

Island of San Giorgio, Venice

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 exit-less galleries and staircases.

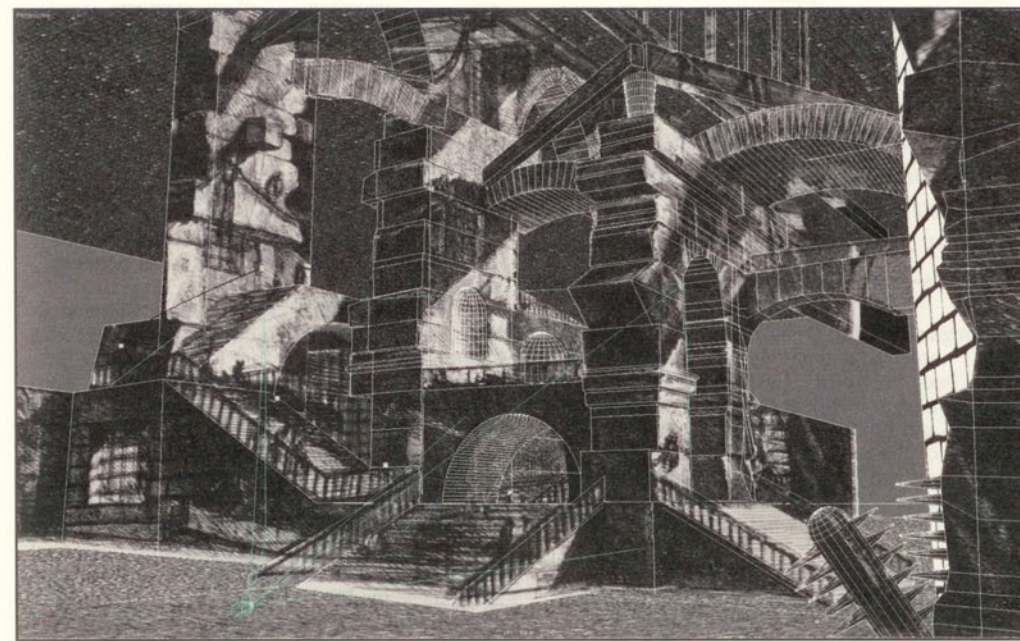
You penetrate the title page and float through a barred window into a vast space, where faceless figures gesticulate desperately on a high platform with giant Roman heads in relief, while below a man is tortured on the rack. Then you zoom back, pressing up close against a wall to see the fish-hook etching marks, Piranesi's own hand at work; sweep under an arch into more ruinous, arched spaces with Cyclopien stone walls, vast chains, broken beams; you cross bridges, climb stairs towards roofless spaces and moving clouds, pass wraiths 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 sublimity of horror, 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 probably 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 aesthetic 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



A plate from Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione*, early 1760s

remains he had accumulated in his famous museum-workshop in Palazzo Tomati, can be turned like the pages of an iBook, and the first and last versions of the *Carceri* can be seen



The same view being turned into a 3D experience

better. You come to them after the film and feel that you are 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, of influences, of 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 the Cini's own collection—in various different ways so as to surprise and engage us.

This exhibition is also the first major one of Piranesi since post-modernism made art history 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 organisers to make full use of the digital technology available. For example, the two sketchbooks in the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria at Modena, showing Piranesi's working drawings and sketches of classical

dissolving from one into another.

Michele De Lucchi, the curator, is himself a practising architect, and to judge by the way he has paced and hung the exhibition, a man of taste. He has also designed the solid, elegant, wooden desk cases that considerably allow you to lean on them while looking at the prints inside.

And what prints they are: Piranesi is never boring. Even with something so unromantic as a Roman sluice to let water out of Lake Albano, he shows every part of the engineering on a separate curling scroll, superimposed on a bird's eye view of the lake itself as though pinned on an architect's drawing board. His 1756 topographical print of how he thought ancient Rome to have been (systematic archeology had not yet got to work) is surrounded by fragments of the groundplans of its major ancient buildings, like the plaster of a damaged wall painting.

In a sensitive and clear essay, John Wilton-Ely, one of the greatest experts on Piranesi, explains this fancifulness by Piranesi's early training in a wildly rococo Venice, where there was also much designing of illusionistic stage sets. This was combined, after he came to Rome in 1740, with the topographical depiction of the weighty inheritance of antiquity. The core of the exhibition is the result, the most extravagant "paper architecture" to be produced before the 20th century. It was these etchings that made

Piranesi's fame with the English, with their veneration of the classics and Roman antiquity.

Another part of the exhibition is a kind of show-within-the-show of specially commissioned black and white photographs by Gabriele Basilico of views of Rome and the temples of Paestum from as close as possible to the same vantage point as chosen by Piranesi. This not only has the simple fascination of "make-overs"—squares with carriages, now with cars; monuments richly crumbling and sprouting trees, now stripped and smoothly restored—but it also shows how Piranesi, who boasted of the truthfulness of his depictions, in fact distorted space to make the buildings grander, used multiple vanishing points that no camera can emulate, and exaggerated light and shade to add drama.

The last part of the exhibition is where Pasquale Gagliardi, secretary general of the Cini Foundation, and Adam Lowe, founder of Factum Arte, once again challenge those who believe that works of art must be original. In 2006, Gagliardi asked Factum Arte to make an astonishingly accurate photographic reproduction, realistic down to the last textured brushstroke, to replace Veronese's *Marriage of Cana*, now in the Louvre and missing from the refectory of the monastery of San Giorgio since Napoleon had it removed in 1797.

For this exhibition, Factum Arte has made actual objects from Piranesi prints. To quote their description of the process: they used STL

digital technology, widely employed for rapid prototyping and computer-aided manufacturing, to produce a 3D virtual version of the etching. A prototype was then built from the STL file by stereolithography, the object to be reproduced being built slice by slice from bottom to top, in a vessel of liquid polymer that hardens when struck by a laser beam. The prototype surface was then reworked by hand in order to add the more intricate details, after which a silicon mould was made, from which the object was cast. The result is that you can not only see, but will be able to buy, one of Piranesi's chimneypieces from his 1769 book *Diverse maniere d'adornare i cammini*, or the griffon vase

that in 1778 belonged to the artist, antiquarian and dealer, Richard Dalton, now missing. Other recreated pieces are a Roman tripod table in bronze, one of Piranesi's fanciful, tall "candelabri" made of classical and modern architectural elements, and an exquisite 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, Venice, has 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 (Firmin Didot 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 PAL 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: b.seppings@theartnewspaper.com