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PATERLIMPSEST

Paragon

Toby Paterson has coined a new word. It has a massive plastic form, enunciated in solid concrete, though weightless and as yet utterly meaningless. But how long can he preserve it thus, guard it against our filling it up with meanings? And where did he get it? A word is not just something you conjure up entirely out of your own whimsy after all. For the moment we're overwhelmed by his generosity, he sends us this weightless, colourful, tender gift again and again with loving care, and we are disarmed —for the moment— of our lexical chains.

'I just couldn't live with the pretence of objectivity' says Paterson. And for once, subjectively, silently, autistically, solipsistically, we can all be in perfectly tacit and meaningless agreement. For Paterson's eloquence brings us —in splendid isolation— the pure forms of the past glories of 20th century modernist architecture. 'Form follows Function' may have been the rallying cry of that era and its modernist project, but no matter our own petty, individual and particular histories and opinions, we must all admit now that History has rendered the functions these constructions were intended to perform as more or less defunct, exhausted, defeated, abandoned, unwanted, forgotten or marginalized. We are left, that is to say, with an expression which has, as yet, no agreed new and necessary content. It's this very emptiness that allows Paterson to exploit it as an ideal. It is unreplenished, bearing no empirical weight of objectivity. But is it thus also without compare?

Paradigm

Paterson's precise and definite renderings of both details (concrete emergency stairways are a favourite) and full buildings from the masters of the modernist era —like Corbusier, Lasdun, and Gillespie Kidd and

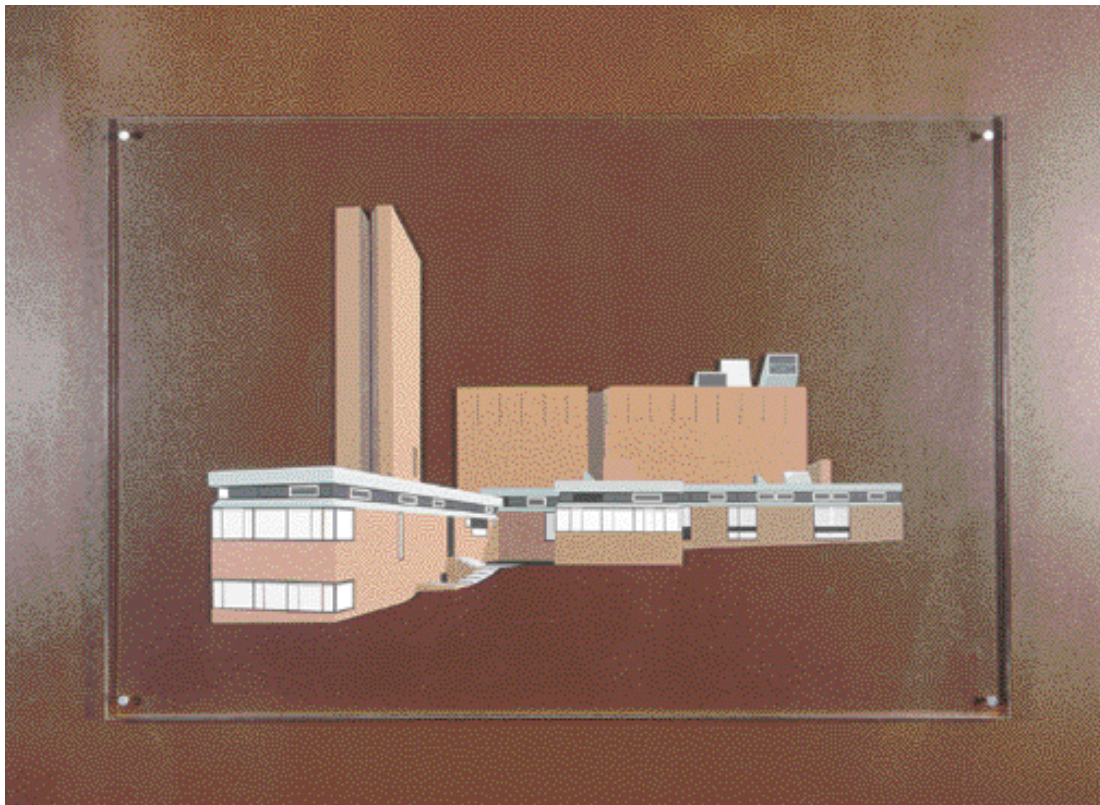
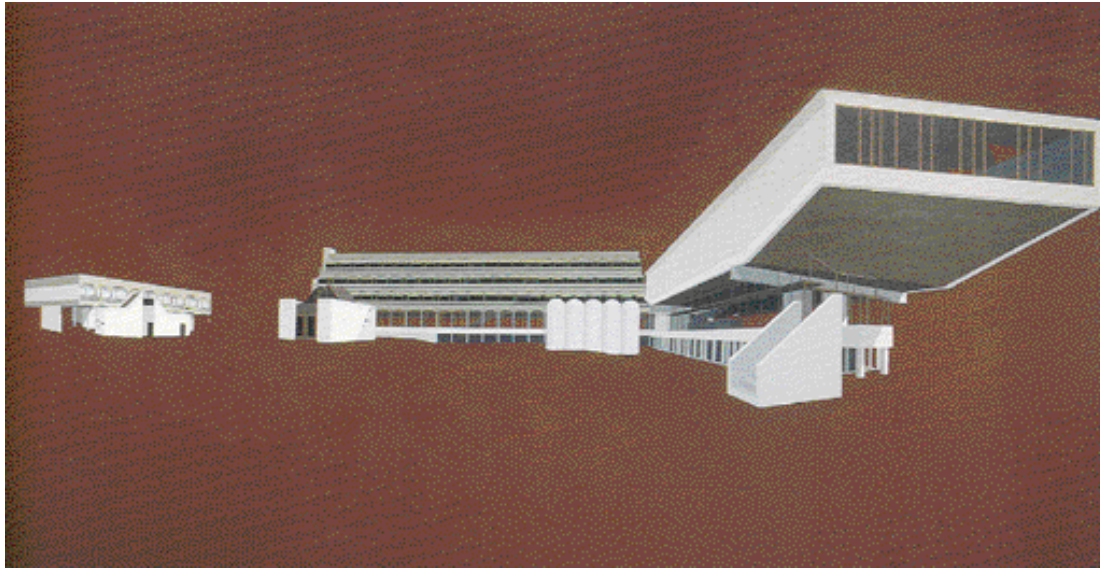
Coia— give us the image of the object perfectly as it was conceived in its heyday, yet at the same time that image seems to float in an ironically ethereal set of quotation marks.

