

Fortresses and Frontiers

Roslyn Oxley 9 Gallery, Sydney

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The city is a jumble of light. Throughout the metropolis, natural and artificial forms of light collide and meld. Light flashes and bounces and reflects off buildings and cars. At key, fleeting moments, the urban viewer can be made aware of light. Twilight, itself a blend of solar radiation and chemical pollutants, coats the city with rapidly changing light. The sky becomes pink or salmon, buildings gleam, the eye adjusts as neon signs replace the fading dusk. The city takes on its nocturnal glow. Yet at all times there is a fluctuating mixture of light. Morning light, daylight, twilight; street lights, traffic lights, flashing lights; head-lights, tail-lights, shop lights; house lights, TV light, fluorescent light, floodlights; light boxes.

Photography is light-writing. The imprinting of light on photo-sensitive material. What is it to write with light boxes? Anne Zahalka has taken the light box out of its advertising precinct, and filled it with alternative images of the city. The light boxes which sprinkle the city are already curious phenomena. Enframing benches at bus shelters, they seem to offer their own form of shelter: the protection of light. Like the stained-glass windows of mediaeval churches, their translucence intimates another presence: the warm glow of an aura. But the twentieth century aura is of course a manufactured one, a play of light and magic focused on the commodity. Light box advertisements are little shrines, infusing products with their own secular glow.

Zahalka's light boxes exploit the properties of the apparatus. Images imprinted with natural or artificial light are augmented with the glow of neon through perspex: another intensity added to the blend of light. Yet these works are much more than kaleidoscopes of light. They reveal another aspect of the urban box: as enclosure, as fortress. The "natural" itself is a re-constructed category within the city. Zoo animals enjoy natural light, but are constrained within artificial spaces. At night, huge arenas are flooded with luminosity: these are light-theatres constructed for performing animals. Everywhere the natural and the cultural merge in constructed spaces. An artificial cave, lit by artificial light, becomes a shelter for the homeless. An absurdly bright park playground is violated by ominous shadow. An excavation site emits an eerie subterranean glow.

Human figures in these images are isolated, anxious. They are a fragile presence, surrounded by buildings that glimmer, by parks that glow with impossible light, by subways that are little prisons of light. They take their place along urban frontiers: intersections of lines and light and social scales. These are frontiers of light, where the sun's radiance meets the city's glow; there are social frontiers, where citizens prosper or struggle or barely survive. Citizens of economics, they are also citizens of light.

The city and its boxes are captured here by Anne Zahalka. re-framed and re-enclosed and re-lit in boxes of light. Light-box-writing.

John William Potts