

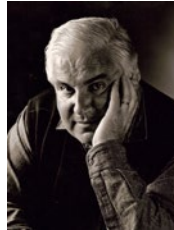
Abstraction and Light

William J.R. Curtis

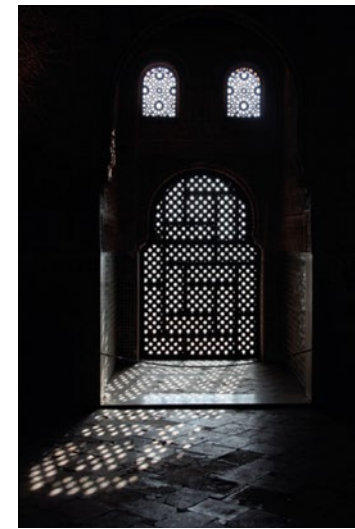
ABSTRACTION AND LIGHT

Organised by the Council of the Alhambra and Generalife, the exhibition 'Abstraction and Light' by William J.R. Curtis recently took place at the Chapel of the Palace of Charles V, Alhambra, Spain. On this occasion, an extensive bilingual catalogue (Spanish and English) was also released.

Architecture+Design carries a few glimpses of the exhibition and an extract from the catalogue—



William J.R. Curtis



Perforated screens (mashrabiya) protecting from the sun in the Throne Room (Chamber of the Ambassadors in the Alhambra) (2012)

these into an abstract calligraphy of interlocking lines and floating shapes. Like mirrors of the imagination, they reflect inner seas of the mind. If there are resemblances between the paintings and the photographs, it is because they issue from the same interior world, the same patterns of thought. These mental structures influence both perception and the creation of forms. My works in diverse media reflect a consistent way of looking at things. Abstraction is their common ground.

Referred to as "mental landscapes", my abstract paintings and drawings suggest many realities – the sea, clouds, rock strata, rain, the horizon, the forest – and yet they cannot be pinned down to any particular subject.

They remain ambiguous². There is a strong emphasis upon materials, yet the aim is to explore the immaterial. They suggest the layers, levels, traces and atmosphere of landscape while evoking some invisible spirit. They touch hidden recesses of the memory and the imagination. Form and idea need to achieve a vital tension. A work of art should communicate intuitively before it is understood. These "mental landscapes" distil my impressions of nature while also evoking memories and mythical themes. They register thoughts and intuitions and transform particular experiences. For me abstraction is a way of condensing meaning, exploring poetic ideas and probing the hidden order beyond the visible world. The hovering lines, resonant voids, horizontal or vertical striations and veils of colour suggest the mysteries of water, geology, light and landscape while hinting at the forces and presences which lie behind phenomena. I think of my works as aids to contemplation and hope to evoke a tranquil, mental space.

These drawings and paintings have nothing to do with illustrating "themes". They do not constitute a drawn or painted literature. They bear titles such as Shadows and Writing, The Gravity of Light, Space of the Mind or Zen Garden in Rain but these are invented after the fact. Titles risk tying things down to a particular reading and giving the impression that one starts out with a preconceived image or idea that is then portrayed. In fact, most of these works were "discovered"

"This is the palace of crystal; nevertheless, some have judged it to be a tempestuous and shaken ocean once they have seen it." — Ibn Zamrak', 14th century.

The exhibition 'Abstraction and Light' presents a selection of my drawings, paintings and photographs stemming from my activities as artist, photographer and historian of architecture over the years. As well as charting a voyage of discovery through a world of images and forms, the exhibition explores ways of seeing architecture and landscape with a particular emphasis

upon light, geometry, water, space and shadow. My works in all media hint at an order beyond appearances through a lyrical abstraction. Some take on the character of microcosms condensing vast natural phenomena such as the formation of clouds or the infinity of the ocean. While anchored in direct experience, they also react to invisible forces of nature and translate



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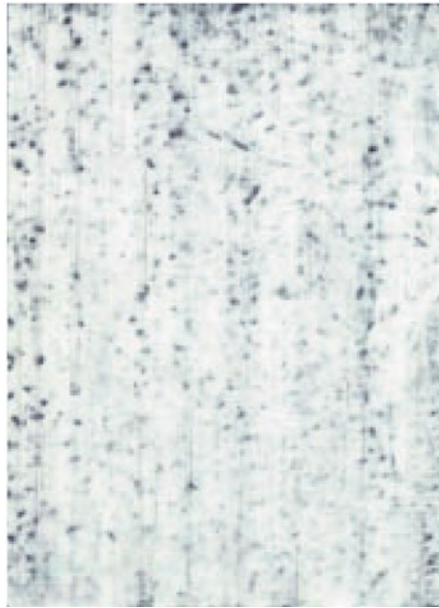
William Curtis—paintings at display



The exhibition 'Abstraction and Light'

“Landscapes themselves are sometimes haunted places in which historical phases of occupation leave layers and traces over the geological foundations laid by nature... Perhaps a work of art may embody a parallel set of erosions, excavations and markings in which layers and incised lines reveal something of the underlying structure and spirit.”