'Painting directly onto the wall and onto perspex came from a dissatisfaction with conventional materials such as canvas.' he says 'I try to make images that sidestep the medium in which they are rendered, to allow an uncluttered view of the subject and the ideas that surround it. I try to get rid of as much as possible, so that only the image remains.'

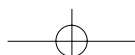
For all its seeming concern with architectural 'Grands Projets', history and the public realm, Paterson's project here is a very different, very much more lonely and introverted one than that described as pertaining to those 19th century French 'devils' in Diana Periton's *Coupe Anatomique* (see p.42). Periton describes those pictorial tableaux of Paris as 'seductively banal', where the 'banal' is defined as having 'mysteries ... laid bare'. Paterson's modernist tableaux could equally be described as being banal, but in his less humanistic case, the definition would have to substitute the word 'empty' for 'bare', thus removing the latter word's (Christian) connotations of suffering humanity. But neither could Paterson's occasional depiction of an interior (like the stairway) be described accurately as a *cross-section* or even as a content of the outer form: these are rather objects liberated from context (and so from objectivity), purified of any notion of instrumentality, isolated from the flows of people and things which are exposed and processed so viciously in *Coupe Anatomique*.

Indeed if it is true at all to say that the history of western thought and art has been one long round of swings from obsession with the truth in the infinite to the obsession with the truth in the finite, from the





Top: Seminary in a woodland setting
Bottom: Church in a New Town
Both from 'New Façades', CCA, 2003



metaphysical to the empirical, the ideal to the particular, the abstract to the natural, and back again, then perhaps we should not be surprised to find a more congenial ground for comparison with Paterson's pure *post* modernist forms in that period of *pre* recent history when Paris first appeared as the *Capitale du Monde*. Naturally the 12th and 13th centuries have left us a shorter and much less colourful record of their cultural activities than did the 19th, but what more do we need when the great Gothic cathedrals, representing the summit of achievement in theology, art, architecture, sculpture, artisanry, engineering, — and according to some—philosophy, still stand? The architect indeed, is accorded in the medieval (and specifically Scholastic) period an exemplary status amongst artists —or rather amongst *creators*. Like the Christian God of the Scholastic philosophers, the architect was seen to create not merely as *imitatio* from nature perceived through the fallible senses as a model, but from his own idea he creates an object which did not have any previous material model. His drawings represent nothing more than his idea, some pure form taken directly from his intellect.

