



picturing the invisible

The house seen from below

Paul Coldwell





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Introduction

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Sir John Soane Museum

Sue Palmer

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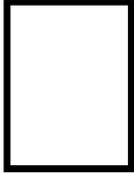
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Paul Coldwell

*In a museum that is so full to bursting, it might seem perverse to
focus on what's absent, that which is now invisible.*

I come in with the coal, trailing dust. ¹

Background

I first visited the Sir John Soane's Museum over 40 years ago, when, as a postgraduate student at the Slade School of Art in the mid 1970's a tutor suggested I might find it interesting. I was studying printmaking and Piranesi was amongst the artists I was curious about, so was excited to have the rare opportunity of seeing some of his works that I was told were on display. I duly went along and was immediately entranced by the museum as a whole. In a period before the advent of the internet, The Soane Museum seemed like a little known treasure, a secret to be passed on by word of mouth.

I was living in short-life housing in Covent Garden in that period when the Covent Garden Market has just moved out to a new location at Nine Elms and the slow re-development of the site for shops, restaurants and tourism had just begun. The area around Holborn is unrecognisable from how it appears then. The Soane Museum seemed a place out of time, a place to be found rather than a place seeking out an audience, and I'm sure that many of its visitors felt, as I did, that they were part of a small privileged fraternity.

One of the aspects of the museum that I vividly remember was the sense that the internal space appeared greater than from the outside. I was 11 years old when Dr Who was first broadcast on BBC. The Doctor's travelling machine, the Tardis, whose exterior as a police phone box, miraculously opened up upon entering to a spacious interior, seemed to correspond with my later experience of the Soane museum.ⁱⁱ This effect was not only achieved so ingeniously in the picture gallery, where the walls unfold to allow for more than double the number of pictures to be displayed, but also in the way that the museum is full of models, visions in miniature, alongside architectural fragments and details. The viewer is drawn in to an

alternative world, encouraged at every turn to suspend disbelief. This is compounded by the labyrinthine layout of the museum which even today serves to disorientate me, as well as in the manner in which the house encompasses such a variety of spaces including the dining room, the model room, the sepulchral chamber and the monk's parlour, each with its own distinctive character and lighting. Furthermore, the lack of signage, increasingly rare for a museum, allows the visitor to wander and make their own connections and stories, enabling as Gaston Bachelard proposes, for the house to support daydreaming.ⁱⁱⁱ

I have visited on many occasions since my first encounter and over the last two years whilst working on this project, have become a regular visitor. During these visits I have wandered like a flâneur, on each occasion discovering something new or previously overlooked; I have drawn and made notes as aide memoires, have had conversations with the invigilators and the curatorial staff, have attended guided tours, read books and catalogues on both Soane and the museum itself, have arranged for works in store to be brought out for me to draw and photograph and spent time in the library browsing through amongst other things, the albums of prints by Piranesi. All this information has been shifted through and processed in my studio and the work I'm showing is the result.

The Absent Presence

The Sir John Soane's Museum, while being full of models, furniture, paintings and objects of every description speaks also of what is absent. Most obviously Sir John Soane himself, (now resting some miles away in Old St Pancras churchyard in the family tomb he designed). The house and its contents, represent a monument to Soane's standing and as a testament to his achievements and taste. It is a backdrop against which to view his practice as an architect, collector and man of substance. Now past, the museum offers a means to speculate on the absent occupant and provides ample material to do so.

But there is another absence, the invisible group of staff who were engaged in maintaining a house such as this. The maids, cooks, footman and butler all of whom would have ensured the

regular upkeep of the house and the well-being of their employer. My exhibition imagines the house from the viewpoint of these now invisible presences, those figures below stairs, engaged with the daily chores of cleaning, cooking and keeping the house warm and safe. These are the daily actions that leaves no monument and little trace. One also imagines that if done well, their work would go unnoticed, drawing attention to itself only if something went wrong or was missing.

