

Nature in our Perception

Interdisciplinary practice presentation summary

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On-site documentation

The subject matter of my paintings is the metamorphosis of the object. My recent interest is the deformed woods in the parks, especially the fallen trees, and their relationship to human emotions and personal experiences. Though this project, I aim to learn more about the woods through site visit, interview and research.

My project focused on Richmond Park, which is a national nature reserve and a European special area of conservation, and is currently managed by The Royal Parks. Through consulting with psychologist and trees conservation parties, I hope to have more insights on how the relationship between nature and emotions/personal experience can contribute in my art making and might further develop into site-specific project of the park.



On-site documentation



Two Storm wood within deer-free area to prevent deer eating them before they grow into a tree



A fallen tree that might be able to be alive if its root's not damaged and attached to the ground, or alternatively it becomes habitat for fungi and other animals and insect to live inside or beneath

What I did in this project:

Tree Studying

- Research about trees (Judi Dench: My Passion for Trees, 26/12/2017, BBC1 London)
- Guided walk with a tree guide (Janet Bostock) in Richmond Park
- Document different shapes of tree
- Interview with a tree guide
- Learn about the treatment of deadwood in Parks

Trees in Psychology and Perception

- Walk with a psychologist in Richmond Park
- Research how trees involve in psychology tests
- Read about how different animals perceive a tree

Trees in Art

- Look at landscape painting (Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland)
- Interview with a curator (George Shaw) about Sutherland, Nash and Shaw's work

Outcome:

1. The TV Programme, Judi Dench: My Passion for Trees

- Winter is resting phase for trees
- Fungi connect the entire forest to interact
- Yew forest is mysterious, leaves poisonous to human, some experience hallucination
- Tree craving:
Somehow this moment this woodland marked something they wanted to remember forever. It will go eventually, it will disappear and the story will end too.

2. Richmond Park guided walk with a tree guide, Janet Bostock

- Regenerate of the woods
- Another life form of decaying wood (habitat of other animals)
- Networking of the trees underground
- How human management affect the growth of forest

"I think people have lost the content with trees. They've forgotten what to use them for, forgotten how to nurture them. They are just a piece of... just a tree!"

3. Landscape Advice Note The Treatment of Dead Wood in Historic Parks and Gardens

- *How dead wood facilitate the growth of the nature*
- *How the shape and form of dead wood seen as English landscape style*
- *'it is very possible, also, that the blasted old oak there – its trunk a mere shell – its bark full of knobs, spots, and stains – its branches broken and twisted, with every mark of injury and decay; may please the painter more than a tree in full vigour and freshness'*

4. Richmond Park walk with a psychologist, Nimmi Hutnik

- Tree drawing used as a tool for psychology test (House-Tree-Person Test, Baum test, Rorschach Ink blot test)
- Could be subjective
- Baum test is a Picture-drawing techniques as a measure of cognitive functions and personality characteristics
- Tree is like life, many events taking place.

5. Reading “A Foray into the worlds of Animals and Humans” by Jakob von Uexkull

- how different living things sees an oak in their different subjective realities

“Each and every subject (P.126) lives in a world in which there are only subjective realities and that environments themselves represent only subjective realities.”

“In the hundred different environments of its inhabitants, the oak plays an ever-changing role as object, sometimes with some parts, sometimes with others.”

6. Looking at painting of Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, and David Milne

- They were all war artists, focus on the shape of tree, human like gesture,
- Abstract and imaginative
- Project their personage onto the form of tree

7. Interview with George Shaw, Artist and Curator of “Graham Sutherland: An Unfinished World”

- His view on the ‘Vegetable-human hybrids’ in Sutherland’s work
- The difference between Nash and Sutherland’s vegetable-human hybrids
- Landscape is both past and future
- Absence of people in Shaw’s work
- He always refer to science fiction

New Ideas/direction for my work:

- Mythology
- History
- Biology
- Science fiction
- Networking
- Recirculation of life
- Memento
- Collection of species
- Different realities/ universe

Further development:

- Animation based on my painting,
(an adventure of a piece of wood in the wood)
- Collaborate with history museum, parks
(e.g. Kew Garden, Richmond Park)
- New ideas of work development

Interdisciplinary Practice allows me to learn my subject matter in different aspect and dimensions. There are many different aspects to see the same object, but they are all part of the object that if we put them all together to see a whole picture. Things may look different but they are coherently linked together. By combining them together, the existences of the object we create become valid and completed.

