



Vivienne Koorland
Reisemaalheurs

Reisemalheurs

Tamar Garb

In a list of numbered words and phrases painted onto the monumental canvas, *Wishlist* (2006) Vivienne Koorland includes, as number 8, the word 'Reisemalheurs', a strange compound noun drawn from the writing of Sigmund Freud. In this rich neologism Freud condensed the associative inconveniences and dislocations of travel, bringing them together with a fatal inevitability. Addressing his family in a letter written in 1908 from Blackpool, Freud, the tourist, had used this word to describe a trivial mishap that had befallen him while on his trip to England: a matter of soiled ties and a crumpled panama hat spoiled on the uncomfortable journey. But, decontextualised and inserted into Koorland's large, stitched canvas where it hovers above the quotation 'Unser Herz zeigt nach dem Suden' (Our heart leans towards the South) - also a line from one of Freud's letters - the word gains its own resonance and significance'. Like many of the word fragments extracted by Koorland from her private archive of affect, 'Reisemalheurs' is an unattributed quotation, recycled and resituated in the painted field. In the lower stitched quarter of *Wishlist*, it stands out, the only single word in a curious collection of appropriated phrases, taking up just over half its allotted space under the seam and alongside the emptiness of the painted ground.

In Freud's correspondence, the word appears only once. But its economic compression of the concepts of travel and misfortune resonate in relation to the stress (*Drang*), anxiety (*Angst*) and fear (*Fieber*) which more often

Wishlist, 2006. Oil on burlap, 108 x 78 inches (274 x 198 cm)

accompany the word 'Reise' in the Freud literature. Freud loved to travel, amassing his unique collection of objets d'art, post cards, photographs and archeological relics on his frequent trips to Southern Europe. But travel, for him, was also fraught with anxiety – he referred to it frequently – and writers have repeatedly invoked his 'travel phobia'. His famous obsession with trains and timetables, his acute attacks of 'Angst' before embarking on a journey and his irrational resistances, most notably to Rome, have prompted much speculation and interpretation¹⁴. Various understood as a manifestation of separation anxiety, unresolved Oedipal issues, ambivalence towards his own Jewishness, or identification, both with Hannibal who was defeated and never managed to reach Rome and with Moses who saw but never entered the 'promised land', Freud's fraught relationship to Rome manifested itself in what have become known as the 'Rome Dreams'¹⁵. But Freud's travel neurosis has also been traced to the actual displacement suffered by his family when they fled the anti-Semitism of Moravia in 1859 and moved to Austria¹⁶. Never quite 'at home' in Vienna, Freud seems to have idealised his birthplace as the lost and longed for 'heimat' which predated the trauma of departure. Forced to move as a young child and then struggling as an adult to conquer his fear of travel, Freud ended his life as a refugee from Nazi Germany in London, where he surrounded himself with artifacts and memorabilia collected on his life time of journeying. Travel, therefore was a condition of Freud's life, the 'Reisemalheurs' he suffered on his sojourn in Blackpool only a mild manifestation of the larger disturbances, both physical and psychic, that his wanderings precipitated.

In this, Freud was not alone. 'Reisemalheurs' as a concept may originate in the private correspondence and experience of Sigmund Freud but it speaks to a common condition, one produced by the technologies of travel experienced in tourism and the tyrannies of travel attendant on displacement. At the same time the term suggests the psychic cost of such peregrinations, whether prompted by the pursuit of pleasure or necessitated by the trauma of flight. In the context of Vivienne Koorland's work, the word 'Reisemalheurs', has particular resonance. Not only does it invoke the peripatetic nature of her own life-story – a representative tale which has its origins in Eastern Europe, its formative years in South Africa, student

experiences in Berlin and Paris, an 'extended adulthood in New York as well as deep familial ties to London' – it serves to distill the sense of unease attendant on displacement and dislocation that so much of her work thematises: iconically, textually and materially. Registering the private discomfort and distress of comings and goings, the term also invokes the much larger patterns of migration and movement that history necessitates. In *Wishlist* it is situated amongst an accretion of quotations and phrases in which travel is variously invoked: 'a Siberian dream map'; 'circle the sacred mountain'; 'from Cape Town to Katmandu' are all verbal fragments which suggest actual voyages and spatial topographies, mythic journeys and fantastic narratives. Points of reference, spatial as well as cultural, geographic and literary, these bits of text form a private inventory of experience interspersed with the stories of others.