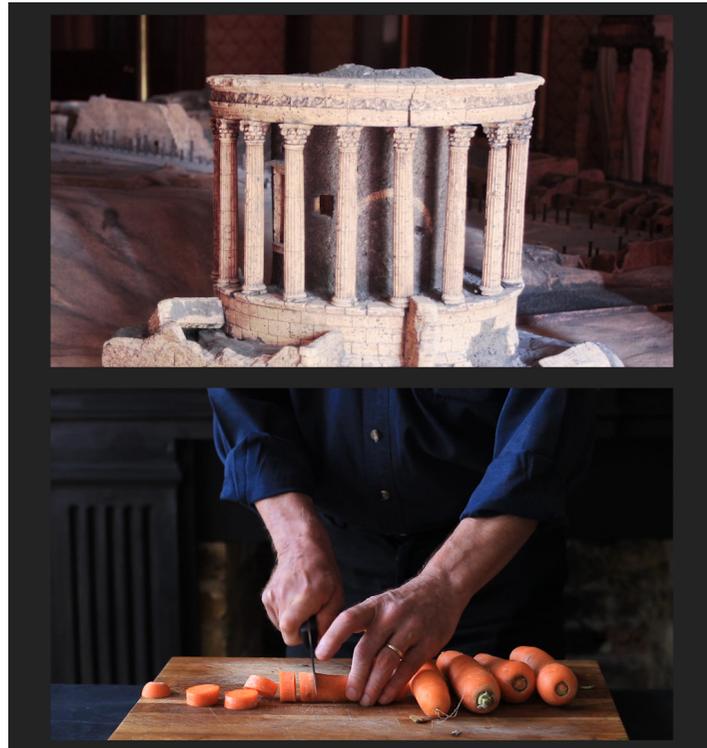
Below stairs, the activities of laying the fires, preparing and cooking the food, washing clothes etc. would have been repeated each day and no matter how well these tasks were performed, they would require re-doing the following day. Like the myth of Sisyphus, domestic work does not build into something greater. It has little accumulative effect. This is in stark contrast to Soane, who was active in not only designing buildings and monuments for posterity, but was also forging his reputation, social position and influence. And now, thanks to an act of parliament,^{iv} his house and collection remains intact as a memorial and testament to the owner's eye and taste, a unique time capsule. But Soane, as an architect, was not only building for the present but also had a vision of how these works might appear in the future as they slowly and inevitable fell into ruins. The watercolours that Soane commissioned from Joseph Gandy, serve to re-image his buildings projected into a mythological future, suggesting how they would acquire a further elegance and meaning even as they crumble. Against this broad scoping of history, the day to day activity in the house and the mundane repetitious lives of the servants can easily be forgotten. My project has been to try to find ways of picturing the invisible and view the house from their perspective.

(Image of the kitchens)



Commentary on the work

Film



This short two screen video film was made with the assistance of the filmmaker Kristina Pulejkova and was filmed both in the model room at the Soane Museum and at my home in North London. The sequence on the top monitor is taken from a 24-hour recording we made of the cork model of the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli in the Model Room in the summer of 2018. We recorded the appearance of the temple as the light fluctuated and edited this into a condensed time

lapse film of the changing light as it fell upon the model. The Temple of Vesta appears in many guises within the museum; the textured, burnt quality of this cork model is in stark contrast to the refined pure white plaster version by the model maker François Fouquet which is also on display in the Model room.



The lower monitor (a view from below stairs), features scenes of me cutting vegetables and with which I then attempt to use to form columns and structures. I also play with sugar cubes to create architectural forms such as arches and wells. In these I consciously transgress the maxim of not playing with food. Here food is presented as sculptural material and building blocks from which to construct ideas and exercise imagination. I wanted to image how the servants, surrounded as they were by the multitude of models in the house, might attempt to imitate or ape these, using the materials at hand in the kitchen. Within a spirit of play and curiosity, each vegetable is tested for its potential as a building material. Sliced leeks, for

Above left: image of Model of the Roman circular Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, near Rome, by Giovanni Altieri Museum number: MR2

Above right: Model of the Roman circular Temple of Vesta at Tivoli, near Rome, François Fouquet (1787 - 1870), maker/plaster of Paris. Museum number: MR13)

example, are arranged to resemble carved marble columns, built up until they collapse. These are by their nature impermanent structures, as fleeting as the servant's daily chores and suggest aspiration over achievement.

I imagined the servant's world as being an eternal present, as opposed to Soane's perspective in which he looks back to a very distant past while also projecting forward into a future of posterity long after his death.^v



Plates



Caption? Six plates from
Scenes from the kitchen I-XX 2019
22cms dia.