This project made me consider new ideas like history of the site, mythology of creatures, science fiction and concepts of different realites in developing my work. I plan to read more in these field I mentioned to further develop the deformed wood in my work – not just the interesting shape of the wood but also a connection to other history or science fiction references.

Appendix

Transcript of the interview with Janet Bostock 7/4/2018

The tree guide in Richmond Park and Kew Garden



During the guided walk with Janet Bostock

What do you think about men's role in shaping the nature?

From what we've seen today, this park is controlled by deer. The image that you have, if you look across the park, there's no branches on the trees because the deer eat them. So that's men's management because men, there have been people introduced the deer.

Aren't deer originally here?

No, they came 1630s when it became a deer park. Before that this area was farmland. But it's also a very poor quality farmland, so it was not a good value, which why Charles II was allowed, he got away with, um, taking the land of people, to make a deer park. If it had been a valuable farmland, he probably would not to be able to do it. But you can see the contrast, there's the woodland with no deer, so that's men's influence. And the other men's influence in this park is introducing a lot of foreign species of tree, so it's not all native, not a native

woodland.

How do men taking care of the park?

So we have a tree ecologist here in the park, so she is very knowledgeable about trees and so she and her employees look after the trees. So if branches are becoming dangerous they might cut them whereas in the forest naturally those would be left on fall. But here they might be cut because they might be dangerous because there are people in the park. So again, the management of trees here is not the same as in the forest.

Do you think trees can actually feel things, or having sense of something? I was told that they could communicate with each other.

That's true. They can, but it's not feeling, it's chemical. It's all chemical. It's just chemical exchange rather than as you say we feel 'oh, that's hurting'. Trees don't feel in the same way, if they're cut, they will heal but it's all to do with chemicals and reaction and hormones within the plant. So trees do communicate. These trees, all these oak trees, under the ground they have roots. Those roots will be connected that tree to this tree by fungi, mycorrhizal fungi.

Do they have an underground network?

There's a network, yes, it's a very complicated network. Where we are walking here, the ground is compacted, those fungi are being damaged. The roots are being damaged, so this is another effect of having so many people in the park. It's damaging the trees. But um, all these trees, if an insect pest hit this side of the forest, here, chemical construction within the tree travel through the tree, through the fungi network, the next tree may change the tenants, the chemicals in their leaves, they will make more, because that will deter the insects, the predator that is eating the leaves, so they do change. Also the plant might give a pheromone, a volatile smell which will travel, and the next tree will pick them up, so will change chemicals, content. Again, but I understand from reading, you know because it's all second hand, because I'm reading to try to understand.

As I learnt today, as long as a tree fall down, attach to the ground, they can keep growing right?

As long as, if that tree fell, and half of that root plate, we saw in the wood there,

some trees have fallen, if all of the roots are broken, or maybe the tree's old, it might not start to grow again. But the trees upon that hillside over there, where it had fallen, it was a younger healthy tree, although it got blown over to this windy place, but half of that root plate were still in the soil, so it kept growing. So it depends.

Does this mean that if there's no other factors disturbing the forest, the forest will never stop growing?

The forest will regenerate if these trees fell down, if there weren't deer and people here, you will have old seedlings. But as long as deer here, as I showed you the tree up there, the tree of heaven, where the seeds are coming up, the deer eat it. If there weren't deer here, we would have a forest of that tree. We'll have more of them. And when you go into the fence area up there, which we walk through, two storied wood, there's poplars, the quaking aspen, it's the one you get in America as well. There are lots of them growing, up off the root, so it's becoming of a forest. But if that tree was planted out here, those suckers would be immediately eaten by the deer, so again, this is a deer park. It's the best it could be.

What do you think about the relationship between human and trees?

I think people have lost the content with trees. They've forgotten what to use them for, forgotten how to nurture them. Before we had machines, this is probably 200 years ago, when we had the industrial revolution in England, in Britain, People stopped using trees to make things, they used metal, and so they stopped nurturing trees, people burn coal instead of valuing the timber, some timber burn very hot, some timber is useless for fire, it burns quickly and gives no heat. So people stop understanding what the value of different trees. They're just using them. They are just a piece of... just a tree!

