

Wistful Thinking & Municipal Solitude

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Municipal Solitude and Wistful Thinking is a body of work that encapsulates loneliness in our society. We are becoming so interconnected by the Internet. Barriers such as distance and time are broken by the ability that social media has given us to be constantly communicating and yet, we are facing a loneliness epidemic that is leading to mental and physical illness. I wanted to explore this concept further through painting and photography.

Municipal Solitude is a large-scale painting of a warped cityscape with the composition built entirely from a series of my own photographs. The placement of the buildings is fabricated to emphasise the idea of looming concrete cities. Monolithic structures pressed against each other, windows only metres apart, normally teeming with people and activity, yet we are the loneliest generation. In my work, there is an absence of people which reinforces emptiness and loneliness of a concrete desert. Despite the many windows and space for people to exist, in my composition there are none, emphasising the idea that the individual can feel alone even in a crowd. My work has been inspired by Jeffrey Smart and his depiction of cityscapes and his underlying concepts of the tensions that exist within. I immediately connected to his bold colour choice that contrasts with the solitary figures that appear mysteriously throughout his work. I have employed a similar idealistic saturation to my own painting to reinforce the kind of utopian community idea that the concept of a city suggests. Despite Smart using figures to convey loneliness, I have chosen to omit people completely. The only possible sign of life in my painting being a car that alludes to the presence of a person, this allusion enables the audience to place themselves in the composition. I have also been inspired by the works of surrealist artist Giorgio de Chirico, and his reoccurring themes of tragedy, enigma, and melancholy. The symbolism of contrasting past and present in De Chirico's paintings depicts loneliness. His limited palette and exaggerated light helped to inform my own style. However, his empty architectural compositions were of most influence to me.

The title, Municipal Solitude, plays on the idea of mandated metropolitan services, like the fire, gas, and plumbing or even youth services that councils implement to support the community. Municipal Solitude introduces a new kind of "service" that has clouded our present society. Initially, my work had a stronger focus on the connection to social media and isolation of presenting a faux or perfected image of ourselves. However, the urban structure of our society became my aesthetic with influences of Smart and Chirico as I was able to express the same kind of loneliness that I intended. South Australian artist, Donovan Christie, has been another influential artist who informed my work, particularly his realist depictions of urban relics on the edge of a dying era and the sense of longing and nostalgia that pervade his paintings. The high saturation and the airbrush effect that he uses to purify an unflattering reality to enhance the nostalgia has helped me develop my aesthetic.

Exploring my concept further, Wistful Thinking depicts more intimate moments of solitude and isolation. Loneliness is a universal feeling. Everyone can site a different experience of loneliness and while it would be impossible to depict every projection of this emotion, I intended to reveal an urban interpretation of isolation. I have taken snapshots of intimate moments to expose the existentialism that we face when staring into the void that can only be seen with the absence of others. I intended to give an insight into those universal experiences of loneliness to connect the viewer to the work. I have primarily been inspired by the work of the narrative photographer, Gregory Crewdson. His ambitious photographic series, taken with cinematic levels of precision, create an almost fictional composition.

Crewdson's photographic narratives, reminiscent of Edward Hopper, are open to interpretation and possess an air of mystery that highlights suburban oppression and loneliness. I wanted to emanate similar themes in my work, so I employed techniques of chiaroscuro and silhouette to emphasise the solitude of each subject.

Wistful Thinking is a play on the phrase, 'wishful thinking' which is imagining an unlikely future. However, the subjects in this series are more contemplative in their isolation with a vague sense of regret or longing that pervades the composition. Unlike Municipal Solitude, Wistful Thinking has a narrative; each photograph has its own story that is open to interpretation. Windows are a reoccurring motif throughout the series; they frame the subjects and enclose them, symbolising a lack of freedom from the lives they lead and the loneliness that consumes them. Artists such as Smart, Hopper, and Crewdson use windows to depict isolation and create claustrophobic moods. The photograph of the man in the shed is a representation of suburban loneliness in lost hopes and dreams. The image is submerged in darkness the only light source is from inside the shed creating a silhouette, highlighting the clutter of memorabilia. The photograph of the man at the bar is a depiction of isolation in a typically crowded place, the silhouette in this photograph created by windows that frame the subject. The image of the woman washing the dishes is also framed by a window and is representative of the isolation of suburbia, emphasised by the oblique shadows that mimic prison bars. The photograph of the woman in the alleyway is a depiction of the loneliness of a fast-paced urban lifestyle. The composition is primarily lit by streetlights in the alleyway illuminating only half of the subject, it is the linking piece between the two major works.

Both Municipal Solitude and Wistful Thinking are a comment on the paradoxical loneliness that pervades our society in the age of information and communication. Wistful Thinking serves to depict individual experiences of loneliness. While Municipal Solitude shows that even if we are merely meters apart there is an inescapable isolation that is attached to the idea of an urban lifestyle.

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