

## 'The Obsidian Isle', 2010

Gayle Chong Kwan

### Brief

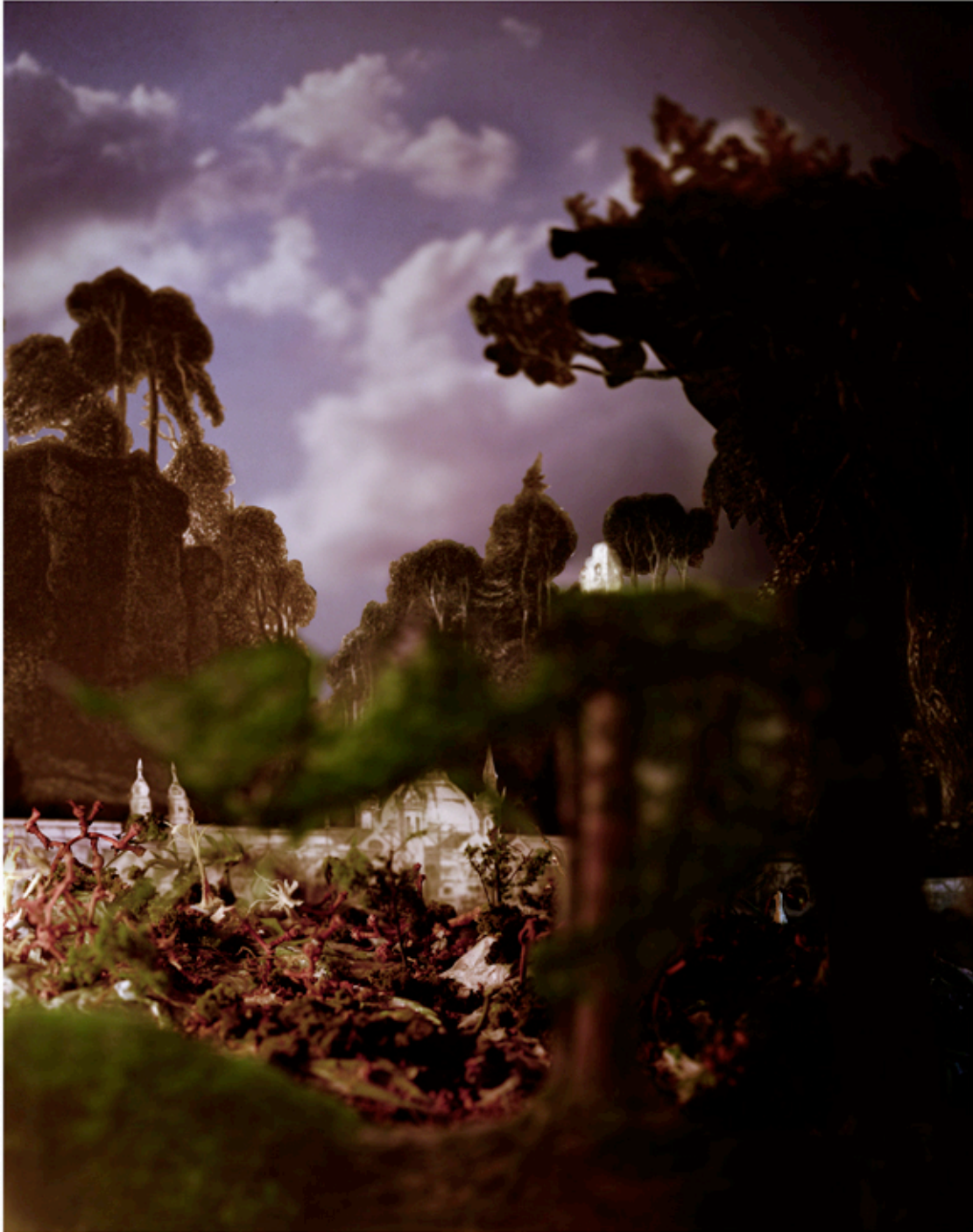
'The Obsidian Isle' is a fictional island, on which exist the lost and destroyed buildings and places of one country. 'The Obsidian Isle' plays with wider ideas of collective history, national identity, landscape, tourism, and the distortion of memories, through the prism of the particularities of Scotland. From structures that fell into dereliction after the Highland Clearances, buildings destroyed during the Second World War, places torn down to make way for new developments, or structures that collapsed due to poor construction, the island is a place where visitors are invited to remember or possibly to collectively 'forget'. 'The Obsidian Isle' questions what is kept, what remains, what falls into ruin or is destroyed, what persists and how these can be altered by memories, myth or competing histories.