Just so, Paterson claims that with architecture as a subject, he can marry two apparently very disparate approaches to his art. Namely a painterly visual aspect and the more intellectual or conceptual approach normally associated these days with the installation artist. Or as that top gymnast, Thomas of Aquinas, noted for his high swinging antics through the vast nave of that Gothic Cathedral of Learning that was the Sorbonne, once wrote, '*sicut domus praeexistet in mente aedificatoris, et haec potest dici idea domus*'

(thus the house pre-existed in the mind of the architect: and this can be designated as the idea of the house, *Summa Theologia I, 15, 1*)

Painter

But what is it about Paterson's language that we find so vaguely threatening? Is it because we know that this isn't architecture at all but just painting? Is it because, as often as not, the painting itself doesn't even exist any more?

'I've never been happy with the limitations of stretched canvas' says Paterson 'it's the commodity aspect that is worrying'

And how can we find it threatening if it is allegedly so bland? And how can it even be bland if so much of it doesn't even exist? —It's all very well to talk about Scholastic philosophy, but Aristotle himself just wouldn't stand for any of this *is it/isn't it* business.

Unlike, say Piranesi (an architect who became famous for his artistic drawings, rather than an artist who is becoming known for his architectural drawing style) Paterson admits —at least of his latest show at the Barbican in London, featuring buildings from Rotterdam, Berlin and Coventry— that his is a less than didactic approach to experiencing these cities.

He is ignorant, for example, of the names of the architects of many of the chosen buildings, and he preferred to spend more time in the actual cities wandering around with a notebook in his hand, to researching the environmental history.

It is thus not, however, the first time that the 'otherness' of a whole epoch has been exposed by architectural draughtsmanship. If Piranesi trained with his uncle as an engineer and architect, and had a stonemason father, then it was as an engraver that he will forever be remembered as 'virtually the inventor of Rome's tragic beauty.' And if Piranesi's mature technique owes so much to the genius of the great Baroque Age —then like his contemporaries in the literary and artistic world, Goethe, Goya and Hogarth, he exploits its adjustments of perspective and its massings of solid and void for chiaroscuro effect and so on to present a nightmarish, megalomaniac, phantasmagorical vision of the horrors inherent in that genius.

As Marguerite Yourcenar, in her fine article *The Dark Brain of Piranesi*, said, 'We cannot help thinking of our theories, our systems, our magnificent and futile constructions in whose corners some victim can always be found crouching.'

Indeed, although again like his contemporaries named above, Piranesi has populated his oeuvre with tiny, grotesque, tortured individuals, we find as we study his technique that the goal of the 'mysteries ... laid bare' is achieved —as with Paterson— by means of an emptying out, by the void, and sometimes also by a subsequent overlapping of other forms. The gibbets, ladders, wheels and other machines that Piranesi added to the second edition of the *Carceri* compounded the tortured darkness in more than a literal sense, and the crosshatchings in that edition also became darker and deeper.

It is further worth drawing attention to the fact that just as the *Carcere d'Invenzioni* portrays buildings which are precisely that —*inventions*—pure fancy, which never really existed, so of the actual monuments which Piranesi engraved elsewhere, it is estimated that at least one third of them have now disappeared. For again, striking parallels can be drawn with Paterson. Despite the fact that his period takes in the last 50 years and represents its subjects in 'pristine' form, many of the buildings which Paterson has painted either no longer exist —like for example, the campanile of the St Bride's Church in East Kilbride by Isi Metzstein, demolished in 1987 (see bottom image p.12) —; or exist now in a much deteriorated state — Metzstein's St Peter's Seminary (see top image p.12)Cardross is now a hollow dilapidated shell, overgrown and covered with graffiti (see p.51)—; or could even in their heyday never have been viewed as presented by Paterson's drawing —the St Peter's Seminary as represented in perspective by Paterson could in truth only be viewed thus by hovering some 30-40m above a wooded gully to the NW of the building.



It is evident then, that although on the face of it, his work may at first seem somewhat light and straightforward, Paterson, like Piranesi with the Baroque, is not involved in a simple cataloguing or recording of the architectural achievements, enduring or otherwise, of 20th century modernism. Paterson's engagement with the unsaid or unspeakable ideas of modernism does what's more, take on an acutely personal aspect.

