

the modernist

31 in-between



CONTENTS

02

JAKOBSEN – BETWEEN LANDSCAPE, MODERN ART AND HISTORY Karen Fitzsimon	06
RETAIL CONTAINERS Gary Warnaby	12
TRADITION & TRANSITION: GILLESPIE KIDD & COIA James Robertson	16
SUN, SHIT, COMPOST AND AIR Silvan Linden	20
WEST BERLIN BIOTOPE MAP Sandra Bartoli	26
BROWN'S AMERICA Luca Csepely-Knorr	34
MINIATURE GARDEN CITY Vicky Jolley	40
EVERYTHING HERE IS BLISS [FRAGMENTS] Helen Angell	56
TOWER AND SLAB Eszter Bakay	46
FIRST NEW NEW TOWN Jonjo Maudsley	50
REGULAR SHAPE OF FOREVER André Stitt	52
SYSTEM OF GREEN TENTACLES Koenraad Danneels + Bruno Notteboom	58

During August 2018 I worked with the Glassball artists group as part of their ILLUME project that situated artworks in response to Skelmersdale New Town. Throughout the day on 19th August a reclamation took place by painting the concrete subway/underpass wall reliefs originally designed and installed by Mike Cumiskey who was resident artist in Skelmersdale from 1966 to 1976.

Skelmersdale, or Skem as it's known to locals, reached its 50th anniversary in 2011. Situated in West Lancashire, just a short distance from Ormskirk and Wigan, 'Skelmersdale was designed to house the overspill population of Merseyside. The result is a town ordered by loosely alphabetised housing projects, vast green space and looping roads which contain no traffic lights – only roundabouts'.¹ While some would condemn Skem as 'a planning disaster' there is evidence of utopian aspirations through the integration of housing, civic amenities, dedicated pedestrian and cycle paths and the separation of traffic and green space. You will also find the 'gold meditation dome', home of the European Centre for Transcendental Meditation (TM) Utopian Village. The founder of TM, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, became spiritual advisor to The Beatles in 1967. The Yogi was later excommunicated by the group – ironic that the TM centre is 13 miles from Liverpool, the birthplace of The Beatles. An attentiveness associated with TM might be reflected in embodied experiences of Skem. Paul Farley recalls a particular sense of being within and of the environment when he writes of growing up in Skelmersdale:

*[...] endlessly waiting for something to happen, meant it was possible to develop an attentiveness to the world around you, the infra-ordinary, [...] the oddness, and excitement of being in such a new place, [...] I became quite obsessed with the ground that lay under the weight of those concrete shapes and all that newness.*²

