Worldmaking and world-building in the work of Jeffrey Dennis

Nelson Goodman's short book *Ways of Worldmaking* is an underused and overlooked resource for thinking about artworks. It is also useful for thinking about the loosely defined fields of contemporary art, where diverse practices and narratives coexist, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in opposition. Artworks too can be thought of as forms of worldmaking. An art school can be thought of as a site in which numerous, multiple worlds, are made and remade, perhaps even forming a single world that is constantly in a process of becoming. Similarly, the networks of galleries, images and texts that constitute a broader field of practice can be encompassed within this kind of a conceptual framework. Goodman used the term *worlds* to implicate sciences, forms of creativity (the arts), and social practice. He sought to identify the quality of worlds, if there were too many, and which of these were spurious? However, in Jeff's work we can also recognise these processes within individual works. Goodman writes that worldmaking is not made from nothing, but from other worlds. Whatever worlds are made are not unrelated to the world, but rather making is remaking. Worlds are remakings of the world.

Jeff's paintings and objects might be imagined through the processes Goodman describes. These are processes of building a world out of others. The sense of an overall world is displaced by versions, by multiple worlds, leaving us to ask how worlds are made, how they are tested, and how they are known? Goodman's approach is to lean towards thinking about some of the relationships that exist between worlds, or in Jeff's case, between elements of his paintings, between one painting and another, between his paintings and his objects, and, of course, between his practice and the wider world as it might be understood. Much worldmaking is taking apart and putting together, dividing, partitioning, making distinctions, composing and connecting. Differences in styles of representation offer forms of contrast between worlds. Representation in artworks is a form of distinguishing types of emphasis that depart from modes of everyday seeing. A world of an art practice, or an artwork, or an art school can, at least in part, be thought of in terms of structure, ordering and the differences between elements. These elements include tone and octave, geometries, circumstances and objectives. Arrangements, groupings and orderings are all aspects of relations between worlds.

I would like to ask if a painter can be described as a worldmaker? In addition, I would like to bring the concept of worldmaking together with the idea of world-building. World-building is a term that is generally associated with genre fictions, particularly science fiction and fantasy. Although I wouldn't want to make any claims regarding a particular presence of these fields in Jeff's practice, or his having any particular ongoing association with them, it is nevertheless how I would like to think about his practice. A somewhat oblique perspective perhaps, but an anamorphic image that takes shape when glanced from the viewpoint of my own preoccupations. World building can be thought of in relation to Tom Moylan's account of the tendencies demonstrated by science fiction to recreate the present as an elsewhere, "an alternative spacetime that is the empirical moment but not that moment as it is ideologically produced by way of everyday common sense." (p.4) This tendency is one of the pleasures of the science fiction text, as well as the source of its subversive potential. World-building plays a Brechtian role in enabling the reader to see the world as different. Critical estrangement and engagement play a role in the move to overcome alienation: Creating a society that does not exist offers some kind of mapping of the extant.

In the recent book *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, Mark J.P. Wolf describes science fiction and fantasy worlds as often oriented towards an

engagement in which the audience make their way in that fictional world: "World-building results in the creation of new things and the changing of assumptions regarding existing and familiar things that are usually taken for granted." (p.32) The audience is invited in to another world, and held there, which for Wolf, corresponds to the core concept of entertainment. Rather than interpreting entertainment as trivial or a form of crude ideological function, it is for Wolf an alternative to merely following a narrative. Entertainment, he writes, " (…) traces its etymology to the Latin roots *inter* meaning "among", and *tenere* meaning "to hold"." (Wolf, p.17) Once held within a fictional world that has been built with enough care to hold us among it, we might find ourselves amongst "(…) realms of possibility, a mix of familiar and unfamiliar, permutations of wish, dread, and dream, and other kinds of existence that can make us more aware of the circumstances and conditions of the actual world we inhabit." (Wolf, p.17) Imaginary worlds that hold us within them propose the idea that things could be otherwise, opening up the potential for forms of problem solving, the consideration of imaginary objects and possibilities, and ofr exploring relationships between actual and fictional.