'The Obsidian Isle' is an installation of photographs and sculptural works consisting of: ten large-format photographic c-type prints of views which connect up to form a panoramic vista of the island; a series of small photographic prints which play with ideas of sensory abstraction and altered memories, developed by the artist through a series of workshops and events in which people were invited to create blind drawings, tactile printing, memory maps and upside down mirror drawings; and sensory aids, which reference Claude glasses and framing devices, for use by visitors on the island.

Supposedly located off the west coast of Scotland in the Inner Hebrides, Chong Kwan's 'The Obsidian Isle' refers to a controversial literary work. Ossian, the blind 3rd century poet who was 'discovered' by James Macpherson in the 18th Century, was presented to the public as the narrator and supposed author, of a cycle of epic poems, translated from fragments of ancient sources in Scots Gaelic. A controversy raged at the time around its publication, Samuel Johnson called Macpherson "a mountebank, a liar, and a fraud, and that the poems were forgeries", Hugh Blair upheld its authenticity, and a Committee for the Highlands was set up to investigate its sources and the veracity of Macpherson's claims.

Macpherson's 'Ossian' was influential in the development of changing ideas of the Highland and Scottish landscape and notions of 'Scottish identity' at home and abroad: it went on to be translated into several languages; Napoleon was said to carry a copy with him; Ingres painted the 'Dream of Ossian' and places inspired by and named after Ossian, such as Fingal's Cave in Staffa, and Ossian's Cave in Drumkeld, became tourist attractions.

The ten large-format photographs are constructed from found images, three-dimensional elements and medium-format photographs taken by the artist, which are re-made as mise-en-scenes of the island which are then photographed in the studio:



**'The Eastern Palace'**

The temporary Eastern Palace was an oriental fantasy with a grand dome adorned by an electric-torch wielding golden angel of light. It was designed by Glasgow-based architect James Miller for the Glasgow International Exhibition in Kelvingrove in 1901, where it was surrounded by buildings for industrial and machinery displays, concert halls, restaurants and cafes.



**'Greenside Place'**

The tenements on Greenside Place in Edinburgh, which were a continuation of Leith Street stood nine-stories high. They were destroyed in 1973-4 to make way for a traffic interchange for the planned ring road that was never realised, part of the large-scale building and redevelopment phase which took place in Scotland in the 1960s and 1970s.



### **'Stonelaw School'**

Luftwaffe bombings during the Second World War centred on Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Clydebank, Greenock and Dundee. Stonelaw School, damaged in an air raid in 1941, was one of the many buildings in Scotland which were left in ruin or destroyed at this time. Opened in 1886, the school could accommodate 568 children and enabled pupils in Rutherglen to continue their education without having to go travel Glasgow.





### **'Fingal's Cave'**

Staffa is an island made up of hexagonally joined basalt pillars, in the Inner Hebrides, which was brought to the attention of the English-speaking world by Sir Joseph Banks in 1772. Named 'Fingal's Cave' after Macpherson's Ossian, it also provided inspiration for Turner, Wordsworth, Jules Verne and Mendelssohn wrote the 'Hebrides Overture' from his experience of being there. The Gaelic legend of Finn has the hero building a causeway between Scotland and Ireland. Located in this vista are the Theatre Royal Edinburgh, which was destroyed by fire in 1884, the fourth time the theatre had burnt down, as it had previously caught fire in 1853, 1865, and 1875, and also a building from the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, partially destroyed during 'The Great Fire' of November 1824.



