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The Diary: Caroline Daniel

Caroline Daniel

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‘I find myself in the artist’s serene loft in Queens, and spend an extraordinary day discussing her work’



I have come to Chicago for the inaugural Chicago Forum on Global Cities, organised by Ivo Daalder, a former US ambassador to Nato and Europhile diplomat, for which the Financial Times is the media partner. Hundreds of speakers and attendees have flown in from around the world. It is a decade since I was last in Chicago — I was an FT correspondent then, and now am chairing several panels over the next two days. The most visible change is the 98-storey Trump Tower, bright and glassy. On it is a tasteless 2,800 sq ft “Trump” sign; insatiable vanity amid Chicago’s dignified downtown.

Chicago, as ever, puts on its best suit for its international guests, aided by the support of 10 local companies, with panels being held across the city. I head to the University of Chicago, opening my panel about its new Urban Labs by recalling an early journalistic faux pas. When I arrived in the city in 2002 I was invited to have drinks with one of its law professors. I never went; Barack Obama and I never became confidantes.

Urban Labs, under the direction of Dr Timothy Knowles, is a group of five labs set up to look at crime, education, energy, health and poverty in cities. The aim is to test urban policies to assess their impact in real time. Its mission, says Knowles, is to provide non-ideological “grade A analytic capacity” to policy makers. “At the risk of being messianic, this is about the power of good evidence.”

One research example he cites is an attempt to stop future crimes by tracking images of gang signs on Instagram so police can be alerted to where there might be a threat. Another involves analysing judgments of the local Cook County court. A judge who may see 300 people in three hours has to make snap decisions about who is granted bail. An algorithm could potentially better predict those likely to commit crime.

An algorithm, however, would have lacked the brusque affability of one Chicago judge. I read a wonderful story in the Chicago Tribune about Bruce Blunt, who was in court as a result of a viral video of him smoking marijuana and blowing the smoke at his pet chameleon. But Cook County judge Robert Kuzas ruled Blunt’s behaviour was not criminal: “The chameleon didn’t change its demeanour, it didn’t change its colour.”

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I rue the fact that the Midwest likes an early start, as I arrive at the Art Institute of Chicago before 8am for my panel on culture and global cities, with James Cuno, president of the J Paul Getty Trust; Wim Pijbes, director of the Rijksmuseum; Romero Britto, a Brazilian pop artist; and Wang Shu, a Chinese architect who won the Pritzker Prize in 2012. It is a lively discussion, ranging from civic identity and digital museums to the ethics of Vermeer images being downloaded to printed on toilet paper.

The most poignant remarks come from the self-contained Wang. In just 30 years, he says, China has destroyed 90 per cent of the traditional buildings in its cities: “Where is our memory and our life and our culture?” He says it will take “100 years to restore Chinese culture . . . We don’t build cities in China. We create monsters.”

Afterwards, I walk with him and his wife around the museum. He tells me that there is no trace of the Beijing he grew up in; his father’s village has been destroyed by a factory; even some of his own buildings from the 1990s have been demolished. I cannot conceive of being unable to visit the sites of my childhood, geographical triggers for memories. “What the Chinese like most is change,” says Wang. His goal is to preserve a single Chinese village: “It’s our last chance.” I cheer him up by photographing him in front of Gustave Caillebotte’s life-sized “*Paris Street; Rainy Day*” so that he

appears to be walking out of the painting. A nostalgic Chinese architect in a historic Parisian street seems an apt end to a conference on global cities.

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Two works by Jungjin Lee

In January last year I was sent a catalogue of books with postage-stamp reproductions of the covers. One photographic image in particular caught my eye and I tore it out. Although I am no art collector, I contacted the publisher to ask if there were any prints. There were not. I googled its Korean photographer, Jungjin Lee, and contacted her to say that I admired her work. Generously, she responded and mentioned her gallery was in Chicago. I thought no more of it.

Fast forward to last month. I am in Tokyo. I visit the Tsutaya bookstore in Daikanyama. Having zero recall for foreign names, I browse aimlessly. Amid thousands of photography books I pick up *Unnamed Road* and buy it, seduced by the timeless quality of its abstract scenes of Israel.

Back in London, an instinct leads me to check out my old email. The book is by the same photographer, Jungjin. I remember the Chicago connection. So, after the conference is over, I make my way to Andrew Bae, her dealer. He gave up work as a chemist 25 years ago to follow his dream of travelling and buying beautiful things. He represents just eight Asian artists.

In real life, the photos, printed on rice paper, have amazing texture (Jungjin first trained as a ceramicist). One he pulls out of a drawer is the catalogue image that caught my eye early last year. Now I am in the Windy City, looking at one of Jungjin's images from *Wind*. I pick out one abstract image from an earlier monograph and he reaches across the table to shake my hand. It is, he says, her most autobiographical image from that book.

I then pull on the thread still further. I contact Jungjin, who is in New York: serendipitously, I will be in the city the next day. We arrange to meet. So, from a tiny image, I find myself in the artist's serene loft apartment in Long Island City, Queens, a pause of stillness in the big city, spending an extraordinary day with Jungjin discussing her work, from her first book on a man who spent decades on a thwarted quest for ginseng in the mountains to her recent trip to Israel.

Jungjin's work is concerned "with the unconscious, the unknown, and the invisible". The dreamlike state that led me to New York has not ebbed. The same weekend I receive an email from Ivo Daalder: "This afternoon, Elisa and I were visiting a gallery in Chicago to buy a piece



Caroline Daniel with Andrew Bae

of art we had seen a few weeks ago. The owner mentioned that he heard about the Forum . . . from you! Turns out, we love the same artist — Jungjin Lee. We bought one of the pictures from her latest series: *Unnamed Road*. Such a coincidence.”

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Illustration by Luke Waller

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