Koorland's use of interlinearity – the accretion of borrowed lines arranged sequentially as if to create a private logic out of other peoples' words – invokes the Judaic literary device, the *melitzah*. Understood originally as 'a mosaic of fragments and phrases' drawn from the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature and reordered to make new sense, this practice became widespread amongst both secular and religious writers in the nineteenth century and recalls Walter Benjamin's ambition to write a book comprising only quotations⁴¹. The practice of cryptic referencing (only the initiated can decipher the source) and recontextualisation (new meanings accrue in new juxtapositions) implies that each line of the *melitzah* has a double life. On the one hand it harks back to its source with its temporal and cultural references, on the other, it gains new meaning by being placed in contiguous relationships with dissonant fragments⁴². Diachronic and synchronic readings are simultaneously invoked. It was with this complex form of address that Jakob Freud chose to communicate with his secular son, in Hebrew, on his thirty-fifth birthday, inscribing his newly rebound childhood bible with a private message written in the esoteric language of cumulative quotation. By using this literary device Jakob Freud presupposed his son's familiarity with the culture of his childhood. At the same time, he paid inadvertent homage to Sigmund's profound insight that experience is always haunted by the forms and fantasies of the past and that language, more than anything, is its vehicle. Interlinearity presupposes

the interconnections, conscious and unconscious, manifest and repressed, of which culture is composed. Each textual fragment comes freighted with baggage. Freud's term 'Reisemalheurs' is his own, but it gains new life in Koorland's list, situated amongst words drawn from diverse sources, both poetic and prosaic.

Not surprisingly, the word surfaces again, in some of Koorland's other works. We see it listed, for example, on a painting titled *Reisemalheurs*, which includes the related German word 'Bahnhofsstimmung' and a phrase drawn from the great adventurer Flaubert, 'la mélancolie des paquebots', translated by Edward Said as 'the anxious moodiness of travel'⁴³. As in *Wishlist*, it sits in a multilingual field of reference registering the history of European literature as well as the colonial expeditions and private voyages which fuelled its fantasies. On another occasion it appears together with a pasted map of Africa, culled from the yellowing page of an old newspaper. Unlike Koorland's large painted memory maps invoking the partial and selective cartography of childhood experience, or the layered pseudo-military maps charting lines of battle charged with emotional intensity which she produced in the 1990s, this modest and familiar map is public property, the recognisable image of atlases and geography textbooks. But Koorland provides an idiosyncratic handle on the map. Handwritten above it are the words 'KEY:REISEMALHEURS', the emotive Freudian term providing an alternative explanatory framework for the otherwise banal and borrowed image. In addition, as if to mimic the conventional languages of measurement and scale, Koorland has superimposed a fine ink grid onto its surface and accompanied this with numbers stacked vertically at its edge. These personal inscriptions make no logical sense. They serve no useful purpose. Like the numbers in *Wishlist*, these digits and lines invoke systems of measurement and sequence while simultaneously stripping them of their explanatory function. At the same time, though, the words and numbers which are patently hand-written in paint onto the canvas in a shaky individuated script register the private sagas of lived experience, the 'Reisemalheurs' suffered by those subjected to the divisions and revisions of power struggles and politics.