Developing from the film were more elaborate models that I made again using material from the kitchen. I began to shop in a different way, imagining the sections through vegetables as they would appear when chopped and became quite a connoisseur of various makes of pasta, realising the these were perfect for making an equivalent to the carved stone in classical columns. Columns, arches, temples, wells and pavements are amongst the features I tried to imitate and these in turn were photographed and formed the central motif for a series of plates. In one series the image is contained within a decorative border taken from early 19th century Staffordshire Blue and White plates



entitled Italian views. Here my domestic ruins replace the original engraved views of key sites on the Grand Tour and are presented as an installation on the plate dresser in the kitchen. The Grand Tour, so important for Soane's own development, would have been beyond the dreams of the domestic staff, so my plates offer a reimagining of these sites and a means through which, like souvenirs they can function as a substitute for actual experience. In another set of small plates, the central image is contained within a circle, alongside its title and number, as if viewed through a telescope.^{vi}

Caption? Two plates from
Scenes from the kitchen I-XX 2019
22cms dia.



Caption? Plates from
Scenes from the kitchen I-XX 2019
28cms dia.



Caption? Plates from
Scenes from the kitchen I-XX 2019
28cms dia.

Sculptures



Scenes from the kitchens-Columns 2018 Bronze 43 x 23 x 48 cms



Model of the Temple of Castor and Pollux, Rome, plaster Museum number: L70

In these sculptures, I have attempted to memorialise and make permanent the efforts to construct architectural models from such disparate materials as sugar cubes, leeks, carrots and pasta. Each sculpture echoes a model in the collection but is not a copy, more an act of remembering.

After days spent arranging the foodstuffs into architectural forms and a considerable amount of 'trial and error', my models were used to make plaster moulds. These then were then used to form wax casts that were, in turn cast into bronze via the process of lost wax.^{vii} What began as transitory and fragile constructions were given a permanence and resilience through the casting process. My

intention was that through this transformation, my models would be placed on equal terms with the range of models in various materials throughout the museum that would have formed the domestic staff's daily visual landscape.

Scenes from the kitchens-Temple and *Tomb* have been brightly coloured not only to provide extra clues to the material origin of the

Scenes from the kitchens-Temple

2018

Painted Bronze

24 x 24 x 36 cms



models, the jelly babies that form the sculptures around the dome or the pasta that I used to form the columns, but also as a reminder that the ancient world was not populated by pure white marble temples and monochrome sculptures, but that many of these would have been brightly painted and probably viewed as garish by our contemporary tastes.

Scenes from the kitchens-Tomb

2018

Painted Bronze & Plaster

23 x 43 x 38 cms



In titling two of the sculptures, *Four orders- Essentials* and *Single Order- Basics*, I wanted to reference orders in terms of organisation, categorisation and hierarchy as well as to the usage in restaurants as in 'to place an order', a reminder of the staff's domestic position. *Basics* and *Essentials* also refer to those supermarket lines of branded products, many of which I used in the making of these pieces.



Four Orders-Essential 2018 Bronze 15x50x36 cms



Single order-Basics 2019 Painted Bronze 20x30x38 cms



Ghosts-Columns
 2018
 Nylon
 30 x 13 x 32 cms

As well as casting my ad-hoc sculptures in bronze, in some cases I arranged to have them 3D scanned and from these, 3D models printed in nylon. I like their ghostly quality, the nylon having a slight translucency and the manner in which the scanning process records the surface of the objects, reducing the detail and unifying them as uniform white structures.^{viii}



Ghosts-Arch
 2019
 Nylon
 48 x 20 x 40 cms

To complete the range of materials, I made a final piece from plaster casts of individual sugar cubes, pieces of pasta, random lids and biscuits. In essence I made myself a quantity of building material with which I could play. After numerous efforts, and the customary methodology of trial and error, I settled upon making a ruined temple, vaguely based on the cork model in the basement of the museum of the Roman Temple of Fortuna Virilis, in Rome.



Ghosts-Temple

2019

Plaster

68 x 48 x 32 cms

When beginning to think about how to display these works, I had initially thought of them as being very separate with each to be shown on a plinth as isolated objects. Following a meeting with the curator Owen Hopkins, it was suggested to group all the plinths together in the centre of the kitchen, with each plinth a different size and height, to form a central shape. In this way, the intention is to echo the manner that the architectural models are displayed in the Model Room and to set up more specific dialogues between the individual works.