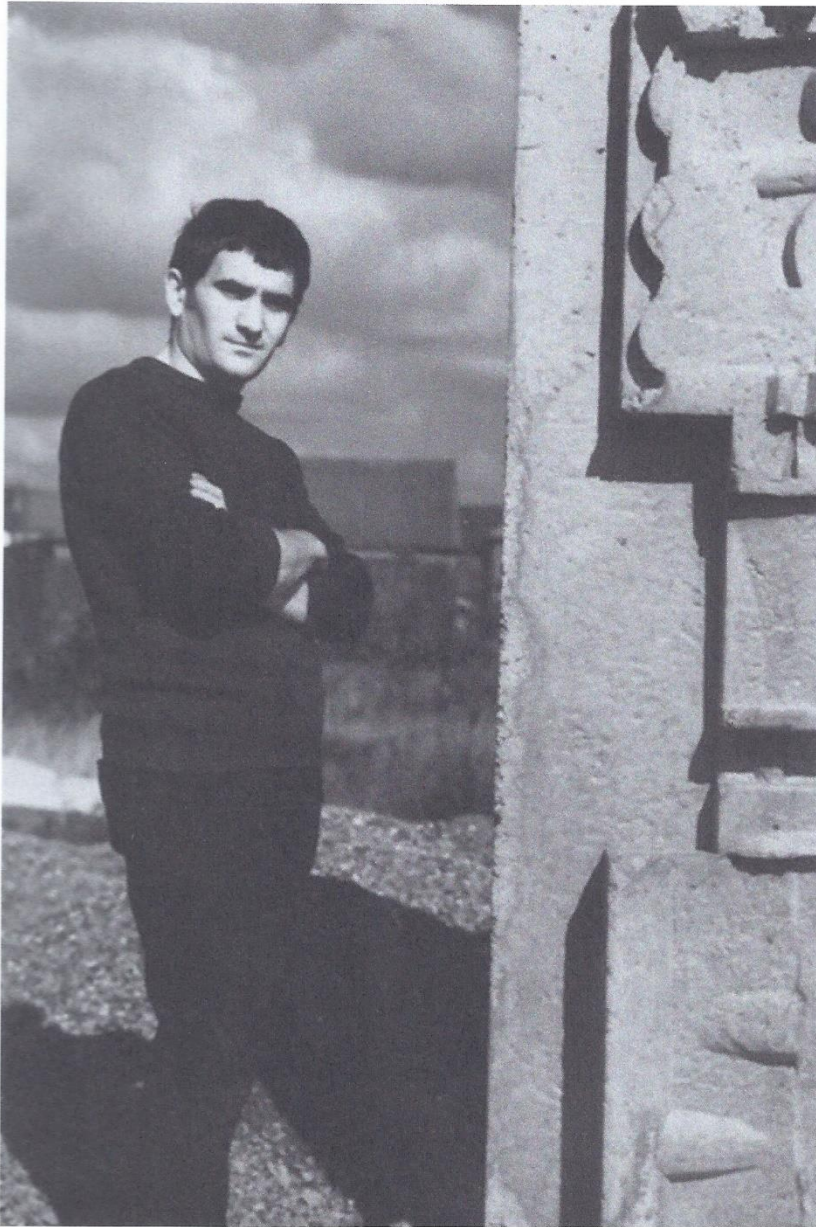
During a two-year period as artist in residence in the New Town of Craigavon in Northern Ireland (designated a New Town in 1965), I too recall embodied experiences of the here and now, and of memory, recall and the 'weight of those concrete shapes' as I passed through subways and underpasses:

*'...hometime underpass. Shadows of people rising up and vaguely staring back at childhood. Wonderland and the end of infinity, running to keep still, a lingering scent of Eden bathed in voiceless sunlight in the regular shape of forever.*³

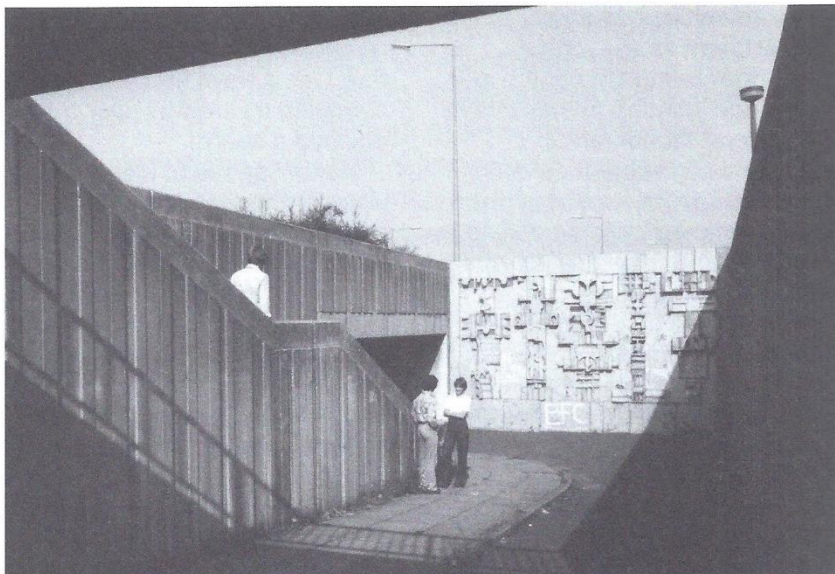
My experience of several visits to Skelmersdale corresponds with experiences during my time in Craigavon New Town in 2008, with its 'strangely intimate spaces in woods and lake-lands, of debris and residues, of demolished housing estates, civic buildings, vacant community centres and shopping precincts'.⁴ This instilled a sense of conformity and similarity as Skelmersdale and Craigavon became one and the same with their endless roundabouts, concrete underpasses, lumpy green fields and their separation of road traffic from pedestrian paths. This sense of a combined layering of memory, visual and embodied experience introduced a method of painting that involved creating transparent layers as a response to Skelmersdale. I will discuss this in more detail later but first it is important to consider how other artists responded to the context of Skelmersdale.