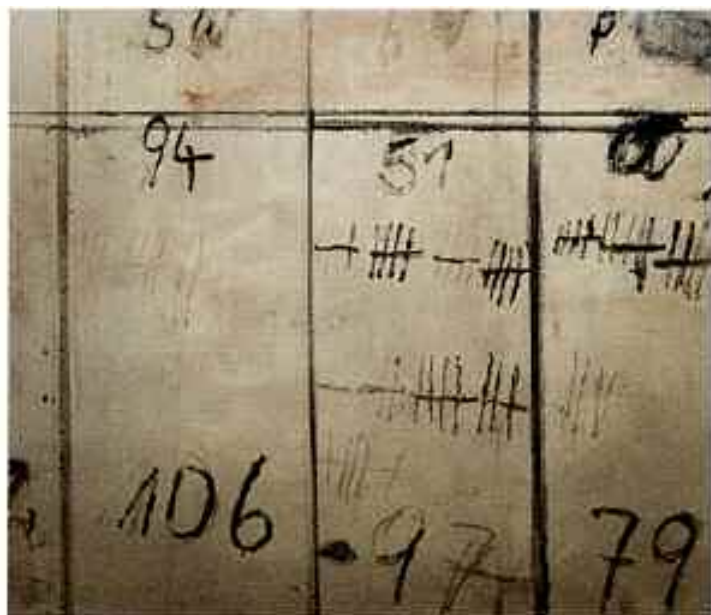
Painting writing is central to this ventriloquism at the heart of Koorland's practice. The words and letters, like the icons and images that she includes in her works, are invariably taken from found sources. *Wishlist*, for example, is headed by its German equivalent, Wunschzettelllll , placed above an archaic wreath, drawn from a facsimile of a schoolchild's notepad from the 1930s. Ready-made and resonant with historical associations, both formal and iconic, the wreath is time-bound and culturally specific. The calligraphy too tells of a moment which is no more. The German title is painstakingly copied, taken like the painted handwriting throughout the work, from found alphabets and writing manuals. In earlier works, such as *Alphabet Painting* (1994), Koorland had transcribed schoolbook handwriting exercises onto canvas, copying the script that she would use in other contexts. Drawing the letters with her brush, she mimicked the faltering, repetitive strokes of a child, disciplined into the protocols of orthography.

Such strategies are fundamental to Koorland's practice. Scripts, icons and lines circulate. Amongst the phrases copied out in 'Wishlist' are words that appear in other paintings. Line 2, for example, reads 'my wild strawberrie' the spelling altered from the original context of a translation of a poem by the Austrian feminist poet, Friederike Mayröcker. These words and letters recur in other works too, with varying degrees of legibility. In *Dark Poem Painting* (2005) for example each hand-written line extracted from the poem occupies a horizontal band, like a serried incantation to a lost beloved. The repetitious slants and slopes of the writing, haunted by unsuccessful attempts at neatness, legibility and conformity to rules, factor in the fragility of the speaking voice, suggested by the appearance of 'My' at the beginning of each line. In *Poem Painting III (Shadow Painting)* (2005) the familiar words from the poem hover on the edge of obscurity, haunted by the traces and echoes of previous marks which erupt to disturb the visual field or pull it back into the depths of illegibility. The same words appear again in *Gold Poem Painting (In Between Painting)* (2006) and in *Poem Fragment* (2005), in a chain of repetitions that reference the other paintings in the set as well as the multiple sources, both verbal and visual on which they draw.



Black Contents, 2001-2. Oil on linen, 48 x 43 inches, 122 x 110 cm

The tactility of writing, its material form, is felt in the painted surface. If lives leave traces in words and things, then Koortland's paintings salvage them and the time-bound technologies of their inscription. Her patient, slow crafting of the surface, often reworking paintings still smudged with paint or stained with oil and then stitched and pasted together, is mirrored in the painstaking labour of transcription and transposition. Onto the surface, its worn and woven beauty evocative of a ruined document, the letters, digits and marks are placed, as if bearing testimony to a life that is no more. Sometimes the references are interlineal and multiple – quotations drawn from various texts and contexts – as in the case of *Wish/ist* and *Black Contents* (2001–2). At other times they are exact and precise, virtual transcriptions of found images, as in the series of paintings, *War Drawings* based on the reproductions of childrens' records of war-time experience. Most chillingly, the use of quotation and citation appears in the minimal markings of a small painting, *The Kapo Talks*.



The Kapo Tallies His Human Losses For The Day, 2006
Oil on canvas, 24 x 27 inches, 61 x 69 cm

His Human Losses For The Day, (2006) a bleak surface, subdivided by a few vertical and horizontal lines, smudged numbers and painted scratches. It is the title that unlocks the source of the picture, recalling the spare and pared down subtitles to Alain Resnais's film *Night and Fog*, which recounts the history of the deportation and extermination of the Jews of Europe. The painting is a copy of a film-still, the marks duplicating the records of prisoners in labour camps, kept by the camp official. A primitive body count is made in the vertical dashes scratched by the kapo, recorded by the camera and transcribed by the brush. How many scratches does it need before a bundle is crossed off or a number is inscribed? How many people are shifted and counted in this way? How much paint does it need to figure a life? Wall becomes film and film becomes paint – a series of material transformations which track available technologies and trace the lives and labours they record. Koorland's labour is only the latest in a chain of such endeavours.