Image Roman Temple of Fortuna Virilis
Museum number: M1274

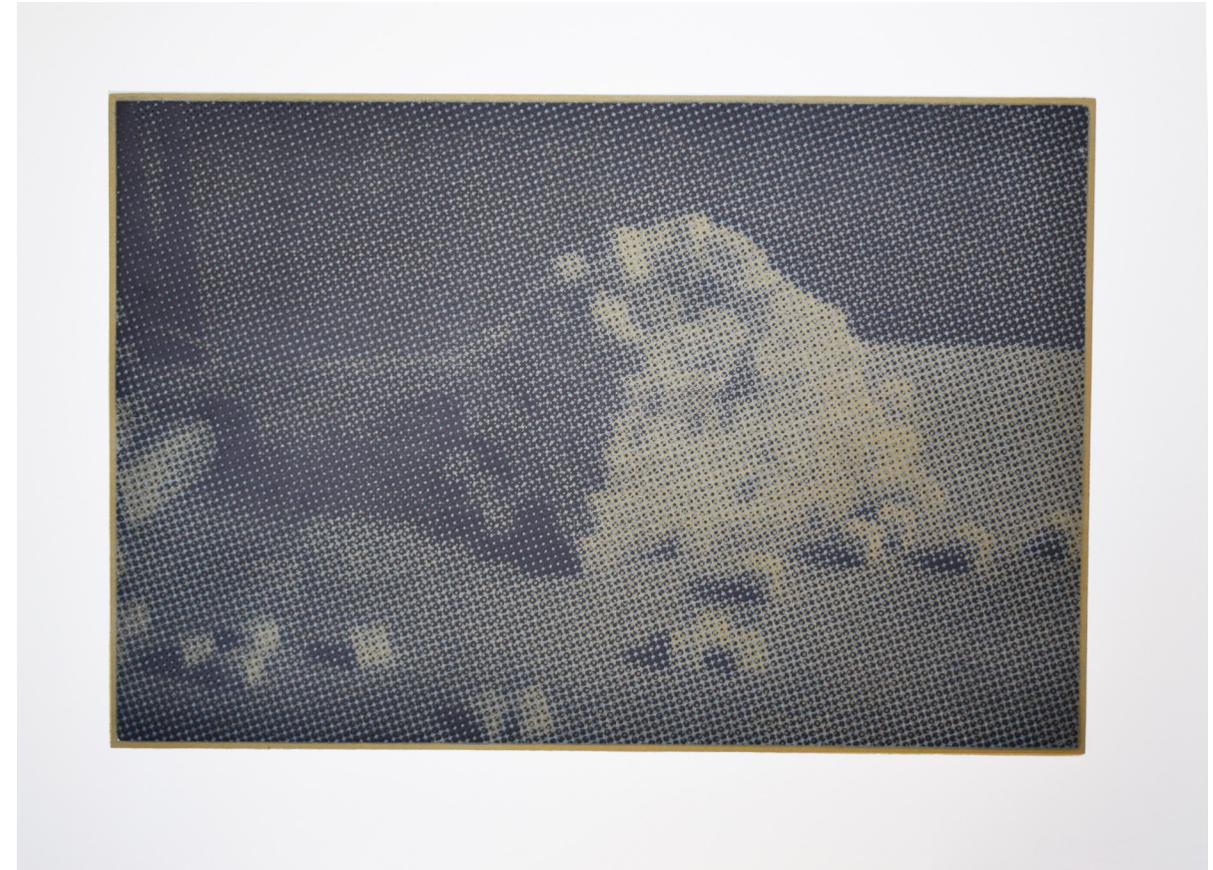


Image of the MODEL ROOM

Prints

It was printmaking that first drew me to the Soane Museum as a student in the 1970's so it was inevitable that I spent some days in the library going through the albums of engravings by Piranesi, in particular, those he made based on views of Rome.^{ix} These large-scale prints hover between observation and romantic embellishment, offering a record of the Grand Tour, either as a souvenir for those travellers or as a substitute for experience for those unable to make the trip. The artist relishes the condition of ruin and freely interprets the views of Italy, playing with scale and introducing narrative to offset a mere topographical rendering. These prints further connect with Joseph Gandy's watercolours of Soane's buildings in which he imagines their slippage into ruins.

