

# Angela Bulloch "New Wave Digits" Simon Lee, Londres,

1-30 May 2015.

By Eric Troncy.

All images courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery London/Hong Kong. Photo: Antoine Espinasseau

*"There was once a princess who fell in love with geometry".*

The pitch for the iPad game Monument Valley—described by its creator, Ken Wong, as “an illusory adventure of impossible architecture and forgiveness—mentions the princess Ida, a tiny character with a conical hat straight out of a fairy tale who gets delightfully and willingly lost in the maze of a castle made of optical illusions and non-Euclidean geometry. With endless staircases that go up and down, the castle is a fantasy of jumbled abscissas and ordinates, of places with three, four and five dimensions in hazy pastel colours that fade into thin air. “A game where architecture is the main character,” explains Ken Wong and it is likely no coincidence that the game was designed in vertical “portrait” format, and not in “landscape”, to allow this architecture to unfold. Downloaded four million times since its release, Monument Valley, developed in 2013 and launched on 3 April 2014 by Ustwo, was named “best iPad game of 2014” by Apple, winning the Apple Design Award the same year. Dear little Ida copes well with the new rules of this improbable architecture as she advances through the intricacies of these reason-defying staircases. Every now and then she even seems to delight in being able to walk vertically; you can almost sense the thrill as she feels her body experience gravity like an astronaut. She never runs, she walks through this brightly coloured horizon-less landscape that has no limits other than the edge of the frame. The frame—in this case, of an iPad mini—is embedded in the surface of a rhombus in one of the sculptures by Angela Bulloch (*Never Ending iPad*, 2015) on display at the Simon Lee Gallery. The sculptures are also subject to new rules of non-Euclidean geometry, defying gravity, made of diagonally-cut coloured blocks, and shrouded in colours that are indisputably pastel if not evanescent; given fairy-tale names such as Blueberry Ice, Cameo White, Glacier Ice and Pale Pink, the terminology is more Farrow & Ball than Pantone.

Visitors to the exhibition can use this iPad to play with the sculpture but, if truth be told, this is hardly essential (and to be honest it's much more practical to play Monument Valley on an iPad than to play Monument Valley on an iPad embedded in the surface of a sculpture). This vague call to participation would be a bit pathetic if it weren't ultimately anecdotal or appeared more than once on the many sculptures that make up this collection. The title of the exhibition, “New Wave Digits”, sends out the necessary signals to the imagination about climbing the staircases of memory, knowledge and interpretation. “Digits” like digital, but also like finger tips, the science of both computers and the senses. As for “New Wave”... it's an expression that is most likely fixed in the memory of a time, as “Young British Artists”, with which Angela Bulloch was once associated, is today. New Wave in the sense of Rauschenberg's *Combines* of Pop music and Punk but with wide-ranging ambitions—not a bad allusion at all. This current New Wave has been forged in a total amnesia of the New Wave of the past, this time applied to a different discipline (“Digits”) because that's how things work now: the past offers rhyming gimmicks but probing any deeper is ill-advised.



When it comes down to it, this exhibition calls upon some of these memories that have yet to be consigned to the archives by history and labelled as definitively over; these are memories in which we can still detect a pulse: the very first 3D simulations, the first virtual reality images and, of course, Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1918). Also made of aligned rhomboids, Brancusi's column worked (in the infinite sense) along one of the geometric axes of representation at the same time, in a less scholarly way, as the idea of an "axis of the world". There are also memories of Angela Bulloch's early works, of globes of light borrowed from the urban landscape (*Belisha Beacons*), sometimes filled with colour pulsating like blood, or memories of the "pixel boxes" seen in her more recent work.



The creators of *Monument Valley* have admitted that their inspiration came from "Japanese prints and minimalist sculptures" (we know that minimalist art is now an "inspiration" for fashion, interior design and video games, a kind of Pinterest). Angela Bulloch's sculptures call, in part, upon art historical experiments (we could also call them "avant-gardes") by aiming to radically simplify forms (let's put Constantin Brancusi AND minimalist art in the same folder marked 2015, provided it's monogrammed of course) and in part upon science fiction, at least, the idea of science fiction that was around at the end of the last century. A naïve, restless and fascinating science fiction, the traces of which can also be felt in the titles of these sculptures. (A title, when it is successful, is a way into a work that is a lot more interesting than any "meditation", yet ultimately a title *is* a meditation and nothing more should be needed. But a particular kind of talent is required to make a title successful, to avoid any potential pitfalls, from unconscious pretension to ridicule).