The means in *The Kapo Tallies His Human Losses For The Day* are spare. On other occasions, icons serve a similar evocative purpose to the tally marks and numbers. The various versions of *This Is The Picture We Saw (Little Hans)* involved, for Koorland, the transcription of a reproduction of a child's drawing, showing, 'Bolsheviks ... chasing the civilian population away from train cars in which they were deporting the Poles'¹⁴. Here in black oil paint on a stitched, barely scrubbed-in canvas Koorland repaints a scene of murder as pictured by 'Adam' in the naïve descriptive language of the untutored. At the top of the drawing/canvas appear the wagons that transport the people. This overdetermined signifier of forced removal, culled from the image bank of a Czech youth, recurs in other of Koorland's works. It sits, for example, stranded amongst the place names and military huts of an imaginary South African landscape in *Cape Town Over Hungary* (1994–5), which itself obliterates an earlier upside down painted map of war-torn Europe with its place names still showing through: Paarl over Pinsk, Riviersonderend over Warschau. Languages, lives, populations are conjured by terms. Names, like the wagon itself, seem to have wandered from one historical locus to another, mirroring the movement of peoples. Entering on the right, the Polish wagon moves above Indwe on its way to Wellington. If 'interlinearity' describes Koorland's process of quoting and recycling text, so that words simultaneously recall and refuse their origins, then perhaps 'intericonicity' might serve to register the movement of images and symbols from one context to another: from 'source' to painting and from work to work.

In *Cape Town Over Hungary*, the wagon takes its place, amongst borrowed box-houses and waving flags spread throughout the surface. Forming part of Koorland's lexicon of resonant signs and historical markers, the house is also taken from a child's vocabulary of forms. If the anxiety laden train suggests displacement and dislocation, then the house operates as a mythic point of origin, both for the children who recycle the conventional rectangular template and for Koorland who mobilizes variations on this image over and over again. For Freud too, the idea of the house/home – with its association of the familiar and the intimate – provided a phantasmatic counter to the unstable journeys of subject formation and separation. But, if 'Reisemalheurs' could only be experienced while travelling, then



Tomaz's Garden, 1980. Oil, tempera, paper and glue on linen. 30 x 34 inches, 76 x 86.5 cm
Collection of the South African National Gallery, Cape Town.

'Reiseangst' and 'Reisedrang' could permeate the unconscious, even when ostensibly safe at home. It is this sense of the precariousness of home which Koorland's unstable house-forms suggest. Her earliest use of this motif was taken from the drawings of children who had lost both home and family but who returned in representation to the mythic square of infantile fantasy: In *Tomaz's Garden*, (1980) for example, the simple flattened shape sits in a sea of floating pasted proteas, the imaginary childhood of the displaced child surrounded with the South African national flowers, shining like stars in a night sky.

The house, like the flower, points to a shared fantasy of origins. In 2006, this juxtaposition still provided Koorland with a rich resource for picture making. In *House Sutra: From Cape Town to Kathmandu*, the tentative linear form of the house is stranded in a sea of black paint peppered with star/flower-like fragments of pasted canvas. Painted along the bottom edge, the words 'From Cape Town to Kathmandu' familiar from other works, bring the world of migrations and meanderings into the fragile dream-space of home. Nowhere is this more poignantly felt than in the melancholic *Dream Painting (She Flew Over To Comfort Me)* (2006) in which drawn houses are perched precariously on cliff-tops, afloat on a stitched burlap ground. No gravitational force anchors these houses or secures their foundations. No illusionistic space roots them in the landscape. Neither are they dense or opaque enough to signify permanence. Situated in a field of fleshy pinks and warm tones, they sit like tattoos on the surface of a sutured skin, stretched and scarred through use. It is the isolated house on a mound that Koorland lifts and frames in *My Heart Leans Towards The South* (2006–7), the Freudian title suggesting the longing and loss which the poignant house embodies. But here the 'South' of Freud's imagining is given particular focus by the tentative insertion of a range of mountains into the fabric of the barely-supporting cliff. These are not just any mountains: they stand for the longed-for peaks of Table Mountain encrypted into the imagination of a Cape Town childhood.