Transcript of the email interview with George Shaw 7/5/2018

The curator of 'Graham Sutherland: An Unfinished World'

How did you become involved in curating 'Graham Sutherland - An Unfinished World' for Modern Art Oxford? Were you always interested in his work?

I was invited to make the exhibition by the curator , Michael Stanley. I always had an interest in the work of Sutherland, particularly his earlier work. I grew up in Coventry and the new cathedral had an enormous tapestry of his and the local gallery exhibited all the preparatory sketches. I think he was the first 'contemporary ' artist I saw in the flesh.

What do you think about the 'vegetable-human hybrids' in Graham Sutherland's paintings?; What is your view on depicting the world through the metaphor of nature and depicting the brutality of the world itself?

What interests me about Sutherland's curious forms in the landscape is I don't really know what they are. I've come to think of them as alien, strange and disturbing. They obviously come from surrealism and Picasso but they are more than just influences. There is something of the science fiction about them. I am thinking of the novels of John Wyndham, in particular The Day of the Triffids. I'm not sure that they depict the brutality of the world. And they are only metaphoric in the way that they are presences, like figure within a landscape. It is either Nash or Sutherland who refers to them as personages. Lately I've come to think of these personages as potential self portraits. In the poems of Edward Thomas the poet encounters a stranger on the road that sometimes calls to mind the paintings of Sutherland; 'I pursued to prove the likeness, and, if true, to watch until myself I knew' (The Other). It is ourselves we meet on the road. And if there is any brutality it is to be found there.

Both Paul Nash and Sutherland were war artists and shared similar subjects in their painting. How would you compare their different approaches to landscape as a subject?

To put it simply I think that Nash is more conscious and in touch with his subject. Sutherland is a bit vague and I'm not sure he was fully aware of what he was

doing. His terrible portraits and the work he made when he lived in France are testament to this. He found himself again when he returned to Pembrokeshire when he was an old man.

Having seen and read about your own work, I understand that woodland is where you liked to spent time during your childhood, could you tell me bit about what trees mean to you/ how do you see the woods?

I don't have much to say about trees I'm afraid. My recent work is often interpreted as an interest in the natural world and concern for ecology. To be honest I don't give a fuck about these things. The recent exhibition at the National Gallery was called My Back to Nature. Some commentators have seen it as back to nature but it is *my* back to nature. I have my eyes on the studio. I'm very much an old school romantic and see the landscape as Ruskin or Wordsworth saw it as extensions and allegories of myself. Romantics call this the pathetic fallacy. Nearly everyone I know cares less about the environment than I do. They say they care but its obvious from the way they live their lives that they don't. A slogan won't save the world. It won't even save yourself.

Like Sutherland's landscape works, there's always an absence of people and animals in your paintings but, the remnants of human activities. This sounds to me that you want the audience to be an observer, and through looking at the evidence to get the idea behind the image. Why do you paint the subject whilst making the subject absent?

You assume that the subject is the human presence. In many ways the subject of recent paintings has been *what* is left behind not *who* leaves it. I'm interested in ghosts and how past events haunt the present tense. The remnants of activites, vandalism, graffiti, rubbish, abandoned artifacts are all allegories – personages or stand-ins - for more abstract concerns such as the the anxiety of time passing, amnesia and melancholy.

In the catalogue of 'Graham Sutherland - An Unfinished World', you wrote:

"It is a landscape that has absorbed time, in which individuals can become consumed, where language, civilisation and progress count for nothing. Is both past and future. A landscape of forgetting and of the forgotten."

I can understand the landscape is the past, but why is it also the future?

Because what has happened will happen again and again. In science fiction the future is often used as an allegory of the present. When the world ends in a film it is because the world is ending. We know we will die because we know that others who have gone before have died. Everything is consumed by the present tense because we are the present tense. It is where contradictions meet. In the tradition of landscape this contemplation of the present tense becomes tangible. And to quote again from Edward Thomas' 'The Other', 'He goes: I follow: No release Until he ceases. Then I also shall cease'