— William Curtis



The primitive Doric (Paestum, Italy)—pen and ink and industrial marker on textured card 16 x 11.5 cm (1998)



Stratified light—paint, pen and ink on thin card 29.5 x 21 cm (2004)

in the process of making rather than being planned. Some were carried out in an almost trance-like state in which the accretions of marks, lines and stains themselves triggered associations. As in calligraphy, there is a unity of expression between hand and mind, medium and gesture. In the end, one hopes to bring a picture alive in its drawing, its surfaces, its overall form and its materials. All the dynamic lines should resolve in stillness. My sources of inspiration include twentieth century abstraction, textiles, maps, calligraphy, Aboriginal bark paintings, even Palaeolithic cave paintings³. Architecture is ever present in a transformed state. I believe that a powerful abstraction enables one to fuse new unities and to give shape to a mythic content, combining personal and historical resonances. Drawings may respond to external stimuli while also being seismographs of states of mind. Light is a dominant obsession in all of my work.

Light itself is invisible: we know it mainly through its secondary effects on air, vapour, water, solids, voids, stone, plants, animal and human life – and of course on architecture. There is the light of the sun, the reflected light of the moon, and the light of far distant

stars some of which have died by the time their light reaches earth. There is the light of fire, of glowing embers, candle flames or lamps, and the reverie of staring at them; and there are all the forms of electric light from the most glaring to the most restful. For me light is associated with rays passing through specks of dust; with silvery drops and rivulets of rain on glass; with blades of schist which resemble mirrors of rock; with fissures in limestone cliffs reflected and refracted in the clear water of streams; with limpid pools on the beach and the silver shimmering of the sea towards the horizon. Then there is inner light associated with the life of the spirit, with illumination and revelation. The writings of mystics even refer to black light or the stirring of water as a mirror of the soul. There is also the luminosity of the night and of blackness: “no light, but rather darkness visible” according to Milton⁴. Possibly abstraction allows one to distil such things and pass through the material realm towards the beyond? My “mental landscapes” evoke the gravity of light, the transformation of light in water, and the presence of shadows.

Photography is concerned by definition with the impression of light. A camera is in fact a small chamber which captures the visual world and transforms it. My photographs combine the instantaneous with an abstract order frozen in time. They are lyrical spaces in themselves, almost like paintings. I do not base them on my paintings, or my paintings on them, but they issue from the same sensibility, the same way of seeing things, the same way of perceiving space. The black and white images of rocks and water, volcanic landscapes and clouds reveal my fascination with the sublime while their shadows could almost be painted in ink. If the mental landscapes suggest multiple associations and ideas, my photographs also distil earlier experiences and visual concepts, even as they frame a particular view. They no doubt reflect examples from

the history of art, but unconsciously, for there are no deliberate references. If one responds to a certain event or configuration in the outer world it is surely because it touches upon some pre-existing pattern in the mind. Memories intervene and the subject itself – a fragment of reality caught in a moment – contains its own history and its own pasts. A photograph may become a resonance chamber fusing several durations of time.

My photographs have been exhibited and published in the past under titles such as *Architectures du Monde* or *Structures of Light*⁵. Rather than being mere records of travels, they are poetic interpretations of buildings, urban spaces and landscapes. Some capture events in the theatre of public life, others suggest private reveries. Some rely upon the human figure, others rejoice in absence. As in my paintings and drawings, abstraction plays a role in concentrating upon essential qualities of what is seen and experienced. A resolved photograph communicates directly through the unity of its composition and through the immediate sense of its dominant image. As a historian I use texts to analyse and explain architecture, but photography may reveal other dimensions that words cannot convey. Sometimes I focus upon a building in its setting, sometimes upon a telling detail that suggests the order of the whole. By framing architecture one may evoke the experience and feeling of a space as well as the impact of light. Beyond appearances there are underlying energies in a site, and a photograph may sometimes capture these. Over the years I have travelled far and wide looking at examples ancient and modern, yet I am acutely aware of certain universal qualities of architecture. My photographs are invitations to see architecture and to sense something of its underlying meaning.

