

Waterlog

Gallery Guide – Large Print

‘Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences connect?’

W.G. Sebald

‘The Rings of Saturn’ (1998)



www.waterlog.fvu.co.uk

Introduction

'Waterlog' is an ambitious contemporary art exhibition comprising of a series of specially commissioned works by some of Britain's most compelling artists — Tacita Dean, Alexander and Susan Maris, Alec Finlay and Guy Moreton, Simon Pope, and Marcus Coates. Drawing upon the distinctive spirit of place that distinguishes the east of England, 'Waterlog' also invokes the digressive literary journeys of the writer W.G. Sebald, who made this part of the country his home until his untimely death in 2001. Indeed, Sebald's elliptical style — perhaps most evident in his extraordinary book 'The Rings of Saturn' (1998), in which he describes a walk along the East Anglian coast — sets the tone for the project, in which the artists' real or imaginary journeys provide opportunities to unearth unexpected cultural connections embedded in the rich history and geography of the area. But this is not an attempt to produce an expanded, illustrated version of Sebald's writings; his books, after all, are already intelligently and evocatively illustrated, whether it be with Sebald's own photographs — of unpeopled streets or shopfronts, or the façades of hotels — or fragments found in newspapers, or family albums; examples of memories, public and private, which fade and yet seem to persist. In none of these new commissions do the artists make explicit reference to the author, although his presence might be sensed in some works by those who care — or hope — to find it. Perhaps Dean's film of the poet Michael Hamburger is a cinematic sequel to Sebald's visit to his old — now late — friend, and their sense of a life, or historical journey, which has been shared; perhaps the journey of Alec Finlay and Guy Moreton to Dunwich might have been inspired by Sebald's own walking there, and his description of the immense destruction — both gradual and rapid — that this great town underwent many centuries ago. Perhaps. More likely, however, is that such a straightforward declaration of a connection between author and artist not only denies the artists' own experiences — of their own migration to the place from which their subject had come, or the family relationship of a friend; of a lifetime of natural observation; of walks long ago with a companion — but also misrepresents the rather more uncertain workings of artistic influence. As Dean has remarked: 'nothing can be more satisfying than arriving somewhere without any clear idea of the route.' Instead the artists might, more accurately, be said to share a sensibility with the author, certain

characteristics, or a tone of voice: knowledgeable, inquisitive, poetic, melancholy almost, and perhaps even a little hesitant, for all their clarity. They share certain interests also: our place within history, and how we might represent it, indeed might represent ourselves; a preoccupation with the past, to the extent that an engagement with the present is always haunted by that which has gone before; a delight in journeys, physical ones, certainly, and walking in particular, but also journeys of the mind which are swifter and often without anticipation; and a profound engagement with place, that is, the layering of history upon landscape, and of this place in particular, the sodden flatlands of the east of England. But most of all they share a profound sense of engagement with the world, the world that they find and the world that they create, and in that they compel us, their viewers, their readers, to join with them, and to do the same.

Tacita Dean

Continuing her recent collection of film portraits, Tacita Dean's most recent work, 'Michael Hamburger' (2007), is a moving portrayal of the poet and translator, a resident of Middleton and great friend of Sebald, who sadly died in June this year; it is also her first commission in Britain since 1999. In its 28 minutes, the film quietly observes the poet in his Suffolk home, its strata of books and papers now somewhat familiar through Sebald's photographs reproduced in 'The Rings of Saturn'. The natural and the cultural further seep into one another: sunlight dissolves the frames of the windows, the most insubstantial of thresholds between this home, only oneroom- deep, and what lies outdoors; a rainbow marks its watery geometry in the sky; the apples age upon the ground, shrunken, and yet somehow becoming more intensely themselves. Although Hamburger is said to despair of reviews of his poetry which declare that he is 'better known as a translator', we might detect a similar deprecation of his self, by himself, in the film which shares his name. Unwilling, perhaps unable, to talk of his past and his migrations, most especially fleeing Nazism in 1933, he talks poignantly, instead, of the apple trees in his garden, of where they have come from, and of their careful cross-breeding. Purity is dismissed, and one senses with an awkward pathos that the poet is translating himself.

Alexander & Susan Maris

If it was observed of Hamburger that, as both poet and translator, he succeeded in placing the best silences in the best order, then the same can also be said of the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, for whom silence is akin to something sacred, and represents the promise of a new beginning; nowhere is this more explicit than in 'Tabula Rasa' (1977), meaning 'blank slate', and in particular its second movement, 'Silentium'. This contemplative work provides the musical basis, and the title also, of a new video work by Alexander and Susan Maris, 'Silentium' (2007), although they share much more. Indeed if Pärt's composition has been described as possessing the quality of gently swirling mist through which patterns emerge, then the same might be said — perhaps even more accurately — of the Marises' work, in which the sea emerges from an Aldeburgh dawn or our view sweeps slowly across an estuary of invisible silt. The Marises' chosen locations — the coast at Aldeburgh, upriver towards Snape, and finally Chapel House in Horham — all relate to the life of the English composer Benjamin Britten, whose work was profoundly connected to the region and admired enormously by Pärt. For Britten, Chapel House was a form of sanctuary, a retreat from the overflying USAF planes which disturbed him at his residence, The Red House. In a series of beautiful, haunting video sequences, the Marises have recreated this quiet escape, retracing this search for silence.