* (ARE THERE ANY IMAGES OF
PIRANESI'S ENGRAVINGS-I
COULD ONLY FIND IMAGES OF
THE DRAWINGS)



Ruins I (ochre)

2018

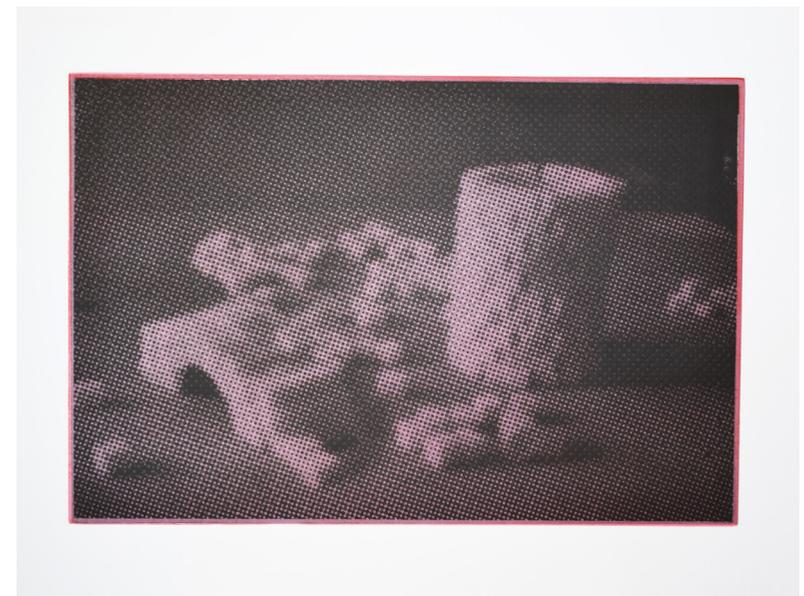
Woodcut

56 x 76 cms

In my prints, again I have used material from the kitchen, in this case simply sugar cubes. With these I made various informal models, one depicting a ruined water well, another a pyramid and in the third, a bridge and column which in turn were photographed and developed on the computer. Then, having reduced the detail through pixilation, I had multiple woodblocks made using laser cut and from these blocks these colour prints were printed.^x I wanted the shimmering colour to further reduce a simple reading of the image and through this suggest the instability of the image as if, like Soane's buildings, they were in a process of decay and disintegration. Here my intention is for the image itself to suggest the invisible, something beyond our grasp but desired. It was finally only possible to show one print from the series, but having seen one in actuality, I hope the viewer is able to interpret the additional works reproduced in this publication.



Ruins I (blue)
2018
Woodcut
56 x 76 cms



Ruins I (pink)
2018
Woodcut
56 x 76 cms

Rooms

As well as overproducing the prints, I also produced more objects than were possible to show. As with all projects what gets finally exhibited depends on space and practicalities. Invariable some works have to be edited and this was the case of three sculptures I made based on imagined rooms for the servants.

During my research, I used the Soane Museum on-line resource to discover more about the collection. In this search I came across three cork models of ancient Greek Tombs probably made in the late 18th century.^{xi} Each model features a burial chamber fashioned from cork and a skeleton surrounded by vases, pieces of armour and other items to accompany the dead into the next world, made from stucco. I was able to view these models and spent some time drawing from them and taking photographs.

The models open up like doll's houses to reveal their interiors, but to me, in spirit they were suggestive of gloomy bedsits and rented rooms stripped down to essentials. These models set me thinking about the lives of the servants and the insecure nature of their existence, with their accommodation tied to their employment. The butler would have slept in the basement (the female staff at the top of the house) and I began to see parallels with the condition of temporary workers and of rough sleepers, now so tragically a common feature of city life. Lincoln's Inn Field has a particular connection to the homeless, offering a long running soup kitchen for those in need while throughout the 1980's serving as a tent city with many homeless people sleeping there overnight. In 1992, this practice ceased and the gates were locked ever night at dusk. A feature of the area during that period was a trial of homeless people gathering in the evening with cardboard boxes in preparation to make their temporary homes.



Room, Bed & Light Bulb

2019

Painted Bronze & Perspex

38 x 30 x 38 cms



Room, Bed & Florescent Light

2019
Painted Bronze & Perspex
 30 x 22 x 32 cms

With these thoughts in mind, I made models of three rooms. In each I have placed a sleeping bag and bed as such as well as an object to suggest that this accommodation was tied to work, a scrubbing brush, a cobbler's anvil and cutlery that I imaged being guarded against theft. Each is overlooked by an exposed light as if to hamper sleep.^{xiii} These works are reproduced here in the publication but not shown.



