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The Synthetic Landscape

In this presentation/ paper entitled 'The Synthetic Landscape' I will be highlighting and examining some of the core values at the heart of my practice; my approaches to making, the themes and concepts I am exploring, and importantly, how I see these connected. I will give an overview of some of my past works and then focus on three bodies of work that I see as pivotal in the development of my practice bringing together process and core conceptual concerns.

1.Fort I (Image)

My past works reference manmade technology and architectural forms. Many of the subjects I have recorded were considered at the forefront of technology during their lifetime, for example, The Maunsell Sea forts in the Thames Estuary and Orford Ness Military testing site in Suffolk. However many are now defunct, superseded or have been reconfigured for different uses. These now lie abandoned, preserved as stark reminders to this past, as lonely structures in the landscape

Seeing these structures and how architecture and redundant technologies can act as metaphors of a past fascinates me and has been the main focus of earlier works. The function and purpose of a lot of my subject matter is generally unknown to the wider public. The work then acts as a way in or introduction to these locations and their histories.

During the making and researching around this work I became interested in concepts around 'Hauntology' especially the Writing of Mark Fischer and how he relates Hauntology to elements of popular culture including art, music and film.

Hauntology covers a range of ideas referring to the return or persistence of elements from the social or cultural past. The concept asks people to consider how "spectres" of alternative futures influence current and historical discourse. For me this related directly to these forms I was capturing. How these architectural structures may be seen as a metaphor to highlight debates around current contemporary themes and future concerns.

I begin many works by gaining first-hand experience and gathering primary research material during field visits to locations where these structures exist. When researching, I use a range of research methods, including drawing, photography, video and sound. This mix of media and process allows me to record as many physical and figurative references as possible, alongside capturing more elemental and emotive qualities of the wider environment.

I find that drawing underpins all my work in many ways, from entirely drawing based works, both on paper and for print, to sketching for photographic and video works. Drawing then I see as becoming incorporated into the expanded fields of print making and photography, where re-engaging with material and process combines with the drawn mark. In this way drawing acts as a direct process into print – allowing the work to evolve organically, further informed by memory, chance and abstraction.

Drawing gives the framework but the final print questions the need for a topographical reference and instead embraces a more intuitive approach. The image starts to evolve becoming a composite of visual fact and my own artistic response. Through geographical and emotional distance the passing of time influences what we remember about the places we visit, it has allowed more abstract ideas to surface creating an autonomy and uniqueness within the work.

This notion of preservation and conservation has allowed me to consider the work as a graphic historical record. By recording these structures I have started to highlight their historical, cultural and social impact documenting the architectural remains of human activity. In this way bringing me to the ideas around hauntology.

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I would like now to discuss three bodies of work in particular “*The Mirror Series*”, *Shifting Sands* and my new *Shelter* works that have fed into and informed each other over the last 10 years. Over this period I feel I have developed a more inter-disciplinary approach allowing me to explore particular themes around defence, boundaries and shelter, generating a stronger political edge and social awareness to my practice.

This emphasis I find in this quote by Celeste Olaquiaga.

“Architecture is treated as the material support to history”

(Olaquiaga, Celeste, , 2019 *Remains of the fray*, Art Forum)

2.Mirror Series (image)

Mirror Series – The Acoustic Sound Mirrors

The first body of work I will discuss is my Mirror Series based on the Acoustic Sound Mirrors. The Acoustic sound mirrors were built on the south and northeast coasts of England between 1916 and the 1930s. The sound mirrors were part of Britain's national defence strategy, designed to pick up the sound of approaching enemy aircraft by focusing the noise of aircraft engines onto the microphone which was amplified by the dish.

I specifically concentrated on the Denge Location in Kent on the southern coast of England.

The Sound Mirrors were at the forefront of technological advancement for their time in a pre-digital age but the development of technology (the speed of the aircraft) and their lack of purpose and function have left them behind. They have now become remnants from a previous time, a redundant architectural reminder of a defensive age.

Interestingly, this sense of defence, surveillance and concern around possible military aggression is now gaining increased prominence and relevance in the current political landscape in Eastern Europe.

Visiting the site at Denge, I began with initial primary research drawings and first hand references, recording and attempting to understand the form, composition and surface qualities of the Mirror structures.

These initial drawings remain evident within the etchings, continually changing hierarchy and emphasis. The role and value of drawing is integral to both the making and the development of the work allowing me to adapt and alter the image accordingly as I think through and evolve an idea,

Taking these drawings into the intaglio etching process offers a further unique means of working. Inherent in the nature of etching is the intervention upon the surface and the sculptural physicality of the process; layering and building-up information through cyclical reapplications of grounds, drawing, etching, burnishing and drypoint. This helps me to utilise the potential for expression found within the drawing and printmaking process.

3. Shifting Sands (image)

Shifting Sands – The North Atlantic wall

The next body of work is titled Shifting Sands based on the remains of the Atlantic Wall.

The Atlantic Wall was a system of coastal fortifications built by Nazi Germany in World War II, 1942 - 1944 along the coast of western Europe stretching over 6000 miles.

The Atlantic wall body of work further explores themes of boundaries and frontiers, offering contemporary relevance and a symbolic connection with current social and political debates around visible and invisible barriers. The structures themselves are a contradiction of their functional redundancy and their political legacy that still haunts us today.

Some of these brutalist structures remain, originally built to defend and create a boundary they now remain isolated architectural symbols of permanence slipping into failure and decay becoming a visual metaphor of the shifting political, social and environmental landscape. An architectural reminder of failure.

During site visits to the locations of these structures I came across this poem by Shelley which really resonated with me as I began working and researching.

