

The Piranesi effect

What is the Piranesi effect? The Russian film-maker Sergei Eisenstein found it by mapping what would happen if an image from Piranesi's *Carceri* series exploded. Certainly the 'Piranesi effect' takes a number of forms; it can be something to do with a feeling of unease and ambiguity, of things out of place or out of time. It is also a sensation of glorious indigestion, a piling up or layering of parts which far exceeds what is required to make a whole.

By juxtaposing Piranesi's eighteenth-century etchings with artworks by contemporary Australian artists, this exhibition reveals something of how Piranesi's images work their discordant charm on the viewer. Extending across two gallery spaces, the exhibition is divided into two sections: the works in this gallery have been chosen to highlight the materiality of Piranesi's work, while the works displayed in the adjacent gallery suggest something of Piranesi's attitude to the art of the past, which he sums up in the introduction to his 1769 work *Diverse maniere d'adornare i Camini* (Diverse manners of ornamenting fireplaces):

An artist who would do himself honour, and acquire a name, must not content himself with copying faithfully the ancients, but studying their work he ought to show himself of an inventive, and I had almost said, of a Creating Genius.

In addition to contemporary works by Rick Amor, Mira Gojak, Michael Graf, Andrew Hazewinkel, Peter Robinson, Jan Senbergs and Simon Terrill, objects from the University Art Collection and the Classics and Archaeology Collection, as well as the Baillieu Library Print and Special collections, have been brought together with a selection of Piranesi's works from the collection of the State Library of Victoria and private lenders.

The Piranesi effect is a companion to the State Library of Victoria's exhibition *Rome: Piranesi's vision* (22 February to 6 July 2014), a joint project of the University Library and the State Library of Victoria.

The Piranesi effect includes contemporary Australian artists Rick Amor, Mira Gojak, Michael Graf, Andrew Hazewinkel, Peter Robinson, Jan Senbergs and Simon Terrill.

None of the works by these artists were made with Piranesi in mind. They were made with other intentions, and all have rich histories and associations which until now did not include Piranesi or eighteenth-century Rome. And yet there are correspondences and connections to be found.

Piranesi saw in the ruins of ancient Rome an ideal model for the city of the future. Over two centuries later, the photographs of Simon Terrill trace the shape of another European city—London, particularly those sites where utopian dreams intersect with the flow of lived experience.

Piranesi's views of Rome with their startling lighting effects, use of scale and complex spatial structures also alert the viewer to the way Rick Amor uses these same elements to unsettle. The work of Mira Gojak and Jan Senbergs reminds us of the fine mesh of lines which Piranesi uses to empty out solid objects until they reach a restless flickering state.

Transmutation of a different order takes place in the works of Michael Graf and Andrew Hazewinkel. Just as Piranesi's imagination was fired by the fragments of ancient Rome, Andrew Hazewinkel collides and collages disparate elements with their own disrupted histories. For Michael Graf, the reproduction and remaking of selected fragments from literature, art and architecture is a process more like translation—his work retains traces of the original but becomes new, enriched and transformed by the process.

If there is one characteristic which Piranesi's work shares with works by these artists, it is his Baroque interest in holding a number of elements in tension within a single work: dark and light, solid and void. Peter Robinson's monumental yet delicate polystyrene sculptures contain at the same time qualities of heaviness and lightness, science and art, austerity and ornament.

The sheer vitality of Piranesi's printmaking technique, his hybrid forms and his imaginative response to the art of the past all ensure that his extraordinary images remain relevant to contemporary culture.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) was one of the most extraordinary printmakers of the eighteenth century. His images of ruins and imaginary prisons have appealed to artists, architects and writers from De Quincy, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Adam and John Soane, to Baudelaire and Jorge Luis Borges.

Piranesi was very much an artist of his time. Born in Venice in 1720 he lived in a period when scholars began to look beyond orthodox ideas to more evidence-based, empirical methods of investigation. But it was also a time when creativity could peacefully co-exist with these new scientific ways of thinking. Piranesi was not troubled by modern distinctions between nature and artifice, scholarship and imagination.

As a young man Piranesi trained in Venice and Rome, acquiring the skills of an architect and designer, a printmaker and an archaeologist. Settling in Rome, Piranesi's passion for the architecture of the classical world soon drew him into a series of debates about the relative merits of the ancient Greek and Roman styles of building. He was a passionate advocate for the bold inventiveness of Roman adaptations of earlier styles, arguing for innovation and complexity over unity or purity.

In the eighteenth century Piranesi was famous for the *vedute* or architectural views which he sold to aristocratic travellers passing through Rome on The Grand Tour of Europe. His archaeological work also earned him a reputation as a fine antiquarian, while his extraordinary furniture and interior designs were much copied and adapted, particularly in Britain. After his death in 1778, the *carceri* became increasingly popular. This series of imaginary prisons was first issued in the 1740s and then reworked around 1760. These works have continued to fascinate viewers with their impossible spaces and multiplicity. The mysterious effect in the *carceri* works is achieved through a combination of highly complex compositional devices, perspective and lighting which leave the viewer disoriented and unable to find rest or resolution in their labyrinthine spaces.