna without her child, is undoubtedly the center point of this journey. While the signposts of place are at best unreliable, this figure signals clearly and with a glorious and exultant voice that she is not ruined. The buildings continue to fall around her, and the paths through the debris remain stark and desolate. But the destruction around her is not what we have come here to know. She is the hub, the axis from which we can find our way and ourselves.

The projection then shifts to a languorous pan across the devastation, offering our first opportunity to grasp the extent of the damage. It is also our chance to grasp the bent, undulating nature of the space, much like a Baroque piazza. More characters emerge, each with their own shameful wounds and their own unique compensations. A richly saturated upper panel contrasts sharply with the gray, dust strewn lower panel where the characters can be clearly seen.

Suddenly, the upper panel is gone. Only white remains. It is the same placeless space, now devoid even of debris. Slowly, each in his turn, the suffering ones find their way into this panel. Isolated, they become both solitary and exceptional. Each has struggled, and each has failed, yet each also has transcended and surpassed their struggle. Each surmounts the destruction, the devastated landscape, and confounds the power of war and nature. These small creatures, lost in an impossible and hopeless place, simply and purely survive. Their triumph is not a victory over death or suffering, it is merely persistence.

The piece is projected large enough to allow us to immerse ourselves, and to lose ourselves, in the rubble. We find our way out, and we find how simple and necessary it is to be hopeful despite the devastation.

This is not the first time Chris Doyle has effectively disrupted our sense of place. In *Freeze Frame*, a video from 2004, Doyle presented a stunningly concise watercolor of the view from his studio across the East River to the missing World Trade Center towers. Here, a perplexing live river mixed seamlessly with the drawing, and slowly froze into place. The landscape was both imaginary and real, both metaphor and representation. It was clearly a place and yet not a place. The impact was chilling, and brought home the stark reality and enduring outcome of the devastating attack in 2001.

With *Untitled House Series*, he isolated and de-contextualized hundreds of American dwellings. His tiny, lovingly rendered houses floated, slipped and glided across sheets of startlingly white paper. Did it matter where the house was? Did the paper indicate snow, sand or the soulless landscape of the American suburbs? The oddest effect was the instant desire the miniature bungalows, cottages, A frames and farmhouses conjured in the viewer. You felt a desperation to know where you were, where the house was and who lived in it. We do not enjoy being lost, even if it is good for us.

Apocalypse Management takes us to a much darker, as well as more elaborate and frightening space. While the characters provide touchstones, they are hardly signposts back to the place we came from. Doyle leaves us lost so, as Thoreau noted, we can finally realize where we are.

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