A photograph is not a neutral description. It is a selective frame of

external reality which reflects a point of view, unconscious desires, conceptual filters, artistic influences and recurrent visual obsessions. The historian reconstructs the past of a building, explaining how it came about and what it originally meant. The photographer reacts to its present existence and selects a way of portraying it through the viewfinder and the lens. Buildings move through time and abandon the conditions of their origin. They possess a life of their own and gather new levels of significance as they are occupied, abandoned or modified. They convey atmospheres and moods and these are forever changing, from era to era, season to season, day to day, even minute to minute. They have a special “presence” but this is modified by changes in weather and ambience. Through my images, I intuit the aura of buildings, the spirit of places and the fluctuating effects of light, even the impact of wind, rain and snow. These are some of the intangible qualities which I try to capture and convey, but without forcing the subject through the manipulation of the image. A photograph reveals something which is already there.

Architecture needs light to be rendered visible, yet light also needs architecture to acquire meaning and form. Throughout the history of architecture, light has been used to energise space, to articulate movement and to touch the mind and senses of the observer. Light is sometimes used to dissolve matter, even to evoke the ethereal and the immaterial. Light can suggest the invisible, even the divine. Depending on how it is treated, light may take on many meanings, stirring the imagination and illuminating the spirit. Most major civilisations place light near the centre of their cosmologies, evoking the planetary realm and the origin of things. Light may even take on political meaning as with the ray which passes through the oculus of the dome of the Pantheon in Rome, sanctioning the microcosm of



Uxmal, Yucatan, México, 9th c (1985)



Architectural space as visible and invisible layers, autumn (2012)



The poetry of shadows, autumn (2012)

“For William Curtis, to engage in painting – or drawing or photography – is not to play lightly on some violin of Ingres. Rather it is to plunge into the awe inspiring reality of the world. His journeys are transformed via diverse and complementary quests. The creator he already was, in a different manner, experiences direct creation. The delicate testimonies that he now exhibits – that he continues to exhibit – reveal pleasure found: the indispensable key to the realm of beauty. Restlessness and serenity coexist in the images which accompany – as if in a dream.”

– Álvaro Siza Vieira

the Imperial order in the world below by linking it to the macrocosm of the heavens above. Light, along with its complement shadow, is one of the fundamental materials of architecture. Le Corbusier, the modern master who never ceased to transform nature and the past, and who aspired to the timeless, defined architecture as “the masterly, correct and magnificent play of volumes in light”. Referring to his Chapel at Ronchamp, one of the great sacred spaces of modern architecture, he stated simply: “I compose with light”⁶.

Light varies according to geographical position, time of year and the intended purpose of the building. One thinks of the cool light of the far north bathing the sober interiors of a strict and undecorated Protestant church in the Baltic. At this latitude the winter days are short, the summer days are long, and the sun is relatively low in the sky. All is done to introduce as much light as possible through vast bays of glass and to distribute it over whitewashed walls. Light takes on an ethical dimension related to the teachings of the Bible and its supposed

enlightenment. By contrast, one thinks of the Mezquita in Cordoba (8th-10th centuries), where the summer light and heat are fierce and where shade is desirable even necessary. Here light is filtered indirectly through the roofs into cool and shaded halls of columns which evoke the unity of the Moslem community and the social order of Islam. The focal point is the Mihrab with its shimmering golden surfaces lit from a hidden source. In this instance, physical light recalls divine revelation and the metaphysical illumination cited in the Quran. Given the Islamic interdiction of images, sacred content had to be communicated by abstract means such as calligraphy, geometry and ornament.

Architecture appeals to all of the senses including those of touch, sound and smell. One cannot separate the visual aspects of light and shadow from their impact upon the psyche and the body. Surely one of the marvels of the Alhambra is the variation of temperature as one passes from one court or hall to another. The transitions through spatial layers are accompanied by variations in the intensity of light and of course by the cooling effects of water and the perfume of plants.

The sound of water, pouring, dripping, running in channels itself is soothing to the senses. In the Court of the Myrtles the rectangular water surface is perfectly still like a mirror, except for the burbling of the circular fountain basins at each end. Reflections supply stirring liquid images to the imagination. In the Court of the Lions, the water is agitated and stretched into channels which activate the space and bring the white marble floor surfaces alive. One recalls the allusions made in the poetic inscriptions to stone as solidified water, to the ocean, to water as melted pearl⁷. In the Palace of the Partal the water brings the sky down to earth and dissolves the architectural forms in patterns of light and shade as well as wobbling reflections. In the Generalife, water is joyous, agitated, playful, fruitful, refreshing to behold, and a reminder of the relation between culture and agriculture. Water, like light, is one of the fundamental materials of architecture.

