Inside Piranesi’s prisons

An immersive, digital film at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini reimagines the artist’s dark fantasies as if in three dimensions

By Anna Somers Cocks

In Venice for the September opening of the Architecture Biennale, Frank Gehry went to the Piranesi exhibition (prolonged until 9 January 2011) at the Fondazione Cini on the island of San Giorgio. What he saw held him transfixed, trying to work out how it had been done. It is a film that takes you into the terrible but noble prisons, the architectural fantasy etchings that Piranesi produced in 1745 and republished in the early 1760s, this time reworked so that they were darker, more oppressive, with yet more evil-looking galleries and staircases. You penetrate the title page and float through a room divided into a vast space, where faceless figures gesticulate desperately on a high platform with giant mortar heads in relief, while below a man is tortured on the rack. Then you zoom back, pressing up close against a wall to see the fish hook, etching marks. Piranesi’s own hand at work; sweep under an arch into more ominous, arched spaces with Cyclopean stone walls, vast chairs, broken beams; you cross bridges, climb stairs, towards moonless spaces and moving clouds, pass writhing and go down again into the darkness. The reverberating sound of a solo cello, Bach’s Cello Suite No 2 played by Pablo Casals, accompanies the dense nervous texturing of these famous prints whose artistic intention, beyond showing the brutality of torture, remains a fascinating mystery. They are, why, despite having only one actual building to his name, Giambattista Piranesi has attracted literary figures such as Horace Walpole, Victor Hugo, Aldous Huxley and Marguerite Yourcenar, and there is scarcely more written about him than any other 18th-century architect.

There is no doubt that the author of this film, Grégoire Dupond of Factum Arte, has himself contributed a work of art to the mix of this fascinating exhibition. It required not just a fresh judgement on his part, but also the digital creation of the “other sides” of Piranesi’s structures to provide the third dimension. Dupond’s film also helps you to see the prints better. You come to them after the film and feel that piranesi is revisiting a place you once saw fleetingly in a dream, and you linger over every detail, looking for a way around these irrational, emotional spaces. The deliberate seduction of the visitor is the difference between the aims of the current exhibition and the clutch of shows held in 1978 to coincide with the bicentenary of Giambattista Piranesi’s death. Those were concerned with questions of dating, influences, comparisons with contemporaries such as Canaletto, Guardi and Tiepolo. Today, these lessons in art history have been digested, almost taken for granted, and the aim has been instead to interact with Piranesi’s oeuvre—the etchings come from his own collection—an various different ways so as to surprise and engage you.

This exhibition is also the first major one of Piranesi to be posthumous; the art history is less austere. We are encouraged now to respond to art aesthetically, to mix it up with the art of today, to take liberties with it in the interest of seeing the works anew. This has prompted the organizers to make full use of the digital technology available. For example, the two sinks known to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France Universitaria at Modena, showing Piranesi’s working drawings and sketches of classical remains he had accumulated in his famous museum-workshop in Palazzo Tomati, can be turned like the pages of an i-book, and the first and last versions of the Carceri can be seen that in 1778 belonged to the artist, antiquarian and dealer, Richard Dalton, now missing. Other recorded pieces are a Roman tripod table in bronze, one of Piranesi’s fanciful, tall, “candelabri” made of classical carved stone elements, and an exquisitely silver shell coffeepot.

And so the exhibition ends with a technological fanfare, but one of which Adam Lowe, himself an artist, is convinced that Piranesi would have approved.

Factum Arte: in conjunction with the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, they have published a DVD of the 12-minute film by Grégoire Dupond of the Carceri d’Invenzione, with a second disc containing high-resolution versions of all the prints from the 1761 plates in the collection of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Fortin Dobol edition). Each etching can be viewed at great magnification to see the freedom of Piranesi’s draughtsmanship. The DVD also contains a 24-page booklet with texts by John Wilton-Ely, a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and the distinguished curator Norman Rosenthal. The disc is both Mac and PC compatible and is playable on all DVD players. Price: £25 plus postage (with a £5 donation from each sale going to the Venice in Peril Fund, London). Send your requests to: t.seppings@theartnewspaper.com

A plate from Piranesi’s Carceri d’invenzione, early 1760s