

Ruth WATSON
Snowglobes and Keychains



Second Gramophone:
The Eiffel Tower is a world
of its own like Notre Dame.
It's the Notre Dame of the left bank.
First Gramophone:
It's the Queen of Paris.
Second Gramophone:
She was the queen of Paris.
Now she's the telegraph postmistress.
First Gramophone:
Well, one has to earn a living.

—Jean Cocteau,
The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower (1921)

- (01) Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower, and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (New York City: Hill and Wang, 1979).
- (02) Quoted in Sonya Stephens, 'Framing the Eiffel Tower: From Postcards to Postmodernism' *Framing French Culture*, ed. Natalie Edwards (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2015), 131.
- (03) Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower*.
- (04) Around the time Barthes was writing, across the Seine on the Left Bank, Les Halles, the large grocer's market in central Paris that had functioned in some form since the eleventh century had been razed to make way for a shopping centre. *Second Gramophone: Once the Belly of Paris. Now an underground Westfield*.

p. 26 Ruth Watson, *Snowglobes and Keychains*, 2021, wooden ladder, souvenirs, books, 240 x 50 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer

Among the many colourful trinkets that encrust Ruth Watson's *Snowglobes and Keychains* (2021) are several Eiffel Towers. I spy one, a keychain, sitting on the ladder's eighth rung, and two more sticking out on either side of its base like rooster's spurs, the distinct spine clockable despite the hundreds of similar cheap souvenirs from around the world also covering the structure, which looks like something fished out of an urban harbour. Mini sombreros, red telephone booths, matryoshka dolls, cowrie shells, clogs, small renderings of landmarks—Colosseum, Golden Gate Bridge, Pyramids, Petronas Tower—all were collected by Watson from friends travelling abroad or in op shops where they've been discarded by strangers. She refers to these trinkets as 'Ambassadors', an affectionate way of registering the diplomatic work these image-objects do to sustain national mythologies and seduce the international tourist dollar. Snowglobes and keychains are two of the most enduring types of souvenir, and the most successful, sharing an important ability to preserve the world in miniature and in the round, which is to say to preserve the world how the tourist perceives it, traversable and collectible. Forget encyclopaedic histories and meta-narratives. Overrated doorstops! We've got keychains now, for collecting places on split rings to be jangled as you pull them from your pocket and thumbed through like a rolodex, and snowglobes, making whole planets of single places, small enough to hold in your palm and control the weather.

In his essay on the Eiffel Tower, Roland Barthes calls it "an infinite cipher ... the symbol of Paris, of modernity, of communication, of science or of the nineteenth century, rocket, stem, derrick, phallus, lightning rod or insect."⁰¹ It's the prototypical souvenir, its meaning mutable and shrinkable *ad infinitum*. Barthes borrows half his list from insults thrown at the structure consistently since it was first announced ahead of the 1889 Exposition Universelle, but characterises it himself as a sort of wrought iron beanstalk, the point of which was always to embody the technological prowess and progress of France after a tumultuous century as a young republic, and to allow its visitors a view across the new, built space of

modern human activity and aspiration. "To perceive Paris from above is infallibly to imagine a history," he writes; and to view it in panoramic terms (in the round) is to piece that history together into the Tower's teleology: nature overcome, kings and tyrants vanquished, science anointed.

Souvenir (je reviens), another work by Watson first made in 1992, uses stacks of the miniature Eiffel Towers to spell out the name of a women's perfume in cursive, *je reviens*, a phrase translating to 'I'm coming back' or 'I'm returning'. With their four feet pinned to the wall the spindly forms are distorted. A spotlight aimed toward the work throws jet plane-shaped shadows behind each point, so that the word seems to lurch rightwards. In Watson's work we are *above* the Tower's above, from which aspect it is hardly recognisable and stripped of the sense of ascension that is integral to its mythos ("a steep hill climbing out of the darkness of the past," Georges Berger, manager of the Exposition, once called it proudly).⁰² Like *Snowglobes and Keychains*, the work suggests jumbled and gyring mobilities—of tourism, commodities and ideas. Barthes, too, ends in similar territory, with the restaurants built into the structure: "selling, buying, exchanging," he writes "it is by these simple gestures that men truly dominate the wildest sites, the most sacred constructions."⁰³

Nowadays the most visible forms of commerce at the Eiffel Tower take place around its base, outside the glass balustrades erected along its perimeter, where migrants hawk souvenirs in its image, alongside selfie sticks and bubble wands. Tourist parents huddle their children away or else try to haggle the price down by a few euros. One has to earn a living, don't forget. It's the unwritten rule of the western dream.⁰⁴ On Google Maps I try to approach two vendors to view the wares spread out on a blanket more closely—statues in gold, silver, rose gold, black and in all sizes; keychains and snowglobes of course—but I click and they've vanished. A couple wearing sensible, grey, his-and-hers New Balance sneakers are walking across the pavement where they just were. Behind them, the Tower towers, marking the power of modern man to transform nature, touch the skies and unfold the world like a brochure. At its feet unfolds a counter-panorama: mobilities always held to be upwards spreading microbially as shadow markets