

Minoru Nomata: Architecture of the Mind

'Painting is an escapist world, but I would like it to be a place to become energised and return to the world rather than a place to stay' (Minoru Nomata).¹

How do our imaginations manifest through our built environments? Is it possible to conceive of a world in which humans no longer exist? What remains of human creation will be left within this intangible world located somewhere after the future? These are just some of the questions stirred by the visionary artworks of Minoru Nomata, whose near four decades of working chart a consistent negotiation between fantastical and concrete realities, between the spaces that we build and inhabit, and the oneiric and imaginary rhythms that shape and suffuse them. For Nomata, constructed environments are often related to processes of individual or collective dreaming, be they towering forms of an industrial machine-age aesthetic created in the name of human progress; aerodynamic curvatures, such as balloons and sails, floating vulnerably like signals in the sky, or mountainous structures emerging from the earth, some twinkling with the glow of suggested life, others sitting shadowed and dormant. So often when we look at Nomata's works, we have an uncanny sense of familiarity coupled with a distant otherworldliness. Each construction is as much connected to the artist's own interior structures of thought, in which processes of precision and speculation elide within the space of the painting, as they are to the built realities that have been realised throughout history. These are self-portraits visualised through escapist worlds: architectures of the mind.

Whilst the forms, colours and incredible detail of the architectures that Nomata creates are visually striking, his images transmit an equally salient yet enigmatic ambience via what it not included, namely human life. Set within vast landscapes, these structures appear to have been abandoned, no-longer functional, or existing as sealed fortresses impenetrable from the outside. To what extent are these visions of a post-apocalyptic future, or an unknown time in which the grand edifices made by humans over centuries are the only thing remaining as crumbling signals to their prior existence? This is not a question that Nomata is necessarily interested in resolving,

¹ *White Cube Companion*, eds. Honey Luard and Elaine Tam. White Cube, 2021, p. 26.

however his decision to avoid human presence within each landscape points to what philosophers Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and Mark Fisher would deem the slow cancellation of any mythological conception of a utopian future for humankind. As Berardi comments, even the notion of the future is a 'faith based on the concept of "progress" ...rooted in modern capitalism, in the experience of expansion of the economy and knowledge'.² If, as this formulation suggests, the idea of the future is now obsolete, then Nomata's paintings might speak to another version that lies beyond the accumulation of human-centred systems of value and understanding. It is, as architect Terunobu Fujimori describes, 'an unknown future which cannot be described sufficiently with either words or images...[Nomata]...confronts the canvas trying to capture, if nothing else, some sort of sign or foreshadowing of this future'.³

If the future that Nomata confronts cannot be sufficiently expressed through words or images, it may help to draw upon a key inspiration within his practice: music. An important starting point for these images are the ambient sounds of musician Brian Eno and composer Erik Satie. In particular, the former is believed to have guided Nomata in developing his unique approach to incorporating architectural motifs into his painting, as evidenced through what Masato Fukushima calls its 'atmospheric sensibility'.⁴ In a similar manner to how we experience the disconcerting absence of human life within each of these paintings, so too there is always an underlying ambience pervading the forms and textures that we are perceiving; an unseen, unbuilt dimension, but one that is felt emanating from the image like subtle, sonic vibrations. Eno is notable for coining the term 'generative music', which privileges simple, open systems or rules that leave space of unexpected consequences. What emerges from this constraint is the potential for improvisation or reinterpretation by the musicians who perform it. Such a description is perhaps not far from Nomata's own approach to visual construction. These are architectural blueprints from the past and present that maintain their legibility through the ostensible connection to a built reality. However, through the subtlety of the artist's technique – light, shadow, colour and form – across the background and foreground of each composition, they are imbued with a mystic ambience that elicits a multiplicity of interpretations by those who view them.

Writer Finn Williams makes the link between Eno's 'generative music' and architecture, posing that if 'classical music is like architecture that conforms

² Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future*. Edinburgh, Oakland, Baltimore: AK Press, 2011, p. 18.

³ Terunobu Fujimori, 'Prophetic Painter – Minoru Nomata' in *Minoru Nomata: Alternative Sights*, ed. Kyoko Wada. Kyoto: Seigensha Art Publishing, Inc., 2010, p. 87.

⁴ Masato Fukushima, 'Minoru Nomata: The allure of polychromatic topology' in *White Cube Companion*, p. 72.

to a predetermined plan, generative music has more in common with the way cities evolve dynamically in response to good planning'.⁵ This idea is elucidated by Eno in speaking about art making: 'it doesn't mean there's no plan at all, but that the process of making is a process of you interacting with the object, and letting it set the pace'.⁶ How can we relate Eno's generative, collaborative and open-ended approach to making to the uncertain future that Nomata conjures? One answer could lie in finding a sense of collective responsibility towards the environments they we inhabit, in making room for a plurality of voices to help shape them, and seeking a wild equilibrium between what is considered natural and humanmade. 'Looking at the night sky is like looking into the bottomless, infinite universe itself. Limitless, dark, and frightening'.⁷ Nomata is acutely aware of the sublime overwhelm that nature can ignite within, and his paintings affirm this constant confrontation with forces that are greater than us. Through physical, ambient and interior architectures, he envisions an uncertain future that is undoubtedly elsewhere, but it is a future reality that we might still have the power to collectively determine from our present moment.

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⁵ Finn Williams, 'Brian Eno's ideas have unexpected resonance for architecture', *Dezeen*, 9 November 2018 (<https://www.dezeen.com/2018/11/09/brian-eno-architecture-planning-finn-williams-opinion-column/>).

⁶ Brian Eno, *Serpentine Galleries* website (<https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/brian-eno-in-a-garden/>)

⁷ Minoru Nomata in Kazuko Koike, 'Alternative World' in *Minoru Nomata: Alternative Sights*, p. 13.