Wolf's interest in imaginary worlds, or secondary worlds, is in those that break with narrative, in that they are not worlds described in just enough detail to push the narrative forward. If I could suggest that it is possible to think about Jeff's paintings through this idea of world-building, it is useful to sustain this emphasis away from narrative as conventionally understood. His paintings may well relate to, or contain, elements of narrative, but are not defined by this quality. Instead, it is useful to explore Wolf's particular understanding of *world*. For Wolf, world is not the same as place in that it "is not simply geographical but *experiential*". (p.25) It must have a distinct border from the primary world, our world of fact and actuality. The translation of this concept to painting encounters a difficulty here, in that such a border might be difficult to recognise. We might read novels set in Westoros or Middle Earth, immerse ourselves in TV shows set in a 24th century where an interstellar union between worlds helps to bring an enlightened peace. Those books and TV shows are clearly not the lived experience of the viewer or reader. How then could world building be imagined as an element of a painting practice? The paintings do not present a futuristic or fantastic setting in which an audience can be immersed. How should this loose translation or adaptation of ideas across forms and contexts operate? Can Jeff's practice find that sense of distinct separation from the here and now that is generally required in world building?

There is an obvious border, a limit between worlds. It is the edge of the canvas. It creates a space within, as well as defining the object in space. However, the sense of a boundary is complicated by having images set within the edges of the canvas, occasionally including images of Jeff at work in his studio. The edges of his work are even further complicated by the inclusion in his exhibition of his painted objects. These objects had previously served a discrete purpose. They were originally constructed as a means to view and produce spaces to be translated into his paintings. This is a category of artefact that has now evolved into its own related yet distinct taxonomic branch. They are now things to be encountered alongside the works on canvas. They brazenly disrupt the picture plane to trip you up as you step back from the painting.

Is each one of Jeff's works a singular world? Or rather, do they cumulatively form a world? I like to think that Jeff does not create a distinct world with each painting, but rather has spent years establishing the elements of his world, crafting, adjusting, focusing on certain elements at particular times. They correspond with one another, sharing formal and cognitive elements. Jeff's worlds are connected to the one in which you live. Borders and boundaries are permeable. This is a deliberately porous form of world-building, where

realties ooze and seep through edges. Bubblespace leaks out of the singular picture plane. It radiates benignantly across works. Bubblespace radiation is optical, soaking the retina, but it is cognitive and intellectual too. It might even be thought of emotional, relating to affect. This is one of the possibilities of becoming ensnared in other worlds, that our own emotional spaces of subjectivity may be not only engaged, but shaped and even reformed. Bubblespace corresponds to Wolf's distinction between world and space, as experiential rather than topographic.

Mark Wolf also writes about the question of immersion, a term usually associated with new media and cinema experience. (p.48) For emotional and conceptual immersion, "the audience must be fully engaged with the work at hand; thus, to speak only of "immersion" is not enough, and an additional liquid metaphor is needed: that of *absorption*." (Wolf, p. 49) This is a two-way process. The user is pulled in, while also absorbing the imaginary world "in the same way that the memory brings forth people, events, and objects when their names are mentioned." (Wolf, p.49) Details of the secondary world displace those of the primary world. A third metaphor is *saturation*. Saturation involves forgetting about the primary world. "Saturation is the pleasurable goal of conceptual immersion; the occupying of the audience's full attention and imagination, often with more detail than can be held in the mind all at once." (Wolf, p.49) As a world builder, Jeff offers us opportunities for these forms of immersion, absorption and saturation, getting lost in nuanced articulations of an experiential rather than topographic space.

Jeff's world-building is made up of individual paintings, but configured across works, building relations between paintings, as well as incorporating painted objects. His worlds contain small human figures, sometimes within the panel-like images that are set within the whole work, sometimes independently standing around the edges. He tells me these are like stagehands, helping out with the mechanicals of the picture, facilitating its operation, but also, in some strange way, he sees them as indicators of scepticism. Jeff's own scepticism is present in all of his paintings, in the form of an underpainting that he applies as a structuring device for synthesising the diverse elements that appear. Before his recognisable bubbleverse takes shape, he paints a floral William Morris wallpaper pattern, a motif Jeff adopted after a chance encounter with the pattern at the William Morris Museum in Walthamstow. Jeff has said to me that this pattern offers a contrast to the image he wants to bring into being. It is regular, consistent and predictable. It functions as a grid on which to work. This is a formal device used to compose each painting, a visual structure to work with, but also a subtext referring to Morris's *News From Nowhere* of 1890.