It appears with the above examples, that Paterson has had some personal obsession with reproducing in his own stylised way the architectural works of Isi Metzstein, the one time principal of the Glasgow modernist architectural firm Gillespie, Kidd and Coia (GKC). But even this work does not exist in quite as straightforward a way as one feels it ought to or could do. In the first place, it is known that Metzstein was impressed, nay flattered, by Paterson's work, and that he and his wife would have liked to have purchased a painting of St Peter's Cardross. —Remarkable really, given the anomalous anarchitectural take, outlined above, that Paterson had on the building; but anyhow, sadly for Metzstein it proved impossible as Paterson, in his stated anxiousness to avoid the 'commodity aspect', had only painted these representations of St Peter's directly onto the wall of the CCA gallery in Glasgow where the prize winning show took place. Thus the painting had been erased, or painted over after the show, and no longer exists.

Metzstein subsequently purchased some other, smaller work —so much for avoiding 'commodification'— but the paterimpsest (if it can be allowed that thus we may start to define this abysmal situation in a word which cannot be pronounced at large) becomes inevitably more complicated when we find out that Paterson now has Metzstein for his real world landlord. Paterson is currently occupying the former offices of GKC architects (defunct) and making his domestic living space in the building which was formerly the great modernist architects' place of work, and where the plans of these very buildings named above were drawn up.

What, Paterson seems to say, can we do with such a scene, the making of a place, except keep grafting other non-existent layers on top, so 'avoiding the pretence of objectivity'.

It was in just such a spirit surely, that Theophile Gautier —one of Periton's 19th century French devils—said he would have liked to see *Hamlet* performed in a setting based on Piranesi's *Carceri*. And if we were provoked to provide analogies with Paterson's work, what could be more appropriate to the modestly gaping abysses around Paterson's palimpsests than to see one of Pinter's banal tragedies performed on one of his non-existent modernist flat roofs?



Pinter

In the first place is it possible to coin a word that has no meaning?

And in the last place is its use not always more important than its ultimate meaning?

Readers will of course recognise this dilemma for the one elaborated in Deleuze's *Anti-Oedipus* as characterising the tussle between the ethnologists and the psychoanalysts.

We all know that the symbol ultimately *means* the phallus, but what are we using it for?

We must be careful, that is to say, with the erections of Our Fathers.

And if in the house of Metzstein the young Paterson is just *going over the same old ground*, living through it rather than working it out (albeit in much prettier colours than the first time), are we to understand the palimpsest as the literary/artistic modality of incest? Is it just a question of transgression?