My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Ozymandias, Percy Shelley, 1818

The locations in France and Denmark evoke a sense of the sublime; of the lonely and colossal wrecks that Shelley mentions, which I aimed to bring into this work, pulling these neglected spaces back into the cultural imagination.

Through onsite observation I started to record these structures through drawing, video and rubbings. The combination of photography, printmaking and the continuation of the drawing element is an integral part of my process.

Wooden textures are still visibly evident in the concrete of the bunkers. The wooden formers used to cast the concrete sections of the bunkers are now imprinted and fossilised into the very being of the structures. I have incorporated these wooden textures back into the etchings, allowing the subject matter itself to inform the materials used to record it.

I see a direct correlation between the continual elemental erosion of the Bunkers and the same erosion of the etched copper surface that is used to make the printed images. Here, time is inherent in the making of the work, slowly layering and etching away the surface as the image builds. The subject matter then becomes embedded in the process used to record it, the material values of the process becoming engrained within the concept itself.

The notion of time passing greatly influences the structures I record and also plays an important role in the decisions I make when making work through particular processes – drawing in pencil, etching or photography – all are able to evoke time within the final image in different ways and at different speeds. The passing of time influences what I remember about these places I visit and it becomes a fine balance in the work, between the spontaneity and immediacy of the original drawn marks and sketches and the lengthier, methodical approach of the printmaking process.

In the studio the etching plate is continually reworked expanding on the idea of permanence and impermanence. Taking an immediate response – a quick drawing or a photograph – and building from this into something slower and more considered, which draws a creative parallel with the way one's immediate response whilst in a place is different to the thoughts and feelings that emerge later.

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These two bodies of work I have discussed have been key in laying the groundwork for my current body of work titled *The Synthetic Landscape* which explores the theme of shelter.

4. Synthetic Landscape (Image)

Synthetic Landscape - Shelter series.

Throughout the pandemic and during lockdown periods I started to research and record a range of shelter structures, through primary research and using online referencing. I began to consider mankind's basic need for shelter from the elements especially in time of crisis. Over the last few years we have seen an increase in migrants fleeing political crisis and searching for new homes or places to feel safe. The previous structures I had looked at had certain national political agendas for defense, whereas these shelters are more about personal defense and the individual need for protection.

I researched a broad range of shelters highlighting a range of repetitive shapes and forms. There was also a diverse range of materials used such as wood, straw, metal, straw, fabric and found materials.

In beginning this work I isolated each structure in composition to take it out of its original context or environment. Some are in the process of being made, the skeleton and framework of the structure laid bare heightening the sense of vulnerability and openness to the elements. A broad range of structures were recorded highlighting a range of repetitive shapes and forms where form and function were the consideration over any aesthetic values.

At this time, I was trying to bring a looseness and energy into my existing way of working and I was interested in developing new mechanisms and approaches to do so. Drawings were made and then photographed using the Wet plate collodion process.

The negative glass plates are then overlayed and scanned, sections of the image would become covered or revealed, enhancing figurative elements as well abstracting sections. This created abstracted imagery that give a sense of transition and a state of flux in their creation. This transience and state of change offers a duality in that the structures themselves are made for protection but are also temporary and will disappear.

Coming from a print and drawing context I wanted to explore the Wet plate Collodion process to embrace its inherent material qualities as part my inter-disciplinary practice. The collodions are then drawn and scanned retaining the mistakes and flaws in the developing process, celebrating and bringing forward these incidental marks and making the technical glitch more visible and embedded in the work. Like the etching process this has created an autonomy and uniqueness within the work embracing the crafted and handmade. The primacy of looking and the progressive withdrawal from topographical detail allowing abstraction to play more of a role. The visual accuracy of photography has given way to something new and more personal.

A digital scan image is then taken back into the print workshop to create photopolymer etching plates, allowing the intaglio print process to resolve and synthesise the layers of information, creating new compositions through layering, collaging and material ink surface.

There has become a clear correlation between my past use of etching to discuss contemporary themes and the use of an historic analogue photographic process such as wet plate collodion to further discuss related themes around Isolation and boundaries. This relates back to the influence of Hauntology and looking to past processes, integrating both conceptual ideas and process qualities.

5. Synthetic Landscape II Projection (Image)

The scale of this work is smaller in comparison to previous works but more recently I have explored a way to bring these images to almost life size through projection. Having digital images of the prints means I can put them into different kinds of external spaces, projecting on to surfaces of walls. Varying surface qualities for the projection alters not only the clarity of image itself but informs the concept and context of the work. Projections offer the opportunity and flexibility to explore scale and immersion but also relates to them as more temporary and mass disseminated objects for human use.

I am currently working with the charity *ShelterBox*- an International disaster relief charity providing emergency shelter in areas such as Ukraine, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan. I was approached by *ShelterBox* to use this body of work as a vehicle to highlight the message of the charity and to create a new working relationship where talks and exhibitions are presented to major sponsors and corporate partners in the fields of Architecture, Construction and Engineering. For them the work can reach new audiences, bring greater awareness and diversify the publicity and awareness of the work they are undertaking in disaster zones around the world.

As I look back at these three bodies of works, I see the nature of interdisciplinarity becoming increasingly important. How, as an artist, the way I can record and emphasise subject matter through various making processes can bring awareness to overlooked structures of the past in new ways.

I feel that although boundaries of each process becoming blurred, overlapping and informing new lines of enquiry for new original ideas and concepts to be explored, there is still a moment for each to offer its own unique stance – through drawing, etching and wet plate collodian forming part of an ongoing methodology.

To be continued.....