The Skelmersdale Development Corporation (SDC) employed three resident artists during the town's formative period of growth during the 1960s and 1970s. Ian Henderson was the first SDC artist employed to improve the 'harsh concrete environment and make it a stimulating place'.⁵ However, as there was no materials budget he was told to use leftover building materials. This meant that all three resident artists had to approach the site responsive brief through the use of available materials such as concrete and brick. Henderson himself created several large concrete signs for communal areas such as the angular signage for a surgery positioned in the New Church Farm area. His other major contribution was to create several children's adventure play areas with sculptural climbing constructions from building materials. Some of these remain in an adulterated form and many do not, having now been demolished or subsumed into the landscape.

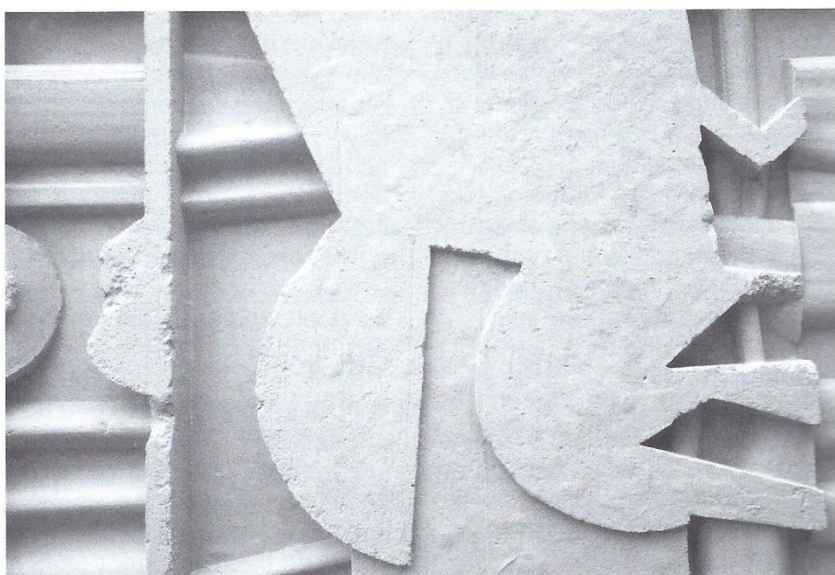
Alan Boyson was responsible for building the most well-known of Skelmersdale's concrete 'monuments', The Pyramid. Alan Boyson's work suffered from being associated with a later rejection of all things associated with Brutalism. Originally the work consisted of one large pyramid and four small ones. The large pyramid was placed above the original entrance to the Concourse Shopping Centre in Skem, but was demolished in the 1980s when a large, glass extension to the building was made. He felt 'the concrete design of the pyramid that I made under contract to the SDC was generally not well liked at the time of its construction'.⁶ There is no evidence of what happened to the other pyramids.



[a]



[b]



[c]

[a] Mike Cumiskey, 1967, Skelmersdale New Town. Copyright Lancashire Archive 2017

[b] Mike Cumiskey, 1967, Wall Relief Artwork, Underpass 1, B5312, Railway Rd. Skelmersdale New Town. Copyright Lancashire Archive