Alec Finlay & Guy Moreton

Pärt's 'Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten' (1977) begins with a lone bell chiming mournfully in the distance, a sound, it is said, not dissimilar from that which is supposed to rise from the drowned town of Dunwich, a short way up the coast. This town was one of the most important ports in medieval England and, at the height of its fortunes, may have possessed as many as eighteen churches, chapels, and religious buildings. Alec Finlay and Guy Moreton are two of the most recent artists who have been drawn to this extraordinarily romantic place, and have created a series of related works inspired by it. In a series of thirteen watercolours, Finlay has represented a 'bell method', a score used in church bell ringing. While such methods usually consist of rows of numbers, one for

each bell to be rung, here Finlay has replaced each number with a coloured circle, creating simple pictures with a curiously synaesthetic effect, music having been transformed into colour. Accompanying these paintings are two typically quiet, and assured, large-format photographs by Moreton of the ruined church of St. Andrew's, Walberswick. In three further large-scale colour photographs, Moreton continues his considered exploration of the landscape of eastern England by concentrating upon Dunston Pillar, Britain's only land lighthouse. Built in 1751 in order to guide travelers across the heath towards Lincoln, the pillar stands sentinel over the exhibition itself, metaphorically marking the passage of its journey from Norwich earlier in the year. Finlay, too, adds a number of companion works, including circle poems presented upon life-buoys, and a small apple sculpture, dedicated to Michael Hamburger. What the work of both artists share, despite their differences of form and content, is a feeling of loss: of loss of self, or the blurring of the boundaries between self and landscape; and of the slow material disappearance of the landscape itself. In their quiet, watchful way, Finlay and Moreton make us reflect more closely upon the natural world and our place within it.

Simon Pope

The east stands for lost causes, Sebald wrote in 'The Rings of Saturn', and the elegiac sense that one often feels within the landscape of this region provides the inspiration behind Simon Pope's latest project, 'The Memorial Walks' (2007). In this, an invited participant — a poet, novelist, landscape historian, but always a writer — chooses a landscape painting from the museum's collection, and then memorises it; the participant must then walk with the artist to a location of his choosing before describing the picture from memory, a process of recollection which is then recorded on tape and photographed. The paintings themselves are hung within the gallery although most are draped with black silk, reminiscent of the ancient Dutch ritual practised in homes in which there had been a death, whereby landscape paintings and mirrors were draped with mourning ribbons in order that the departing soul would not become distracted upon its final journey. Every two weeks during the exhibition a different painting will be unveiled, and its description available for download from the 'Waterlog' website; the other paintings are left to reside in our

memories, or our imaginations, inviting us to become participants, and not merely spectators.

Marcus Coates

A companion project to his earlier 'Britain's Bitterns', Marcus Coates' 'Cadences' is a special commission for the unique soundwall at The Collection. A further reflection on bird-life, temporal change, and the inexorable loss of a particular landscape, 'Cadences' consists of a series of 'last chords' from a number of well-known orchestral pieces from what might be called the English pastoral tradition. Moving across the full extent of the sound wall, these discrete and isolated sounds, plangent but strangely affirming, flow like waves, or gather like birds in flight, before finally landing and coming in to rest. Miniature epitaphs for a bygone England, these swelling, looping chords, always at the point of ending but never actually fading, form a metaphorical echo of our equally persistent myths of Englishness, and the significance of landscape to national identity.

Publication

To mark the midway point of 'Waterlog', an accompanying publication coincides with the Lincoln staging of the project. 'Waterlog: Journeys Around An Exhibition' charts the course of the project so far and strikes out to pursue parallel paths and open up further lines of enquiry. A visual record of the various artists' works, documented also through installation photographs of its previous incarnation in Norwich, this limited edition 128 pp book features a number of specially commissioned texts, including typically inventive contributions from 'Waterlog' artist Alec Finlay, a new poem, 'East', by Matthew Hollis, and essays by writers Robert Macfarlane and Brian Dillon. In acknowledgement of W.G. Sebald, whose writings were a source of inspiration for the project, the book reprints two texts dedicated to his memory: 'Backwaters: Norfolk Fields' by George Szirtes, and Tacita Dean's eponymous visual essay on the author.

Waterlog: Journeys Around An Exhibition

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Opening Times

Open daily 10am–5pm

(last entry 4.30pm)

Free

Artists in conversation

Saturday 15 September 2007

2–3pm

The Collection Auditorium

Come and listen to some of the artists from 'Waterlog' talk about their work and the exhibition. There will also be an open forum providing an opportunity to ask the artists questions.

Free, contact reception to book Telephone 01522 550965

For more information and a copy of the full programme go to www.waterlog.fvu.co.uk.

'Waterlog' was first staged in Norwich, at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery (3 February–15 April 2007) and at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (30 January–24 June 2007).

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