Journeys and home comings, both mythic and actual, come together in these texts and forms. Materialised iconically in the house, the mountain and the wagon, they are also invoked in the use of maps, lists, itineraries and letters, all part of the textual paraphernalia of travel. This Freud knew well and the archive in Maresfield Gardens is filled with facsimiles and originals of just such documents. But the recounting of the traveller's experience had more than a private significance for Freud. Having grown up in a traditional Jewish household, he was familiar with the *Hagaddah* and its foundational tales of journeying recounted at the Passover Seder. As a child, Freud had, 'once a year, witnessed his father recite the lengthy account of the ancient Hebrews' escape from Egypt, a legend of migration, refuge and liberation, which lies at the heart of Jewish narratives of self'.



War Drawing Eva: Seder II, 1992. Oil, wax, tar on burlap over linen, 81.5 x 97 inches, 186 x 246 cm

It is the process of communal narration and commemoration that the Seder represents and it is such an event that is pictured in Koorland's *War Drawing Eva: Seder II*, (1992), hung in the dining room of the Hampstead house. In the apparently guileless hand of the child, a family is shown, gathered around the celebratory but sparsely laid table. The word 'Seder', scrawled in the same hand that inscribes the name *Eva Winternitz* and the date 24th V 1944 together with the class IVB onto the surface of the painting, provides the context and dating of the formal gathering. On the right of the picture sits the comic, shrunken figure of the mustachioed father, book in hand, who presides over the ritual meal. On the left enters the enlarged figure of the mother, handbag dangling from her outstretched arm, separate from and yet part of the family group. Beneath her sits another name, 'Meitner Eva' indicating that this is an image of two *Evas*, a composite drawn from the signatory styles of at least two scripts, two memories, two records. Made as one of a series of works on the theme of the Seder gathering, *War Drawing Eva: Seder II*, like all of Koorland's work, takes as its source the scriptural gestures of others. In this case, she uses a Soviet pamphlet of children's drawings from Theresienstadt, but fuses the sketches of Winternitz and Meitner to



War Drawing Eva: Seder I, 1991. Oil on linen. 36 x 88 inches, 91 x 112 cm
 picture an imaginary childhood of her own. In another, related work, she writes the names and birthdates of her own family next to the assembled figures, fusing personal experience with received knowledge.

A fantasy gathering, culled from childrens' testimony and the imaginative reconstruction of the artist, *War Drawing Eva: Seder II* fabricates a meal that never happened in a home that never was. Based on found records and false memories, it gives centre stage to a collective moment of narration in which an epic journey is remembered. But the picture offers little comfort. Instead, it places loss at the heart of the family drama, the dislocated testimony of the two Evas unable to be reconciled into a reparative account of history or experience. It is this sense of loss that permeates Koorland's work. It haunts the fractured narratives and their transformation into paint in the works based on war records, it hovers in the space between legibility and illegibility in the poem paintings, it echoes and reverberates in the silent lists of musical terms and it is the affective motor which generates the place names in the map paintings. The concept of 'Reisemalheurs' distills the discomfort of displacement and the pain of loss. In Vivienne Koorland's work, it is everywhere felt.

Painting Maps

William Kentridge

In the 1970s, when Vivienne Koorland was an art student in Cape Town, South African geography contained two worlds, a real and an imagined realm. Distorted politics produced a dislocated geography. The possibilities for travelers on South African passports during the Apartheid era were circumscribed by a vast forbidden ocean around a few islands of acceptance. Western Europe, Australia, North America and as an afterthought, Singapore and Hong Kong, allowed South African visitors in. South America (with the exceptions of Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Chile under Pinochet) was implausible, as were India, China, the Soviet Union and almost all of Africa. One knew these places existed, but they had the unreality of a Cold War construction. There was a sense of Cape Town being closer to London, than to Luanda or Kinshasa. The African map was full of no-fly zones: blank areas of danger and impossibility, reminiscent of a medieval map.

The mathematical coordinates of maps were always at odds with lived experience. The existence of so many places had to be taken on trust. Many place names had a false innocence on a map – their cartographic position hiding their history and politics. This was true both at a global scale and inside South Africa, with the country itself divided into areas familiar to white South Africans and areas unknown or forbidden (either through law, habit, or fear). The result was that the distance to Paris seemed, and was, shorter than the distance to any number of villages,

Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles, 1995–2006. Oil on burlap over linen. 96 x 68 inches, 244 x 174cm

settlements or 'homelands' in South Africa. This town, this suburb, this street was reserved for whites, this location, this township was allocated to blacks, or coloureds, or Indians. All geography, from the street to the hemisphere, was loaded. And geographic divisions and separations were indicative of more profound gaps and lacunae. The history of Europe was familiar, as were its traditions of image-making and belief systems, while African art and culture (except for its sculpture as filtered through Cubism) were absent or exoticised. To understand the geography of Apartheid South Africa would be to understand everything from social history to personal desire.

