

## Why Be Exotic In Private – Jenny Steele

Probably the best photograph my mother has ever taken is of the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill on Sea. The image, awash with hazy coastal light pouring through overlapping layers of glass and steel, captivated me as a child. A classic Southern Railways poster of the building also hung in my grandmother's hallway. I have never been to the pavilion and yet I feel that I have a connection with it too, a shared heritage that connects three generations of my family. Throughout history, coastal communities have been associated with healing, mystery and relaxation. The simple functional forms and open communal spaces of modernism were a fitting vessel to bring this preoccupation into the 20th century. Now, Manchester based artist Jenny Steele asks what it is about this aesthetic that is still so resonant today.



*Why Be Exotic in Private*, 2019, installation view, Jenny Steele. Courtesy of the artist.

Steele has carried out extensive research into modernist architecture all over the world. Her solo installation, *Why Be Exotic in Private*, is the result of five years of research, including two residencies supported by The Fountainhead in Miami and the Artists International Development Fund. After working in locations such as Blackpool and Morecombe, Steele was drawn to the beach front hotels and pavilions of South Beach, Miami, Florida. The area boasts a huge concentration of interwar modernist design that led to South Beach becoming an international symbol of relaxation and pleasure in the 1930s. However, rising crime levels and the arrival of budget air lines contributed to a decline throughout the 1960s and

1970s, before the Miami Design Preservation League spearheaded a revival in the 1980s that rejuvenated the dilapidated beach front architecture.

Steele's installation, which chronicles this evolution, toured to Rogue Artist Studios in Manchester after initially opening at The Foundry Gallery in London. Unfortunately, as I walk from the train station it seems that Steele's work is the only bit of Miami to have reached Gorton on a drizzly Monday; however, the initial visual impact of the installation does not disappoint. It sits in the centre of the exhibition space, like a room within a room. There is a feeling of quiet anticipation about the structure, like an empty stage set before the opening scene. A collection of large 'flats', as Steele calls them, stand ready for the audience to explore. Some feature screen prints on their faces and all reveal archive objects such as postcards and magazines depicting the seafront in its 1930s heyday on their rear. The flats are painted in a bright 'south beach palette', a set of pastel tones created by designer Leonard Horowitz for the buildings of Miami.



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Horowitz was a founding member of the Miami Design Preservation League, a group who transformed the South Beach area in the early 1980s after years of neglect had resulted in serious deterioration. He painted the beach front hotels of Ocean Drive in a range of bright pastel colours, transforming the area in a radical way. Instead of seeking to restore the buildings to their original state, the

preservation league chose a bold new aesthetic that looked to the future and made a clear statement that the area was ready for change. This initiative was successful in promoting Miami as a holiday destination once again and is in part responsible for its contemporary image as an iconic holiday destination. Steele is drawn to the galvanising effect that this re-painting had, demonstrating the remarkable power and influence that colour and design wield in regard to instigating social regeneration.

If Steele's palette symbolises South Beach's second incarnation, then her references to stage sets and theatre lie in the region's 1930s origins. Fuelled by an interwar leisure boom, building materials, plants, and exotic wildlife species, were all imported onto empty swampland to create a modernist recreational utopia. Architect Morris Lapidus, best known for his iconic 1954 Fontainebleau Miami Beach hotel, stated that he envisioned his buildings as stage sets on which inhabitants became actors, playing out their dreams of a perfect holiday. The same can be said for the entire South Beach development. Is the person roller-skating down Ocean Drive in the evening sun doing so just because they want to? Or because they are inhabiting the role of the South Beach holidaymaker, as immortalised by the likes of television shows such as *Miami Vice*?



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Steele parallels this by creating a structure the viewer moves through, performing on her stage, as holiday maker performs on Miami's. The archive material displayed on the back of the flats encourages further exploration. The viewer encounters captured moments of history as they move through the work. It seems that Steele is constantly drawn to the effect of modernist architecture on its inhabitants. From seafront pavilions that amplify nostalgia, past extravagant palaces of pleasure, to iconic neighbourhoods that underpin vibrant communities; it seems that human experience lies at the heart of Steele's enquiry. Why then, are there so few people present in this project? Apart from a few figures in postcards the work does not feature anyone inhabiting the buildings that interest Steele so much. Could this be because Steele hopes to create a total facsimile of her subject with such an immersive work. Does the viewer becomes the inhabitant of her space, as the Floridian inhabits South Beach?

Writing about work that is the result of such extensive and engaging research is tricky. It is difficult not to just write about the research itself and neglect to discuss the actual work in question. But then again, is this precisely the point of an installation like this? Steele often shy's away from traditional modes of presentation. Here, she uses the exhibition format as just one way to disseminate research among many possible outlets. The body of research and the resultant artwork become one, so discussion of context and the work itself are equivalent. However, I do feel that there is a lack of narratives concerning the people of South Beach and their lived experiences of the spaces that interest Steele so much. Furthermore, greater discussion of South Beach's inhabitants would surely facilitate a deeper understanding of how this iconic architecture has shaped their lives. Nevertheless, Steele has opened my eyes to the cultural and societal impacts of structural design and perhaps my desire for more information is indicative of *Why Be Exotic in Private*'s success.

### *Why Be Exotic in Private*

Rogue Studios Project Space, Openshaw, Manchester.  
8th – 29th June 2019.

James M-Hiskett