[c] Reclamation Skelmersdale 2018 Copyright Glassball Illume

The only work that remains reasonably intact is the concrete subway/underpass wall reliefs by Mike Cumiskey, who was resident artist from 1966 to 1976. Four major wall reliefs by Cumiskey were made in 1967 and positioned at underpasses on the B5312, Railway Road. These 'decorated underpasses were to guide workers to their factories' and linked Pennylands housing estates to the Gillibrands Industrial Estate.⁷ The wall reliefs are now weathered and encrusted in dirt and graffiti. The underpasses have not been maintained, their dank concrete interiors now redolent of a liminal underworld. In construction, they echo William Mitchell's work in 'concrete detailing which was carried out in carved polystyrene, attached before casting, and then cleaned to reveal the exposed concrete face'.⁸ Like Mitchell, Cumiskey utilised deeply modelled concrete, variously textured and cast against chunky sections of polystyrene with formwork acting as moulding. The designs 'were derived partly from the idea of advertising hoardings, an image and lettering'.⁹ This abstract translation of the utopian consumerist world of the 1960s seems all the more poignant when experiencing them today. The decorative portals through which, as the local employment agency proclaimed, 'Tomorrow's People Today' marched happily to work are now experienced as the abandoned remains of a previous generation's hopes and aspirations.

The Concrete Concourse of Dreams: Painting and Phenomenal Transparency: In approaching a painting response to Skem, the sense of *déjà vu* and layering of experience acted like a psychological palimpsest. Skelmersdale translated into Craigavon and likewise the 'ghosting' effect of all my New Town experiences became transparent layers of embodied experience. I returned to the use of acrylic paint and proceeded to develop a series of hard edge abstractions based on architectural forms on large wood panels. I explored a transparent technique using very thin layers of acrylic diluted with co-polymer medium that would act as a physical elision between shape, form and composition. I wanted the physical elision of the paint to act as a transmitter that would allude to or evoke subjective experience. Paint was applied in thin coats with very large square and flat brushes, almost like using a squeegee in screen printing. As one coat dried I would then apply the paint in another direction creating a translucent cross hatching texture within the medium. These layers were built up into a painting through up to 50 or more applications in various compositions of shape and form.

This simultaneous perception of different spatial locations that emerged through the process was similar to Cubist paintings. This in turn was similar to the idea of phenomenal transparency in architecture that implies a subtle and complex notion of literal transparency. Literal transparency offers simple and direct communication with no sense of presence, whereas with phenomenal transparency in architecture, space not only recedes but also fluctuates in a continuous activity.¹⁰ This allows for multiple viewpoints or perspectives to occur, and as a metaphorical device when regarding paint as a transmitter of experience. In the approach to painting that developed through this final body of work phenomenal transparency emerged as a continuous and layered dialogue between lived experience, memory, recall and the built environment.

The physical Brutalism of Cumiskey's underpasses in Skelmersdale are transitional portals that, like all the spaces and places explored, suggests that the New Town environment was and is a multi-layered and liminal experience. The development of applicable painting processes and techniques allowed ideas of transparency to emerge. This additional discursive element revealed a methodology that combined phenomenology and embodied experiences with phenomenological transparency to create paintings as an equivalence to Brutalism, creating a 'dialectic of the purist and the fragmented, montage and the memorable single image'.¹¹

- 1 Guy, P. (2016) *Skelmersdale: The Weird and Wonderful West Lancashire Town*, Liverpool, Echo, <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/skelmersdale-weird-wonderful-world-west-11280633> [accessed 3 July 2017]
- 2 Farley, P. (2015) *Skelmersdale: A New Town*, Skelmersdale: Glassball Art Projects.
- 3 Stitt, A., McKeown, J. & Johnston, M. (2000) *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*, Craigavon: Millennium Court Arts Centre. pp. 31-32
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Henderson, I. (2012) <https://modernismnorthwest.wordpress.com/category/civic-modernism/page/7> [accessed 22 Feb. 2016]
- 6 Boyson, A. (2014) <https://modernismnorthwest.wordpress.com/category/civic-modernism> [accessed 10 Sept. 2016]
- 7 Modernist North West (2014) <https://modernismnorthwest.wordpress.com/category/civic-modernism> [accessed 10 Sept. 2016]
- 8 Modernist North West (2014) <https://modernismnorthwest.wordpress.com/category/civic-modernism> [accessed 10 Sept. 2016]
- 9 Cumiskey, M. (2017) unpublished email communication with André Stitt, 18 July 2017.
- 10 Rowe, C. & Slutsky, R. (1955) *Literal Transparency and Phenomenal Transparency*, Basel, Birkhäuser Architecture.
- 11 Hatherley, O. (2008) *Militant Modernism*, Ropley, O Books.