News From Nowhere is a clear account of what Morris considered a good society. It is an attempt at a sort of blueprint, a model of envisioning a positive future, which contains within it a detailed account of the means of bringing such a future about. Within the narrative, in which a fictionalised version of Morris awakes in a distant future, the protagonist learns of the long period of turmoil that brings the existing social world of Victorian Britain to an end, and the slow building of a new egalitarian society. For Jeff, this is an unrealistically hopeful future. For me, it is closer to an actual politics of art. It is a statement that helps to frame and contextualise all of Morris's practices and enterprises. It is also a model of social interaction that has meaningful labour at the core. In the future depicted, making, if one is inclined to make, is a source of personal and social fulfilment. This includes the making of beautiful or interesting things. Work is performed not as a source of financial income, but for the pleasure and reward of work itself, as both socially constructive and personally fulfilling.

The William Morris underpainting is a visual field, but also can be drawn out as a latent field of politics, concerning futurity and the unrealised, the yet to be. This need not be conflated with the unrealisable, but instead might be thought of as a horizon towards which one must keep advancing. The literary critic and theorist of science fiction Darko Suvin argues that as long as artists work under conditions where "economic and political power is not fully and transparently vested in people associated in directly democratic ways", (p. 234) art will be trapped in a space between extremes. Art will be stuck, imagined either as either direct struggle or elitist autonomy. He argues that under these conditions "the cognitions arrived at by art will be, in the best cases, utopian foreshadowings, glimpses and guesses of a non-alienated state of relationships between people(.)" (Suvin, p.234) Suvin's view is one I find simultaneously compelling and unhelpful. It is both crude and resonant. It conveys a sense of urgent demand, but undermines the value of what we might think of as "cognitions".

Jeff may be sceptical, but his articulation of scepticism is a generative space of engagement. The underpainting does not condemn or refute Morris, but perhaps does little to promote him. Nevertheless, it is a presence within the work, within the layered operations of world building. It is a trace, a haunting, referring to a notion of a society built on principles that offer an alternative to the reality principles that shape perceptions of contemporary Western cultures. At the core of Morris's world-building are forms of work. This is work as liberated from the increasingly distorted and twisted logics of capitalism. The world-building in Jeff's practice also offers forms of reflection on work. His figures are often images of labour, either abstracted as stage hands, his rude mechanicals as he put it to me, or depictions of himself engaged in the production of artworks. Are these critiques of the instrumentalisation of humanity? Are they images that mock a transformation of subjects into cogs within the technocratic logic of globalisation? Might they be read as alternatives to the ongoing intensification of the alienation of labour? Or are they (and Morris too?) a series of red herrings, distractions and diversions from some other purpose? One thing is certain; the clarity of intention that Morris applied to his utopian narrative cannot be applied to this kind of world-building. Yet this might be a complex visuality that offers parallels to the textual nature of science fiction and related narrative forms in the creation of its own unique yet interdependent set of operations. Structures are set up here to compete as well as coexist, perhaps offering a form that might be read as an image of how representation and meaning operate.

Nelson Goodman poses a question about the multiplicity and coexistence of worlds as he understands them; when so many variables within so many worlds coexist, what are the criteria for success in making a world? Truth can be agreed upon generally when not contradicting unyielding beliefs or its own precepts. The line between belief and precept is not clear or stable. Reality in a world is often a matter of habit. Goodman argues that while readiness to accept other worlds is liberating and productive, welcoming all worlds builds none. What is required here is more than acknowledgement. It is work. Without work, without effort, Goodman sees judgement on its own as worthless: "A broad mind is no substitute for hard work." (p.21) The result of what I could call cognitive labour is to gain something other than one belief or another. Instead, Goodman suggests a form of knowing that is to a large extent not a matter of belief but of insight. This could be understood as comprehension, perhaps of things already identified and defined, but grasped now, when previously undiscerned. This is an advancement of understanding. Knowing is as much remaking as reporting. Goodman suggests that perceiving motion is often a case of producing it, that to discover laws involves drafting them, recognising patterns involves imposing them. For Goodman, creation and comprehension are indivisible. I would like to suggest that the same could be said of Jeff's practice. However, as well as offering us a

space of creation and comprehension as understood through worldmaking, his practice operates as a process of world-building, immersing and reconfiguring viewers in spaces of invention, play, labour and cognition. This is a form of knowledge as comprehension, something that is actively made rather than merely acknowledged.

References
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