- *I Can't do That Dave* (2015). A literal reference to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and the rebellion of the machine (the HAL 9000 computer) when it refuses to open the capsule door, "I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that";
- *Animus Ernest* (2015), *Anima Eve* (2015). Animus and Anima, Jung's anthropomorphic archetypes of the unconscious, have been bestowed with first names that reference interpretations of the Swiss psychotherapist's theories: Eve for the first woman, Ernest for Hemingway... try figuring that one out;
- *Short Cardinal – Never Ending* (2015). Red (cardinal) of course, where Brancusi's "endless" has been replaced by "Never Ending", perhaps from *Neverending Story* and its world named Fantasia, where man's fantasy flourishes, intent on its own destruction once he has given up on his dreams;
- *Heavy Metal Stack of six 3 Blues* (2014): I will leave it up to you to provide your own interpretation.

Add these titles to what the eyes see and the mind has no trouble coming up with the start of a story. What do the eyes see? The sculptures resemble the BeoLab 90 unveiled by Bang & Olufsen in the autumn of 2015, aimed at "a public of audiophiles and fans of the brand as well as consumers of luxury goods" (a sentence worthy of serious thought) with an "aesthetic inspired by contemporary architecture". Really.... They also resemble a sort of redesigned R2-D2, with cables sprouting from rear panels made of Corian, MDF or metal, humanoid computers with decidedly hypothetical functions and a complex design that casts further doubt on their use. There is something familiar about them, benevolent, just like the little robot from *Star Wars* and probably just as useless but at the same time reassuring. These are real sculptures and they definitely do not talk, they do not tell us anything in a literal way (I've been thinking for a while now that the least talkative works have the most to say). They know how to arouse emotion without appealing to anything more than the specific language of their discipline, and it is only then that, potentially or even freely, we can begin thinking about all sorts of things, starting with the relevance of an *Endless Column* that has been updated for 2015 and very skilfully revamped. How beautiful these sculptures are! They also tell us about the modern world and the



state of its art; or rather, they are not there to tell us but to make us talk about it, and this is where their very elegant difference lies. The accuracy of their colour ranges, the complexity of their formal structure, the absurd mechanism that makes them work (some simply produce light, which varies, very slowly, from one colour to another, almost as if they were living things), the delicacy of their position in space and their ability to shape society in this space, in other words, the organisational decisions taken so that the sculptures can be understood through an audio guide. All this serves to make sharing a room with these sculptures an extraordinarily poetic experience.

I should confess at this point in my praise that I have harboured an almost unreserved passion for Angela Bulloch's work since 1990, when I organised what was one of her first solo shows and one of my first exhibitions. I can still see the group of light globes through which the light seemed to circulate, from one globe to another, vanishing from the first to be reborn in the second, before reappearing in the first in the same way; I can still hear the laughter triggered by walking on a particular spot. Some exhibitions leave indelible marks on you. Angela Bulloch is one of the few artists for whom I've wanted to organise more monographic exhibitions (two others, in 1997 and 2005), quite simply because her work has always seemed to me to deserve it in the successive phases of her development. If I cast my mind back, few of the artists I was excited about in the early 1990s have been able to hold my attention over the intervening twenty-five years: some have shown brutal breakdowns in inspiration, others too clear a deference to the commercial world, others still a frankly cynical propensity to capitalise on their own celebrity. Bulloch has instead avoided these pitfalls, always putting an end to her slightly too successful series of works (*Bean Bags*, for example, the associated convenience of which is a touch dated), and ultimately stating that she did not want to rest on her laurels.



Something that often strikes me now is that chronology has disappeared. Relegated to the role of mood board accessories or trend books circulating on the internet simply in the hope of receiving a "like", works are now depicted without their date, something that is perfectly suited to the way in which they are consumed. Yet making such and such a work at such and such a time is not the same as making a work that looks a bit like another, at least, that was how it was when art history had a chronology. This admiration for Angela Bulloch's work is linked largely to her chronology, to how the forms are organised and evolve in a way that does not seem to marry up with the period in question but precedes it a little, confidently envisaging what the period will make of them. The latest mutation of light forms in Bulloch's work sees her arrange them in the shape of a rhombus (following on from globes and pixels), bringing just enough complexity to these volumes to respond to the latest ways of thinking. Furthermore, they take on a complexity that is unprecedented in Bulloch's oeuvre, or certainly never pushed so far, where things appear to have been radicalised in terms of confidence: the shapes, the highly unusual colours (in particular the piece located in the public space near the gallery and another that will be installed in the Tuileries Garden in Paris in the autumn of 2015), their arrangement, which no longer seems to respond to simple organisation, and their simplicity, no longer their most important quality. These sculptures display a certain freedom, as if, at a time when rational works are high in popularity, Bulloch were trying to counter this with just a hint of a taste for the arbitrary.