Room, Bed & Office Light

2019
Painted Bronze & Perspex
 38 x 30 x 38 cms

Endnote

Working in collections presents very particular challenges and the Soane museum is no exception. In fact, its very nature and the conditions upon which the house was presented to the nation, makes it a particularly demanding space to interact with. Not only, how to work within the limited spaces available, but also the very paradox of adding to what is already such a rich and dense environment. This is the antithesis of the experience of exhibiting in the proverbial white cube, that space that has become synonymise with contemporary art. Here, work has to jostle for space and attention and be aware and sensitive to the ethos of the museum and house as a whole. The Soane museum is simultaneously a house, museum and a work place. It is also an artwork in its own right, Soane's architectural masterpiece and a place of experimentation and phantasy. My aim has been to gently de-stabilise the fixed reading of the museum based on the singular vision of Soane himself by introducing the presence of other voices, those who would have been responsible for the day to day maintenance and running of the house and through this create new interpretations.

Paul Coldwell

List of works

Film

First Orders; scenes from the kitchen

A two-screen video set on a loop

approx. 10 mins 2018-19

Plates

Scenes from the kitchen I-XX 2019

Series of 20 plates 22cms dia.

Scenes from the kitchen I-XX 2019

Series of 20 plates 28cms dia.

Sculptures

Scenes from the kitchens - Columns 2018

Bronze 43 x 23 x 48 cms

Scenes from the kitchens - Temple 2018

Painted Bronze 24 x 24 x 36 cms

Scenes from the kitchens - Tomb 2018

Painted Bronze & Plaster 23 x 43 x 38 cms

Four Orders - Essential 2018

Bronze 15 x 50 x 36 cms

Single order - Basics 2019

Painted Bronze 20 x 30 x 38 cms

Ghosts - Columns 2018

Nylon 30 x 13 x 32 cms

Ghosts - Arch 2019

Nylon 48 x 20 x 40 cms

Ghosts - Temple 2019

Plaster 68 x 48 x 32 cms

Prints

Ruins I (ochre) 2018

Woodcut 56 x 76 cms

Ruins I (blue) 2018

Woodcut 56 x 76 cms

Ruins I (blue/grey) 2018

Woodcut 56 x 76 cms

Ruins II (gold) 2018

Woodcut 56 x 76 cms

Ruins II (pink) 2018

Woodcut 56 x 76 cms

Ruins III (magenta) 2018

Woodcut 56 x 76 cms

Ruins III (silver) 2018

Woodcut 56 x 76 cms

Rooms

Scenes from the kitchen I-VI- 2019

Room, Bed & Light Bulb 2019

Painted Bronze & Perspex 38 x 30 x 38 cms

Room, Bed & Florescent Light 2019

Painted Bronze & Perspex 30 x 22 x 32 cms

Room, Bed & Office Light 2019

Painted Bronze & Perspex 38 x 30 x 38 cms

Footnotes

i Notes from my sketchbooks.

ii The Blue Police box was both for the police and members of the public and was in operation from the 1920's until two-way radios and mobile phones made them obsolete. The Police Box was distinct from the red telephone box designed by Sir Charles Gilbert Scott in 1924 that was based on Soane's designs for his family tomb

iii "This being the case, if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. Bachelard, G., 1958 The poetics of space Boston, Beacon Press, p6

iv Soane established the museum in his own lifetime and through a private act of parliament in 1833 ensured that the house would be preserved and maintained as near as possible to how it was left upon his death.

v As exemplified by the commissioned watercolour 'Visions of early fancy ... and dreams in the evening' by J M Gandy in which projects, never realised by Soane are presented in a classical landscape bathed in a golden light.

vi In making these plates I was greatly assisted by Naomi Bailey who also arranged for the plates to be fired.

vii The bronze sculptures were invested and cast in the foundry of Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London with the advice and support of John Nicoll and Rebecca Stevenson. The lost wax process requires the wax model (original) to be invested with a system of runners and risers before set in a plaster mould. The wax is burnt out in the kiln and the molten metal poured into the space previously occupied by the wax original. The plaster is then removed, the runners & risers chased and the bronze object cleaned and patinated.

viii The 3D scanning was carried out by Holly Shaw and the final prints made at Digits2Widgets Ltd

ix PIRANESI, Giovanni Battista (1720–1780) including Opere varie di architettura prospettive grotteschi antichita sul gusto degli antichi Romani inventate, ed incise da Gio. Batista Piranesi architetto Veneziano.

