

Studio Monte Palace

May 14, 2018 | Graham Gussin



Graham Gussin is an artist who uses a wide range of media, including texts, film, video, installation, photography, drawing and sound. In 2017 he was invited to take part in an artist residency in the Azores, Portugal, and during his stay was drawn to an abandoned hotel perched on an isolated mountaintop. This former five-star hotel became Gussin's temporary studio, as well as being the inspiration for a new body of work.



As someone who has exhibited often in Portugal, I was invited to complete a residency at *Pico do Refugio* on the north coast of São Miguel, the largest island in the Azores. I was intrigued by this opportunity to visit a small group of islands two hours flight out from Lisbon, literally in the middle of nowhere. The location is run as a hotel during the busy summer months, and for five years now, the owner has been running residencies for artists during low season. There is a grand house at the top of the hill with many smaller buildings used for travellers and tourists around a large plantation area, first used for fruit growing and later for tea growing and processing.

Initially I took a short trip out for a site visit. A Portuguese artist I know, Miguel Palma, was working on the residency and had organised my invitation during a small show of the work he had made there. During this trip I was taken on a journey to the highest point of the island to visit an abandoned building, the *Hotel Monte Palace*, an astonishing ruin on the lip of an extinct volcano. Seeing this was the starting point of a very productive period of work. When I returned for the residency, all of the work I made was based at the hotel. I went there regularly, sometimes with plans, other times not. The hotel became a kind of studio while I was on the island.

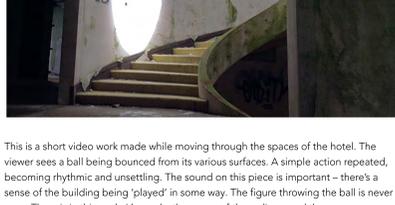


The Hotel Monte Palace was built in the 1980s by a French consortium and was opened in 1989. It soon closed due to insufficient visitors and it lay empty but guarded for a decade. As locals tell the story, when the single guard died the hotel was left open to all and within a few months the fittings, windows and any valuable materials were taken by people from across the island either resold or used in their own homes. This had an interesting resonance for me, ideas of ownership, occupation, tourism and dwelling seemed to be embedded in both the building and the story of its demise. The building is now visited by tourists and local youths, a ruin, caught somehow between a vision of the future and the past.



I made a number of works, using different approaches, details of some of which I've included below. I will return to the island this year to make a small show of some of these pieces and to work on a book which documents the residency.

Videos: *Hotel Reverb*



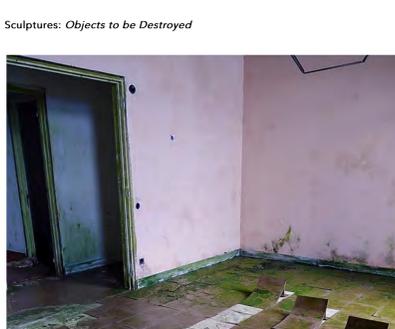
This is a short video work made while moving through the spaces of the hotel. The viewer sees a ball being bounced from its various surfaces. A simple action repeated, becoming rhythmic and unsettling. The sound on this piece is important – there's a sense of the building being "played" in some way. The figure throwing the ball is never seen. There is in this work, I hope, both a sense of the ordinary and the uncanny.



The second video work (as yet untitled) involved igniting fireworks in the central hall of the hotel. It documents the making of a spectacle. I was interested in the collision between something contained and something displayed but also, again sound and scale – the building resonating after the noise of the fireworks like a musical instrument. We had to shoot this at first light so we were there very early in the morning. This meant less interference from possible visitors and less possibility of being stopped by any authorities – or being chased and fined by the authorities as we were leaving.

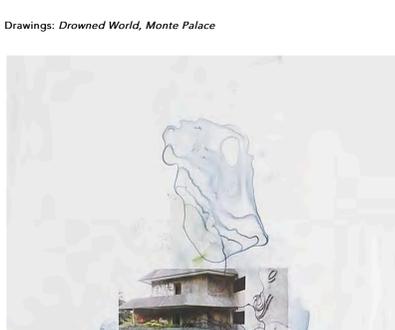
The noise really was extraordinary, the concrete building magnifying this sound and sending it echoing across the crater of the scattered villages around. Four cameras and mics were set up and the boxes of fireworks lit electrically. It was a dangerous space to be in at that point. We let the smoke subside and then packed up very quickly, the previous bravado of the local crew members suddenly evaporating – one of who said it had been like trying to wake the building up through some kind of shock.

Sculptures: *Objects to be Destroyed*



This series of photographs documents temporary sculptures made within the hotel and its grounds. These objects or interventions were made rapidly during a single day using only material found within the building. Everything within the building is in a state of collapse, all that material does within this space is fall or hang, entropy all around. It was interesting to make simple works which contradicted this tendency, if only temporarily.

Drawings: *Drowned World, Monte Palace*



These works can only loosely be described as drawings. They consist of digital photographic prints which are then "drowned" in watercolour and left to dry over a number of days creating a stain across the image. I have used this technique in other works. The idea of the *Drowned World*, which is a reference to the book of the same title by J.G. Ballard, seemed particularly apt when working in the hotel, the sound of dripping water being constant. The watercolour pigment leaves a very fine and detailed trace as it dries, seeming to describe a landscape or geological structure or growth of some sort.

Thinking about the hotel as a studio for the duration of the residency was very liberating. It allowed me to claim the space in some way and to organise things there around a regular pattern, it gave me the chance to think of the building as material and place, as a starting point and perhaps as a sculpture itself. Ideas about how we occupy space were very much in my mind; as visitor, tourist, artist, guest, trespasser and so on, the relation between place and function being primary to this. Martin Heidegger's *Building, Dwelling and Thinking* was a text that kept coming to mind while I was working there. The whole building looked like it had arrived out of nowhere, perhaps a product of the volcano. The location is subject to rapid weather changes, high on a ridge and close to the ocean, this restless and sometimes hostile pattern not conducive with the idea of luxury and relaxation that the hotel assumed as its premise.

All works copyright Graham Gussin 2017

Following his residency, Graham Gussin created 'Drowned World Monte Palace' – a new series of limited edition works which are available in our online shop. Please click [here](#) for details.

An exhibition of Gussin's work will be held at Galeria Fonseca Macedo, Ponta Delgada, Azores, Portugal. A book, featuring the part of 'Walk Through British Art: Sixty Years'. His solo exhibition 'The Mary Jane Paintings' opens at Handel Street Projects, London on 8th June. For further information about Gussin's work please click [here](#).

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