

A Sense of Place

Shoshana Kessler and Beth Sparks, eds., *IRIS*, Issue 1 (March 2016) Hurst Street Press, Oxford, 56pp

REY CONQUER

In illustrating the concept of the category-mistake, Gilbert Ryle tells the story of a foreigner visiting Oxford and, having seen the colleges and the playing fields and the various departments, turns to his guide to ask, 'But where is the University?'. The foreigner's mistake lies in not knowing that the University is not, of course, yet another building alongside the colleges and offices; it is the organising principle behind them, invisible and intangible.

IRIS is a magazine of poetry, essays, comics, and artwork. Its USP is its tangibility and materiality: it was printed using an Adana letterpress, bound by hand, and the materials used—the specific types of paper and thread—are listed in the colophon. The paper is thick and textured, as is the thread. The inside sheets are laid, which means that you can make out the vertical lines from the manufacturing process (previously out of expediency; now for effect). You can still feel the ink on the pages and the indentations from the press. The editors—Shoshana Kessler and Beth Sparks—organised a small exhibition at their studio in Oxpens where you could see all the objects that they used in making the magazine, some sketches and mockups, and the artworks in the flesh (in the case of Josefin Meijer's affecting, austere clay heads, this is almost literal). The theme of this issue (which is the first, of three) is 'sense of place'.

Jan Morris opens her book about Oxford with the view from Boars Hill, where Oxford is glimpsed in sudden flashes when sunlight breaks through the cloud and picks out its details, the 'etched intricacy' of the university buildings as well as the glass and brick of the schools and factories and houses. Morris describes the office of another Morris, William Morris (of Morris Motors, although Kelmscott Manor, country retreat of the designer and printmaker William Morris, is only 25 miles away), which was left as it was in the 1920s up until his death in 1963. This forms an odd time-capsule, all the more surprising for having been done unintentionally, for all that what you could see there—pristine stationery, a diary full of neatly written but unremarkable appointments—is not in itself exciting. Morris Motors was, famously, the largest employer in Oxfordshire for a number of decades (it had previously been Oxford University Press, which, once again, out-employs them by a thousand workers or so). If there is a fussy immateriality to the university understood as such, then the city itself has always been one of stuff, whether wool or pressed steel car bodies or marmalade. But Oxford is

a city with a swiftly decreasing ‘sense of place’: no longer divided merely between ‘town’ and ‘gown’, it has become another coordinate in the widening London commuter belt, and is now – I hope famously – the most unaffordable city in the UK, that is, a city in which its own residents cannot live.

There is no mention of Oxford in *IRIS*, and for all that the contributions address, to some extent, the theme, the only places named or implied are elsewhere: Liverpool, Turkey, the Pacific and Indian oceans. The focus is more that of the magazine itself: textures, documents, objects. There are small, arresting poems (Arabella Currie), abstracted photos of bare interiors where tone becomes feature (Lara Shahnava). There’s an essay on the queer theorist DA Miller which seems at first glance to have little to do with the theme, but which in fact addresses it head-on: If we read between the lines, we find William Ghosh reading between the lines to locate DA Miller in time and space, which is what Miller himself was doing for Roland Barthes. Some of the other pieces are actually critical, academic essays on the adjacent poetry and artwork – rather than the form (i.e. of the essay) being a discreet, neutralising screen, it is a way for the contributors to give their coordinates, abstractly speaking; to assert who and where they are. We see this in other glimpses, too: the newly set-up Hurst Street Press, run by the editors, is named after a street in East Oxford; they thank the Bodleian, the Ruskin School of Art (in whose East Oxford studio they held their launch) and a café on Cowley Road; their first commission has come from Hermione Lee, President of Wolfson College. A sense of place is conveyed by this constellation of particularities, but also from the uncanny combination of the form (‘the hand-printed pamphlet’) and the form (‘the theoretical introduction’). The latter reads unfortunately like a lack of confidence in the ability of the contributions, and the physical aspect of the thing, to speak for themselves – but fulfils, nonetheless, a thematic role, one which could be summed up by the magazine’s own final lines: as Tom Quayle says apropos of Arabella Currie’s poems, ‘we are rooted by our tongues as much as by our feet’.