x I printed these prints at OBS Oficina Bartolomeu dos Santos, Tavira Portugal, the studio of the late Bartolomeu dos Santos. Dos Santos was Professor of Printmaking at the Slade School of art and had originally suggested I visited the Soane Museum.

xi Model of the Monterisi-Rossignoli Tomb, Canosa, attributed to Domenico Padiglione (architecture) and Raffaele Gargiulo (vases), cork and stucco

Model of the Paestum Tomb, attributed to Domenico Padiglione, cork and stucco

Model of the The Nola Tomb, attributed to Domenico Padiglione, cork and stucco

xii When making these 'rooms' two artworks served as references, Giacometti's sculpture The Cage 1950 in which a bust and linear figure are enclosed in a fragile space frame which is supported by a heavy modelled stand and Rene Magritte's painting Les valeurs personnelles (Personal values) 1952 in which he depicts a room with a bed and sideboard, clouds as walls and a group of objects, including a giant comb and glass, painted with his characteristic deadpan style.

Paul Coldwell

Paul Coldwell is Professor of Fine Art at Camberwell, Chelsea, & Wimbledon Colleges of Arts, the University of the Arts London. He has taught in many colleges both in UK and abroad including as visiting Professor at the University of Northampton (2006-09), Visiting Professor at the Chinese University Hong Kong and as Guest Artist at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2010 and Montclair University, 2012.

As an artist, his practice includes prints, book works, sculptures and installations, focusing on themes of journey, absence and loss. He has exhibited widely, his work included in numerous public collections, including Tate, V&A, British Museum, the Arts Council of England, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva and MoMA New York. He was one of the invited artists to represent UK at the Ljubljana Print Biennial in 1997 & 1997, selected for numerous open print exhibitions including the International Print Triennial, Cracow, Print Triennial Warsaw, Northern Print Biennial UK and the Haugesund International, Norway. His recent exhibitions include A Layered Practice Graphic Work 1993-2012 (a retrospective of his printworks staged by the Universities of Kent & Greenwich) and Material Things (University of Bradford), which focused on the relationship between his sculpture and prints. In 2017 he was included in Light/Matter: Art at the Intersection of Photography and Printmaking, Grunwald Gallery of Art, Indiana University and has been invited to present as part of their endowed McKinney lecture Series in the fall 2019.

Much of his work has involved researching within collections. In 2008, he was invited to respond to the house at Kettle's Yard Cambridge, resulting in an installed exhibition, I called while you

were out (supported by a small grant from the AHRC), in 2013, following research at the Scot Polar Research Institute, Cambridge he presented Re-Imagining Scott: Objects & Journeys which included sculptures, glassworks, prints and postcards while in 2016-17 he created new work for the Freud Museums in both Vienna, Setting Memory (2016) and London Temporarily Accessioned (2017) (generously supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England). In 2018 he was an invited artist in the AHRC funded project Art and Reconciliation: Conflict, Culture and Community resulting in new work exhibited in Reconciliations at the History Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina Sarajevo and Bush House, London.

In addition to his studio practice, he has curated a number of exhibitions including Digital Responses, (V&A 2001), Morandi's Legacy: Influences on British Art (Estorick Collection London 2006) and The Artists Folio, (Cartwright Hall, Bradford 2014).

He is on the editorial board of the journal Print Quarterly and the advisory board for Art in Print and contributes regularly to both publications. Furthermore he has published writings on a number of artists including Michael Craig-Martin, Giorgio Morandi, Christiane Baumgartner and Paula Rego, has been keynote speaker at a number of international research fora including Impact 7 International Printmaking Conference, Melbourne, Australia 2011 and SNAP 3, Third International Print Symposium, Bentlage, Rheine, Germany 2015, Why remember? Ruins, Remains & reconstruction in Times of War and its aftermath. Sarajevo 2018 and has conducted many public conversations with prominent printmakers including Jim Dine, William Kentridge, Paula Rego and Sean Caulfield. His book Printmaking: A Contemporary Perspective was published by Black Dog Publishing in 2010.

He is currently leading an AHRC multi-disciplinary research network with Professor Ruth Morgan UCL Picturing the invisible to which this exhibition at the Sir John Soane's Museum is a contribution. The project will result in a multi-disciplinary conference at Chelsea College of Arts in November 2019 and a publication of the papers in a book through UCL Press.

(website: www.paulcoldwell.org)

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