



THE
Piranesi
PROJECT

A STRATIGRAPHY OF VIEWS OF ROME

by
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The following essay is a description of The Piranesi Project, a 50 minute slide/video presentation produced under a 2002-2003 Rome Prize Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. Its inaugural presentation was at the Academy on June 9, 2003.

The Piranesi Project is a work that lies between still photography and video. The work itself is primarily photography, but it is presented in the form of a self-running slide show (utilizing PowerPoint, as a platform) that runs on a computer, similar to a video. This work is an exploration of the use of digital still photography on a documentary subject that is intended to take advantage of the freedom allowed by this new digital medium to combine a multiple set of images into a single print.

The breaking off point for this work is the taking of photographs in Rome today from the same vantage points as used by Giambattista Piranesi in the mid-18th Century for his famous *Vedute di Roma*. Piranesi's ability as an artist who transformed his subjects into scenes of extraordinary power has meant that the Rome that many people come to see even now, 250 years later, is, at one level, the Rome that he both documented and imagined. That is what makes using a camera in his footsteps a particularly challenging project – and one that, in many ways, is impossible to achieve. And yet, the experience of trying to do so is in itself a journey both into his imagery, and into the physical reality of the Rome that exists today.

Piranesi has long been criticized as having altered much that he placed in his famous engravings, but, as I soon discovered, much of this criticism comes from the modern-day view that "truth" is what one sees in an un-manipulated photographic print. The multiple vanishing points, and even combined station-points that Piranesi used to construct his images, is thus seen as a departure from the truth, which, as I learned, is not the case.

With the use of digital imagery, and computer programs (mainly Adobe Photoshop), I found that I could take the raw photographic images into the same realm that Piranesi inhabited as he laid out his engravings –constructing a single view from several different photographs with different vanishing points. Sometimes these images combine more than one station point. The resulting image is still intended to be a photographic document of a real subject. The intention behind my work is not to create abstract images, nor was it to create false images. In terms of artistic creativity, painting, drawing and photography of the spatial environment occupy the same place – they each render their subjects into a two dimensional image within the limits of the paper or canvas. That is a form of abstraction. What I found in this project is that the digital medium allowed me greater freedom to transcend compositional limits available to an artist that had hitherto not been available, except within limits, to a photographer working in silver halide on acetate.

Piranesi’s art is so powerful, and was in his time so influential, because of his ability to capture his subjects in a way that brought the viewer into the very spaces that he was documenting. He used scale and perspective to enrich his views, not to falsify them. His work captured the dramatic energy that he experienced in these places within the four rigid and diminutive sides of the sheet of paper.

Without any reference or connection with Piranesi, my early work (1965-1980) on the New England Textile mills (see: <http://conservationtech.com> - click on “Photographs” at the top of the Home Page) had a similar goal. I sought to capture more than mere details. What I was interested is trying to capture the essence of a space in a single wide view, but I was never interested in distorted “fisheye” views.



Randolph Langenbach, The Amoskeag Millyard, Manchester, N.H., 1968.

Piranesi managed in some of his views to encompass as much as 180° of spatial information into a single flat-field image. A camera cannot do this without a fisheye lens, but the flexibility of the computer allows one to “build” such an image out of several photographs. The Piranesi image that both stimulated me to undertake this project, was also one of the most difficult: the interior of the “Terme Grande” at Hadrian’s Villa, outside of Rome.



Piranesi: Terme Grande, Villa Adriana.

When viewed at the site, the arch shown in Piranesi’s view is directly overhead, with the openings on the left and right, 180° apart from each other. From where Piranesi could stand to see this view, he was unable to move back because there was a wall behind him. To “build” a photograph of this space required six separate photos, each taken with a 19 mm lens (35mm equivalent). The process took over 6 hours on the computer, resulting in the image in the show.



Randolph Langenbach: Terme Grande, 2002

Below on the left is a single image of the same view taken with the 19mm lens. This is close to the widest possible limit for flat-field single-image photography. When I was in the actual space at Hadrian’s villa, I was challenged to pursue the kind of work because there was an energy to the space that Piranesi managed, in my experience, to capture, which simply could not be

captured with the single photographic image. This was true, even though it had been stripped of all of its accumulated soil and vegetation that figures so importantly in Piranesi's view.



In the submitted show, the prelude to the show (the images on white background that precede the actual show) illustrates the nine images that were combined to form the single image of the Tosse Temple in Tivoli, and in the show itself, the individual segments of the interior view of the Pantheon are revealed. Many, but not all, of the other images that are overlaid with the work of Piranesi, and the other artists (which include Vanvitelli, Benoist, and others) are made up with multiple photographs. Some of those that are not part of overlays are composed of several images in order to expand the width of the view while maintaining the flat field.

Ultimately, this project also serves as a commentary on how we preserve and interpret the relics of the past in the midst of a living city. Part of the power of the Piranesi images is how they show ancient Rome as a mysterious memory – abused and in ruins – evocative of time and decay, and yet an eternal survival of the memory of a great civilization. Today, it is remarkable to find many of the same ruins frozen in the same state of dismemberment as they were when Piranesi saw them a quarter of a millennium ago, but now stripped of the accumulated detritus of the intervening 1,500 years between his time and the Classical period. Even the vegetation on them at that time made them seem like part of the natural world. The preserved scene is now packaged and protected, but it is one where the hand of the conservator is now more evident than the hand of time. As Ruskin had so aptly put it: "*It is in that golden stain of time, that we are to look for the real light, the colour, and the preciousness of architecture.*" (John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1849)

Background Music and quotations: In its present form, the Piranesi Project has been shown in Italy and the United States together with the music by Respighi, with live readings of a series of quotations. The plan for the next phase of development is to produce the show as a true video, with a fully integrated sound track.

Future Exhibition: This work is designed to be shown both as a video performance together with individual photographs mounted into a photographic exhibition.