In the Alhambra light flows like liquid and water comes alive like quicksilver. White marble is transformed into a shining sea. Matter is dissolved in light, and spaces recede in shadow through invisible layers. Ornamented

Light as an absence of shadow (2012)



Geometry, texture and light: the language of ornament; the Palace of the Lions (2013)

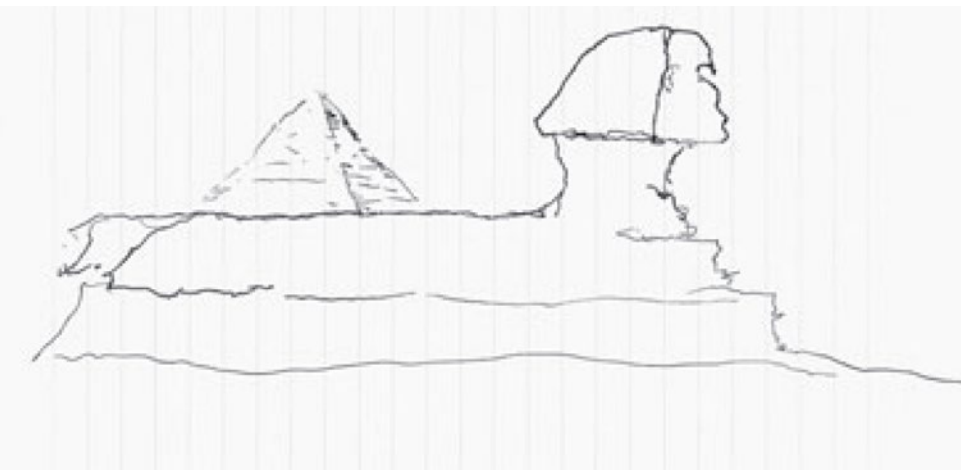
surfaces are weightless and immaterial. Light filters through skylights and caresses white marble columns and ornamented gesso surfaces. Star shaped holes in domes of dimly illuminated baths suggest images of the night sky hovering above water. Mashrabya screens pricked with dots in the deep niches of the Throne Room of the Comares Palace cast black shadows sprinkled with points of light. Syncopated columns in the Court of the Lions shatter the glare and turn attention to the marble floors and sparkling fountain in the centre of the patio. Throughout the Alhambra, light and water create luminous reflections, refractions and transparencies. Shadows are boldly stamped out in

the openings of the towers, in the stern masses of the Alcazar and in the round courtyard of the Palace of Charles V. Light and shade vibrate in the pierced filigree ornaments of the Nasrid Palaces, the vegetation of the gardens and the trellises of the Generalife. In winter when the sun is low in the sky, the rays reflect off the water casting diaphanous shadows of ripples. Then there is the light of the imagination, as in the poetic inscriptions evoking crystals, jewels and pearls.

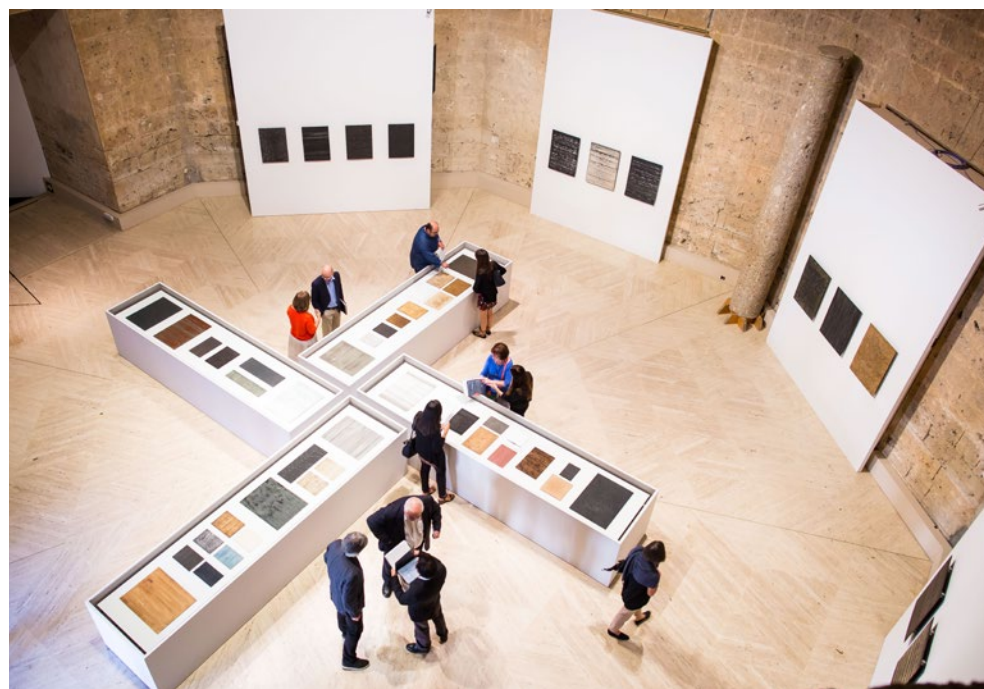
The Nasrid Palaces of the Alhambra exist on several planes of reality and in the inscriptions there are recurrent allusions to images of light, water and the heavenly sphere just as there are in the texts of the Quran. In the Surat-an-Nur we read: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche that enshrines a lamp, the lamp within a crystal of star-like brilliance". In Surat Mohammed, paradise is compared to gardens with "streams running under them"⁸. Architecture of this order draws together the material and the ideal while endowing collective myths with a tangible form. In the Alhambra, water is given many shapes which unite perception and possible meaning. The patios and water