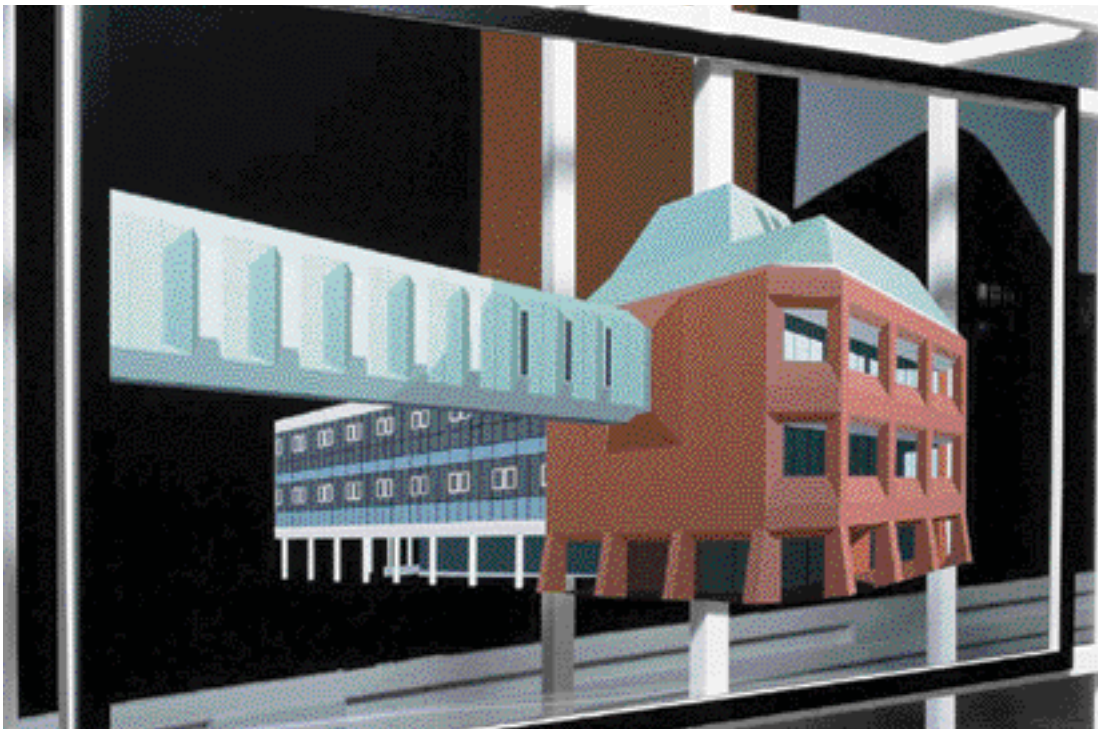
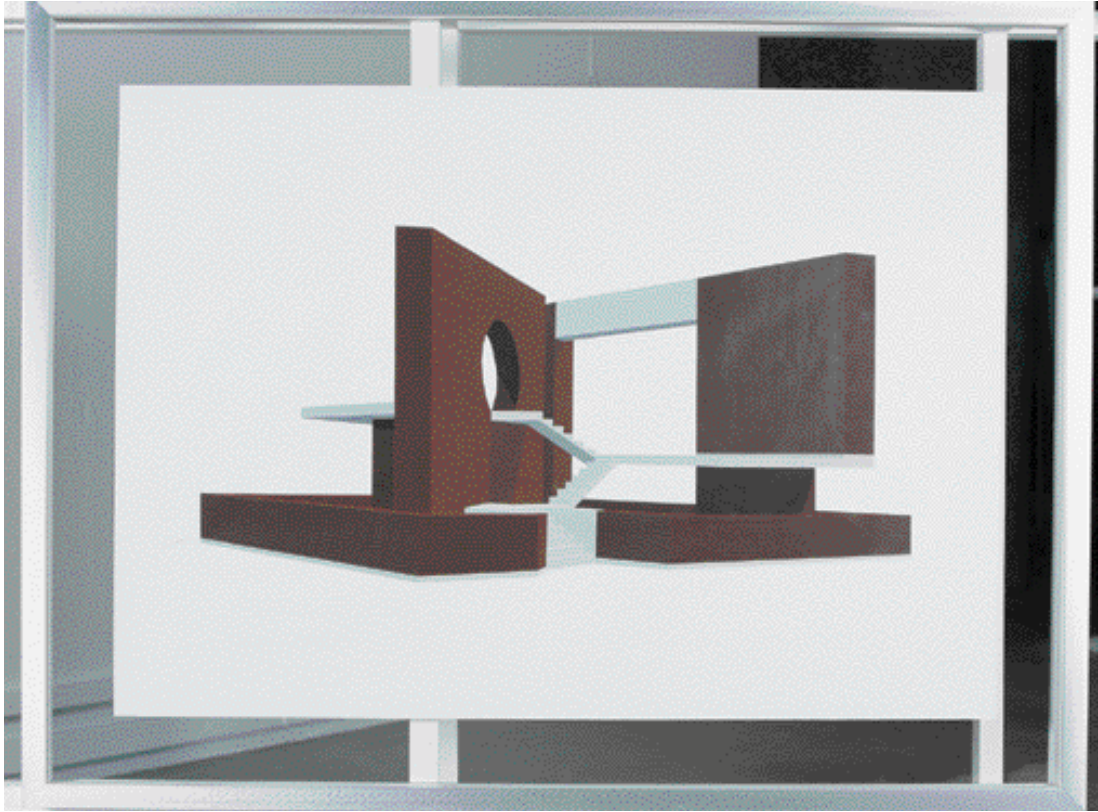
There are at any rate no human figures amongst Paterson's works. They are empty, not bare. Unlike that *locus classicus* for the depiction of modern urban angst —the paintings of Edward Hopper— Toby Paterson's work places the viewers themselves rather than a painted protagonist in direct confrontation with these urban forms. Like some post-modern Ozymandias, 'Look on these pure ideological forms and despair' this artist seems to say to us. Or is it 'Look ... and rejoice!?' For in no-one else's hands is the technique of single point perspective revealed quite so gaily as the grim tool of a now inscrutable absolutism. To what scrutiny could we possibly subject these isolated, empty forms, how could we decode them, if they are presented to us without context, without grounds or programmes, *hors de famille*?