### **'Theatre Royal'**

The Theatre Royal, Queen Street, Glasgow, was built in 1804 by architect David Hamilton, but a fault in its gas supply resulted in the building being destroyed by fire in 1829. Edinburgh artist Alexander Naismith designed the scenery, and the theatre seated 1500 people. In the foreground is one of the schools in Clydebank left in ruin after being hit by bombs during the Second World War.



**'The Royal Arch'**

The Royal or Victoria Arch was a neo-Norman structure designed by JT Rothead, which was erected between the Earl Grey and King William IV docks in Dundee to commemorate the visit of Queen Victoria in 1844. It was dynamited in 1964 to make way for slip roads, which connected with the Tay Road Bridge.





### **'Highland Clearances'**

A shell of a cottage or croft, one of the many ruins or settlements which were forcibly abandoned or left during the Highland Clearances of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when vast areas were de-populated when the population were "encouraged", often forcibly, to move off suitable land for more profitable sheep farming.





### **'Tait Tower'**

Tait Tower, officially known as the Tower of Empire, was a 300ft high art deco structure constructed at the summit of Bellahouston Hill in Bellahouston Park as part of the Empire Exhibition in 1938. Designed by Thomas S Tait, it was built in only nine weeks, with all the materials made in Glasgow's manufacturing plants. It was demolished in July 1939, allegedly because it would be a beacon for enemy bombers, although taller structures were not demolished, and the order to demolish seems to have come two months before the war began. Alongside it stands the remains of the first Tay Bridge, designed by Thomas Bouch, which at two miles long was the longest bridge in the world. On the night of 28 December 1879 at 7.15pm, the bridge collapsed after its central spans gave way during high winter gales. A train with six carriages carrying seventy-five passengers and crew, crossing at the time, plunged into the waters of the Tay and all were lost.



### **'Ossian's Hall'**

Built in 1759 as a view-house in a position overlooking the Black Linn falls, Ossian's Hall was redecorated in 1783 as a shrine to the blind poet Ossian. It was intended to evoke features of 'shock' and 'amazement' in the viewers' minds; the room from where views of the waterfall were taken was lined with mirrors, which made the spectator imagine that the water was appearing from all angles. In 1869 vandals blew up Ossian's Hall destroying the internal mirrors and scheme. No one was prosecuted but they suspected Alexander Robertson, Dondonedine, who opposed the tolls levied in the Tay Bridge at Dunkeld by the Duke of Atholl.



**'McGeoch's Warehouse'**

William McGeoch and Co.'s Warehouse stood on corner of West Campbell Street and Waterloo Street, Glasgow. Designed by JJ Burnet and built in 1905, it was demolished in 1971. Established in 1832, as a brass founders, William McGeoch and Co. is now named McGeoch Technology, based in Birmingham the company describes itself as 'worldwide specialists in marine lighting and electrical systems'.



## **Publication**

A full-colour 75 page publication featuring the ten large-format photographs, smaller photographic works as well as images of the sensory aids, containing pull-out map and limited edition artworks. Edition of 500, size to be confirmed.

Featuring contributions by: Dr John Bonehill, Lecturer in the Department of History of Art, University of Glasgow; Dr Fiona Stafford, Professor of English and Fellow of Somerville College, University of Oxford; Howard Gaskill, Edinburgh University; and Dr Dominic Paterson, Department of History of Art, University of Glasgow. Texts were developed for a symposium 'The Obsidian Isle and the Ossianic Landscape', held at the Glasgow Project Room, Trongate 103, in April 2010, which addressed the themes of landscape, place, travel and nation. The publication is being designed by the artist with Graphical House, Glasgow.