bodies suggest spaces of the mind, even cosmic spaces of a kind. The Alhambra presents symbolic worlds but in ways that touch both the spirit and the senses directly. We need to listen when the poetic inscriptions tell us that we are in the presence of an infinite sea in the Court of the Lions,

part garden, part landscape, it is also a tourist landscape and a cultural park. Past portrayals of the Alhambra have often been encrusted in Orientalist clichés. Today, millions of snapshots are taken annually, but these rarely do more than touch the surface. In an age saturated with electronic images it is worth taking a fresh look at the Alhambra with eyes that see and with a degree of architectural and historical understanding. Can the photograph penetrate to something deeper and more essential about the place? Do such visual interpretations correspond to the original intended meanings of the architecture? Here we are confronted by a historical riddle because there are numerous scholarly debates about what the Alhambra "means". The risk with art historical and iconographical interpretations is that one may lose sight altogether of the experience of a work and the ways in which the medium of architecture is used to give shape to the worldview and cosmology behind the forms. There is an immaterial or metaphysical dimension to the Alhambra and this is transmitted through the perception of space, geometry, light, water, vegetation and landscape. In turn, the ornament provides a rich texture combining calligraphy, musical rhythms and abstractions of natural forms. Taken as a whole, the Alhambra is a place of contrasts between massive and imposing exterior forms and delicate interiors which melt into one another through spatial layers. Seen from afar it presents the image of bold military fortifications. Experienced on the inside it presents winding sequences through exquisite courtly patios and ceremonial rooms. The main buildings conjugate solids and voids as well as the transitions between them. In the Nasrid Palaces, axes and cross axes establish a clear hierarchy around the personage and symbolic importance of the Sultan and the rituals of the court. In the Palace of the Comares the centre line is in effect an



The Sphinx, Giza, Egypt, c. 2500 BC (1989)



Water and meditation: the Alhambra, the Court of the Myrtles in the chill of winter (1993)



Black industrial paint and silver point on compact card 70 x 50 cm (2007)

or that in fountain of the Lindaraja we have to do with a "pearly sculpture of translucent light"⁹. We are seduced immediately by the mirror surfaces and inverted reflections of the water body in the Court of the Myrtles, even before we intellectualise and compare it to an Islamic image of Paradise or an idealised emblem of irrigation. We are transported into the celestial realm when we see the light rays falling the crystalline star-shaped dome, honeycomb cells and stalactites of muqarnas in the Hall of the Abencerrajes. Such is the magic of the architectural art.

A historic site like the Alhambra combines fragments of different periods, as well as absences and restorations. What one sees is incomplete. Part citadel, part palace,



Platforms and earth, Palenque, Mexico, 8th c (1985)



Garden in southwest France, William Curtis, project sketch (1991)

axis of state and royal reception. The Throne Room is capped by a ceiling representing the Seven Heavens and implying a vertical world axis. In the Patio of the Lions the polygonal fountain and cross axes provide a centralised cosmic diagram with channels indicating the four cardinal directions, an arrangement suggesting the rivers in Paradise evoked in the Quran, as well as the fusion of empire and universe. These lines are experienced from changing positions as the route is threaded indirectly through the patios. If light and water are among the materials of the Alhambra so is space. One void melts into another. The layers of the architecture are themselves ambiguous for they recede into shadows and suggest varying illusions of depth. From the interiors, there are framed views of patios of greenery in one direction, external panoramas of the landscape

and distant horizons in the other.

