


MICHAEL HARDY PHOTO 12.14.18 10:00 AM

HUNDREDS OF PHOTOS FORM A SINGLE PORTRAIT OF BRITAIN'S DECLINE



Emily Allchurch created this digital photo collage, titled "Ghost Towers (After Piranesi)," from hundreds of photographs she took across the United Kingdom.  EMILY ALLCHURCH

THE JOURNEY TO the camera takes many paths. English artist [Emily Allchurch](#) began her career as a sculptor; it was at the Royal College of Art, where she earned her master's degree, that she began incorporating photographs into her work. And although photography is now her primary medium—Allchurch best known for her intricate photo collages based on Old Master paintings—that sculptural background can still be glimpsed in the way she digitally assembles hundreds of photographs into fantastical tableaux of British buildings and monuments.

"I would say my photographs are created, not taken," Allchurch explains. "Photography is simply the most relevant material I could use to explore the issues I want to in my work."

Allchurch's most recent image, "Ghost Towers (After Piranesi)," is modeled on Giovanni Battista Piranesi's etching "Ancient Circus of Mars with Neighboring Monuments Viewed at the Via Appia," from the Italian artist's *Roman Antiquities* series. Allchurch was drawn to Piranesi because of his background as a failed architect and because of what she calls his "sense of the theatrical." The etching, one of Piranesi's *capriccios*, or fantasies, depicts a Roman cityscape packed with statues, monuments, and architecture. It's a view of Rome that exists only in the imagination of the artist.

Allchurch's image maintains the compositional structure of Piranesi's etching but replaces the Roman artifacts with British iconography ranging from the Glasgow Necropolis to the latest London high-rises. She started by assembling an "image library" from photographs she took at sites around the United Kingdom, then copied and pasted the images onto the Photoshop equivalent of a blank canvas. Once the hundreds of individual elements were in place, Allchurch blended them into a cohesive landscape by adjusting the colors and adding digital shadows. The process took several months.

"The image is a fantasy, of course, but it's essential that it comes from photographs I've actually taken," she says. "I could take you to the place where I shot each element."

In the final image, modern high-rises dominate the background while, in the foreground, homeless people sleep in tents amidst the tombs and headstones of an ancient cemetery. The work's title, "Ghost Towers," refers to the proliferation of luxury condominium towers in London, many of which are uninhabited by their foreign owners. "They've been bought as an investment and nobody's living in them," Allchurch says. "Meanwhile, there are all these people who can't afford to live in the city where they grew up. Homelessness has gone up so much in the past few years."

Like the Roman monuments in Piranesi's original etching, the funerary artifacts in Allchurch's image are intended as *mementos mori*, reminders that the shiny new buildings going up in London will one day crumble. "I suppose it's a warning against architectural hubris," Allchurch says. "All over the UK there are these massive building projects going on. But empires can collapse, just as ancient Rome collapsed."

A large-scale, lightbox version of the image will debut in January at the [London Art Fair](#). The presentation is part of Allchurch's love of the theatrical, which she shares with Piranesi. "I want the lighted image to be like a window into another world," she says. "Literally."