During the 17th century, the physical mapping of the world was advanced enough for the act of cartography to be taken as a basis for less literal, metaphorical maps. Drawings were made in the form of maps: gardens or countries of emotion. The *Cartes du pays de Tendre* (Madeleine de Scudéry, 1654), with its *Lac d'indifference*, uses the form of a map to find an internal geography. The *Carte du Royaume de Coquetterie* (anonymous, 1654) and the map of the *Royaume d'Amour en l'isle de Cythère* (Tristan L'Hermitte, 1659), are similar. These maps carry their hearts on their sleeves. There are even military maps, with battle lines and armies, not of nation states but of passion, like the map of *The Attack of Love*, 1745, in the *Atlas novus* of Matthaeus Seutter. Their fascination is not in their distillation of emotion, but in the metaphoric possibilities that geography opened up; the pleasure of that transformation. This transformation is taken as a given by Vivienne Koorland; the transformation of place into emotion. What she does in her paintings is not only to note the metaphor but to try to mine the emotion itself. This is done through the activity of painting. It is in the paint itself, its layering, its removal, its re-painting, the sewing together of fragments of canvas, the washing out of the material, continuing until (sometimes after years) the scarifying of the canvas has plumbed the feeling behind it and earned the place name on its surface.

The old metaphoric military maps give us a clue to Vivienne Koorland's First World War map paintings and her lists of the names of destroyed Belgian villages. The map of *The Attack of Love*, 1745, shows advancing

armies of private desire massing their forces against a defensive other. Vivienne Koorland's World War I maps are also internally motivated. Their interest is not only in the fate of Belgium in World War I; rather this mapping serves as a mask to protect or to stand in for the memory, for the history of the destruction that would occur only twenty years later. Not that Vivienne Koorland's maps could simply become internal. They refer to both things: an external battle and devastation in the world and the scars left inside in the wake of this. It is as if her map paintings pull the one into the other, the internal geography being the only safe route to the world outside.

Lists, tables of contents, fragments of writing have long been a part of Vivienne Koorland's work. A list here is already a drawing as is a map: marks on paper that push for meaning. Different from a text in which the marks are incidental to the meaning. The graphic lines of a list, items written beneath each other, is its heart. A list is a drawing of itself. A map is always a drawing and a reference to things outside the drawing. Taking maps as a starting point is a way of meeting the world halfway, a way of projecting the world inside us onto the world outside.

The names in Vivienne Koorland's paintings all involve several layers. A word or name is an ostensibly harmless shell, but it contains a compressed emotion, a force of memory, an over-determined set of associations as if the only way to contain these is through an assumed calm banality. The maps have no expressionist typeface, either in size, boldness or font. The typeface or calligraphic hand is found, a found object, the historic handwriting or typeface that either refers back to the person whose hand is copied or to a particular era. But the painting of the word or text comes at the end of a series of layering actions: layers of canvas, of ground, of paint applied and removed, the pentimenti of older painting coming through – the final word sitting on the surface much as a bruise sits on the surface of fruit or flesh and marks the damage and history inside.

There is a particular memory held by people who have left the site of their childhood. Partly, this is the freezing of time. The names are held on to as talismans: a rosary of names repeated to stand for the years spent and left



Cape Town 1957 (II) (detail), 1995–2002. Oil on linen over burlap, 81.5 x 113 inches, 210 x 292 cm.
Private Collection, London

behind. Oranjezicht, Hatfield Street, Hiddingh Hall, Molteno Road Reservoir, Bridle House, Round House – all Cape Town sites, all markers of place and time. The geography of the map paintings is personal. The position and significance of the places included are not dictated by population size or commercial importance but by emotional resonance. The association of one place to another is determined by invisible lines of connection. They serve as a personal incantation, written down with a certitude and particularity that moves from being a private set of associations and memories to a map which we feel we can trust and inhabit. So that even if the names and places provoke different associations and images for each viewer, there is still comfort and solace in the world spread out by the maps. The deliberateness of their making is the deliberateness of someone trying to be completely accurate in recollection. The look of the map is not the point. The final appearance of the painting is the final state of the act of remembrance.