This telescoping of near and far, this sensation of a floating palace in the air, confirms the political dominance and significance of the site as a controlling citadel in the realm of the Sultanate. The architecture of the Alhambra is about looking but it is also about being seen. The buildings frame their own beauty while providing prosceniums and stages on which the actors of the court played their official roles. The numerous miradors and framed views of landscape suggest the importance of the interaction between monuments and setting, between ruler and ruled. The ensemble of the Alhambra including the Alcazar and the Generalife constitutes an entire symbolic landscape which is in turn linked to the Albacin opposite and to the Sierras in the distance. Water is essential for survival and the palace complexes of

Arab Andalusia were the jewels in the crown of a political order that had its basis in the irrigation of agriculture in the surrounding countryside¹⁰. The image of the "Paradise garden" is recurrent in Islamic architecture and finds textual support in the numerous references to water in the Quran and in Arab poetry, but its courtly aspect needs to be considered against the background of a vast everyday culture of cultivation and plantation in arid and hot climatic zones. The control of water was also linked to political power and its legitimisation. The supposed divine sanction of the ruling elites rested in part upon their ability to guarantee the annual crops by managing irrigation. The Alhambra was an emblem of authority. As a political representation, it was rooted in the

earlier traditions in the echo chambers of its architecture. If the place continues to exercise an uncanny hold over the imagination, it is due in part to the sheer beauty of the place, and to the marriage between the natural and the artificial. The complex is wedded to the topography of hills and valleys, and is nourished and irrigated by streams, aqueducts and channels. As one moves through, one experiences water in its different states: still like a mirror, flowing in tension, rippling in channels, cascading down slopes, playful one minute, mournful the next, altering with the changes of the seasons, with the times of day, even with the changing moods of the sky. Then there are the views back and forth across the site, between the Generalife and the Palaces one way, between the Alcázar and the snowy peaks of the Sierras the other.

To meditate upon these givens of the natural world is also to reflect upon their transformation into the realm of human expression, the domain of symbols and the world of art. Here abstraction plays a role in submitting nature to poetic thought and geometrical schemes of the intellect. Modernism introduced new conceptions of space and transparency born from cubism and abstract art. The Alhambra has been "rethought" in modern abstract terms by architects such as the Mexican Luis Barragán in his metaphysical landscapes combining water and planar walls, or more recently by the Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza and the Spaniard Juan Domingo Santos in their current project for the Atrio entrance pavilions for the Alhambra itself¹². This inserts itself into the historical context by transforming patios and gardens in modern terms. Both water and light are essential to the idea. The Alhambra continues to be read and re-read in different ways.

Sometimes it seems to me that the Alhambra is part of a recurring dream. The first time I went there was over thirty years ago in deepest winter.



Energies of nature—ink on card
16 x 11.5 cm (1997)



Eternal sea—ink on card
14.7 x 10.3 cm (2001)

control of territory, in cosmology and in myths of origins: water was central to its many meanings.

Architecture gives shape to ideas in its images and forms. The Nasrid Palaces may or may not hark back to Solomon and Antiquity, or to some lost Golden Age, but they are haunted by memories nonetheless¹¹. Washington Irving in *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832, 1851) suggested a pervasive nostalgia. The Alhambra certainly distilled many

“ True artistic abstraction, is an extreme concentrate of perceptions, experiences and feelings. Every significant artistic work is a complete microcosm, which is capable of projecting an entire world reflected as in a drop of water. ”

—Juhani Pallasmaa

The Nasrid Palaces in high summer (2012)



There was hardly anybody around, the temperature was close to freezing, and the sky was full of dramatic clouds traversed by fitful rays of sun. The gardens were bare but the fountains sparkled like crystal in the cold air and the water tank in the Court of the Myrtles was deep green and still. Many Europeans think of the Alhambra as being to the south, but for me it was to the north-west extremity of a vast world I had been investigating for several years, that of the former Berber, Arab and Ottoman empires and more generally the territories of Islam. I came to Andalucía from Morocco, which is possibly the right way around. I carried with me refreshed impressions of the Madrasa el Attarin in Fez (14th century); the Menara Gardens in Marrakech (Almohad, 12th century) with the snowy peaks of the High Atlas floating above the rectangular water tank and pavilion; the fortified

mud dwellings of the southern oases with their irrigation channels and palm groves; the exquisite rectangle of water at the centre of the white marble court of the Madrasa of Ben Youssef (16th century), truly an abstract work of art and an aid to meditation upon central poetic images of the Quran, including that of Paradise¹³.