Here we might find rewarding a closer study and comparison with Hopper's work, because not only does Hopper in many of his paintings present us with similar modernist forms, but in his case they are

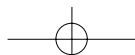
depicted in at least an appearance of totality, within a social, architectural or urban context. One painting in particular —*Office in a Small City*— throws up some interesting parallels. From an open and light-filled interior of an ostensibly 'modernist' building an individual gazes out over a late 19th/early 20th century stone-built city laid out on

a grid. The city represented could just as easily be post-war Glasgow as any North American city.

On closer inspection we see that the white platinic



Both images here from 'After the Rain', Barbican, 2005



forms of the 'modernist' building are not at all detailed; they are in fact even more pure, or ideal, than anything in Paterson's representations, and they contrast with the 'everyday reality' of the carved stonework facades of the buildings opposite, which form its urban context. The painting can thus only represent a dream or a vision of the modernist hygiene. Not only that, but when we look down in the right hand corner of the painting we see that a 'traditional' ornamental façade has, somewhat surreptitiously, been fixed to the street side elevation of the building. (a façade of sufficiently articulate profundity to erase a pre-existent depth void of signifying content! —what is this, paterlimpsest à l'envers? —you better watch your ass, Daddy-oh!)

So even in its ostensibly clean and happy visionary aspect, with Hopper in 1953 we see the modernist project cannot show its face openly in public. It is, evidently, the desire which cannot speak its name. But as with Paterson's decontextualised images, we wonder with this platonic, idealised image, if the 'modernist project' as such, as we know it or think we recognise it, is really the subject here, and not something else, something missing, something which is prohibited, which cannot yet be said, or understood if it is said, because it has not been properly codified, given a language for our understanding?

As O'Doherty says in his book *American Masters*,

'Hopper's scenes not only invite literal comments on the observer and the observed, they play a game of hide and seek in which the artist's pursuit of his identity is pursued by the audience. The elements of such a game are part of the picture's content — disappearance, silence, stealth, suspense, bafflement, glimpses— but no denouement.'

A Deleuzian analysis might not so much help us to understand these images or why they are prohibited or evidently transgressive, but to see why we cannot understand them and why in their very emptiness for us we find them threatening and disturbing. Why, in the case of one artist must these pure forms be hidden behind an ornamental façade, and why with the other do the naked projections into the void leave us feeling so uneasy? In Oedipal formations Deleuze sees the language of capitalist society as setting limits and regulations to inhibit pure flows of desire. Just as the pure forms in Hopper's work are prohibited, have to be hidden behind a façade, recoded that is, in order to participate with the society of buildings, with the family of buildings around the city square, so Deleuze would tell us that the Oedipal formations organise and structure our language so that desire production as a natural flow from within to without is repressed and recodified such that desire can only be spoken of, understood and expressed as a lack —a need, he might say, for the Oedipal façade of mummy-daddyism.

In a description of the 'catastrophic' repressive effects on desire of Freudian Oedipalism, Deleuze makes a criticism that could almost be used as a direct

description of *Office in Small City*,

'psychoanalysis was shutting up sexuality in a bizarre sort of box painted with bourgeois motifs, in a kind of rather repugnant artificial triangle thereby shifting the whole of sexuality as production of desire so as to recast it along entirely different lines, making of it a 'dirty little secret', the dirty little family secret, a private theatre rather than the fantastic factory of Nature and Production.'

These pure forms —stripped of all conventional facades of stone facings and now also of their defunct sociological and economic meanings and functionalisms, surge out of Paterson's works towards us and are simply uncodifiable. Strip the façade from the *Office in a Small City* and what do the people across the way see?

As Deleuze says,

'What is repressed is desiring production. It is the part of this production that does not enter into social production or reproduction. It is what would introduce disorder and revolution into the socius, the non-coded flows of desire.'

Is Paterson then, asking us for revolution —or at least apostasy— in allowing him to say openly this word again and again when he knows we cannot comprehend it and pin it down? If as Deleuze says, 'Interpretation is our modern way of believing and being pious.' then yes, by refusing to let it be understood, by refusing to keep it in the family, by exposing to us precisely and definitively what is going on or not in his father's house of Metzstein, he is saying no to a big open secret in which none of us in our own most secret moments will always not know we are all complicit.

But if this is all too hard on us perhaps we could equally evoke Pinter's play being performed atop Paterson's non-existent modernist flat roof to make things if not exactly objective then a bit more plain, a bit more banal. His work, as the playwright himself once declared, is really concerned with 'the weasel under the cocktail cabinet.'