Before this I had travelled to the Middle East to study the architecture of early Islamic societies, and had written texts on the problem of transforming tradition. I had also visited India, including distant Mogul cousins of the Alhambra, such as the Red Fort in Delhi and the Palace and Mosque complex at Fatehpur Sikri (16th century), itself a masterpiece fusing statecraft, courtyard spaces, shifting axes, and bodies of water in a synthesis referring to diverse earlier civilisations. To return then to the Alhambra was to understand how recurrent types spread

across the worlds of Islam, fusing with earlier local traditions as far apart as India and Andalucía. But is this enough to explain the hold of the Alhambra over my imagination? Perhaps it is also touched memories of childhood, for my earliest years were spent in an earthly paradise: our garden at home with its formal symmetries, its changing levels, its primary and secondary axes and its rectangular pool of water¹⁴. For me the study of history involves a constant oscillation between experience and analysis, between the reconstruction of the past and the direct response to architecture, between my life as a historian and my life as an artist.

The exhibition 'Abstraction and Light' does not content itself with the customary solution of paintings put in frames and attached to walls. As an installation, it permits the visitor to experience the works on show while reflecting upon their relation to architecture as if in parallel with the Alhambra itself. The aim is to transform the rooms of the Palace of Charles V into spaces for meditation with objects floating in light. Key themes are: illumination, flotation, suspension, transparency and spatial ambiguity – works perceived as coloured planes. Experience over time is also important:

changing position is crucial. The result is like a subtle musical score with several scales and rhythms. It recalls subliminally some features of the Arab palaces next door beyond the solid masonry walls¹⁵.

The "mental landscapes" are not just paintings and drawings in the usual sense, but objects for contemplation. They acquire a new material life and luminosity when set off against the textured stone surfaces of the Renaissance palace. The central, octagonal Chapel takes on the character of a ritual space in which abstract paintings float in space or hover ambiguously on four low horizontal tables with glass upper surfaces. The smaller room to the left is more intimate like a shrine: a resonance chamber from which it is possible to glimpse the water of the Court of the Myrtles below. Here smaller pieces are suspended on strings from vineyard wires or else exhibited horizontally like precious objects or antique manuscripts in tables with glass tops. Details of some of the paintings suggest ripples, waves and shadows. The installation combines the experience of looking down as if below the surface of water, with that of looking up towards a virtual

“Coincidences are neither completely by chance nor are they sought after; childhood experiences already contain some of the bases for what one later becomes. The creative journey undertaken by William Curtis is a permanent re-encounter with earlier experiences, parallel realities, personal reflections, with resonances and spirals of an internal journey which began some time ago.”

— Juan Domingo Santos

the gallery spaces lend themselves to a processional route with key works marking the way, and permit diagonal views with shifting effects of parallax. The pieces are experienced not as frozen pictures framed on walls, but as dynamic additions to the space itself. The installation evokes the character of the works on show but in three dimensions, in fact in four, since

horizon. The exhibition is accompanied by a poem of my own composition entitled simply Mental Landscape which evokes meditation on water and the hallucinatory effect of reflections dissolved in light.

The third room down the steps to the right of the Chapel is in darkness and is devoted mostly to photography. On one wall, projections of my photographs



Court of the Myrtles, winter light, late afternoon (2013)

focus on light in architecture. On another, sequences of the Alhambra evoke the hidden presences of the place, the changing atmospheres, the reflecting water surfaces, the sublime light and the mysterious shadows. Low illuminated tables allow the visitor to consult sketchbooks or miniatures by turning pages on electronic touch screens. Black and white photos and sketches hint at recurrent interests such as the horizon, geological strata and the formation of clouds. These small drawings are referred to as "mental maps" or "cosmic landscapes". Travel sketches produced over thirty years in sites as varied as Saqqara, Egypt (the stepped pyramid, 2500 BC) or

Uxmal, México (the Governor's Palace, 9th century AD) reveal an obsession with antique ruins and with universal architectural elements such as the platform, the processional route and the framed view. The details in the larger paintings bear uncanny resemblances to the photographs and sketches of landscape, and to the tremulous lines of the travel sketches. My abstract works draw upon layers of memory and reflection. Sketches serve to analyse and transform.

The exhibition 'Abstraction and Light' is not just about architecture, landscape, drawings, paintings, photographs; it is also about a way of seeing, in fact a vision, which combines a sense of the immediate with a feeling for the presence of the past. Perhaps too it hints at a "family of forms", the recurrent features of a personal style, and the way that these affect observation, abstraction and invention. My paintings and drawings have a life of their own but they also provide mental maps which help me to grasp the spirit of places. They evoke light, shadow, water, writing, space, even revelation, in ways which seem curiously relevant to the Alhambra. Likewise my photographs focussing upon light as a universal material of architecture lead me to look at historical examples a certain way. There is no claim to documentary "objectivity" in this approach but it may reveal something more of the beauty of the Alhambra, especially its magical use of water and light. As with most works of a high order there are levels of meaning which remain beyond reach. But one may still hint at an aura and an atmosphere. Meanwhile the Alhambra has cast light upon my own production. The images of a crystal and a mirror come to mind. As a crystal, the Alhambra has illuminated my enquiry; as a mirror, it has revealed new facets of my own work. In its reflection, I find a new way forward towards other spaces of the imagination, other landscapes of the mind. ✚

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ibn Zamrak, 1333-93, poem inscribed on arch at entry to the Mirador of Daraxa, Alhambra.
- ² See William J.R. Curtis, *Mental Landscapes*, Alvar Aalto Academy, Helsinki, catalogue of exhibition *Mental Landscapes*, Mielen Maisemia, Museum of Finnish Architecture, Helsinki, 2000; Curtis, *Mental Landscapes*, *Paisajes Mentales*, Círculo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, 2002, catalogue of exhibition at the Círculo; also Curtis, *Mental Landscapes*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (CCVA), Harvard University, 2004, catalogue of exhibition in the CCVA, the one building by Le Corbusier in North America.
- ³ For bark paintings see William J.R. Curtis, *Forms and Functions of the Australian Aboriginal Spearthrower*, Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 1982, catalogue of exhibition organised by the author in the CCVA. For cave paintings it is relevant to mention that the author has spent the better part of the last thirty years living in the south of France in two areas with major pre-historic sites as much as 32,000 years old, the Ardèche (Grotte Chauvet) and the Lot (Pech Merle).
- ⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1667, 1674.
- ⁵ *Architectures du Monde: Photos par William J.R. Curtis*, Centre Méridional de l'Architecture

- 1985 (entire issue devoted to water). The literature on this aspect of the Alhambra is extensive but I have drawn lessons from the writings of Anne Marie Schimmel, Henri and Anne Stierlin, D. Fairchild Ruggles, Jerrilyn Dodds and Cynthia Robinson in particular.
- ⁸ Images of water recur in the Quran, their meaning varying according to the context. It is even claimed that mankind was created from water. The theme of Paradise as a garden with rivers running under it is transformed in diverse ways across the world of Islamic architecture, for example in the Tomb of Humayum (16th century) and the Taj Mahal (17th century) in India.
- ⁹ Grabar op cit
- ¹⁰ For agricultural and horticultural aspects see D Fairchild Ruggles, *Garden, Landscape and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, Pennsylvania State Press, 1999; and *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009.
- ¹¹ Grabar op cit
- ¹² See William J.R. Curtis, "Laberintos Intemporales: la Obra de Luis Barragán", A+V, no. 13, 1988. For Atrio, see current travelling exhibition "Álvaro Siza Vieira, Visiones de la Alhambra", with catalogue published by Aedes

“ Tangible cultural heritage that left its mark reaches from Stonehenge and the Egyptian pyramids to the ‘architecture of truth’ at Romanesque Le Thoronet, and Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh. The strong interest in texture found in many drawings may well owe something to his awareness of the importance texture has for built surfaces. ”

—Eduard F. Sekler

- et de la Ville, Toulouse, 2004; William J.R. Curtis, *Structures of Light*, Alvar Aalto Academy, Helsinki, 2007, catalogue of exhibition held in Alvar Aalto Museum, Jyväskylä, 2007.
- ⁶ Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, Paris, 1923; *Précisions*, 1930. For further discussion of light see William J.R. Curtis, *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms*, 2nd ed., London, Phaidon, 2015.
- ⁷ For significance of water see for example Oleg Grabar, *The Alhambra*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1978; also Nasser Rabat, "The Palace of the Lions in the Alhambra and the Role of Water in its Conception", Attilio Petruccioli, ed., *Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre*, Rome

- Gallery, Berlin and the Patronato de la Alhambra Generalife, 2014.
- ¹³ See William J.R. Curtis, "Type and Variation: Berber Collective Dwellings of the North West Sahara", Oleg Grabar, ed., *Muqarnas*, vol 1, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983.
- ¹⁴ Ingoldsby Court, Shakespeare Road, Birchington-on-Sea, Kent, England. The house and garden were designed by Robert Paine in 1947 for my parents and the garden was inspired partly by the work of Edwin Lutyens.
- ¹⁵ The installation of the exhibition *Abstraction and Light* in the Palace of Charles V was designed by Juan Domingo Santos in collaboration with the author.