

## Time, space and contradiction

### [taster]

Bleak, mysterious and melancholy, Ian Chamberlain's monumental prints of forgotten and decaying structures are rich with suggestion and all the more moving for it, writes **Mike White**

### [body text]

A line of abandoned concrete bunkers slide slowly into the sand. Sea forts, standing on stilts out amidst the waves, rust and sing in a relentless wind. Vast concrete 'sound mirrors', built along England's coast, listen out for enemies that are not coming.

Ian Chamberlain's large, architectural etchings are rich with contradictions. Focussing on military or technological structures whose useful life has come to an end, his work quietly simmers with conflicting yet complementary themes and possibilities of meaning.

The first of these is perhaps the blurring of physical and emotional. There's a strong physical pull about the places Ian visits. Rusting sea forts, massive concrete 'sound mirrors' and deep-space searching equipment. The physical journey to these monuments is important in itself, the process of identifying and travelling to remote places, feeling the wind and rain, the bleakness and emptiness. All these physical elements feed into an emotional resonance that influences the finished work.

"The journey is really important to me," says Ian. "There's a long tradition of the journeyman-printmaker, and for me, locating these places, learning about them, getting to them - it's all part of the process." It begins with historical research, lots of reading, marshalling ideas. "But each place has to be of interest visually too - it's no coincidence that so much of my work features brutalist architecture. 1920s-1970s seems to be my era, from pre-war to Cold War. I think it's the strong lines, the confidence of their design and the crudeness in how many of them were made."

He's already planning his next set of trips - to sites along The Atlantic Wall, a 6000-mile line of fortifications built by Nazi Germany between 1942 and 1944 along the coast of continental Europe and Scandinavia as a defence against an anticipated Allied invasion.

Ian has sorties to Dieppe and Dunkirk already booked, and then to a remote corner of north west Denmark - where there are perhaps a dozen of these huge structures. He'll make preliminary drawings while a photographer uses a drone to document the sites from the air. "I'll also be using a process with a name I hate: 'frottage'." The word has more than one meaning, but in art terms it just means 'rubbing'. "I've not tried it before," Ian says, "but I'm planning to use it to record the textures of the monuments themselves. The concrete of the Atlantic Wall bunkers was formed by pressing planks of wood into it, and the imprint of the woodgrain remains. I'm already looking forward to playing with that texture on the plate."

Like the structures he documents, the plates Ian uses are unusually large, with a physicality and a monumental quality that's important. "Their size gives them a presence in a room and in your field of vision. That matters, it links with the grandeur and scale of the objects that I'm recording." It's lost when you see the works on a laptop screen - looking him up online is no substitute for seeing Ian's work in real life. "I'm hoping the Atlantic Wall project will help push my work out there more," he says. "I've been in contact with various institutions like the Imperial War Museum where I'd like to see the work exhibited, to reach new audiences beyond the gallery and art fair scene."

What interests Ian, beyond the fortifications' inhuman scale and stark, unromantic beauty, is the bigger picture. History speaking to the present day; the folly of building vast walls to divide nations. The Atlantic Wall cost "an insane amount," but proved useless, being swiftly overcome by the Allies. Many of its forts were also built without foundations, and so are slowly sinking, being reclaimed by the earth. "The structures themselves remain sound, but the ground is swallowing them up."

The reading and thinking stage of this project is also well underway: "I know why I'm doing it in relation to what I've done previously, but I'd like more to come from it," Ian says. "There are metaphors emerging, with Brexit and Trump, that I'd never intended: boundaries, and their uselessness; the simple truth that you can't separate people and expect things to go well." None of this will be explicit in Ian's future work, so that "people remain free to apply their own meanings," he says. "I don't feel any need to spell it out."

A few years back, whilst visiting the Maunsell sea forts - a set of strange structures standing defiantly in the Thames estuary like tiny oil rigs with windows - Ian recorded a short video, as an *aide memoire* for later studio work. "When I returned to my studio and watched the footage, I found the video had recorded the sound of a shipping buoy's bell, chiming over and over again as it swung in the waves. I found myself playing it on a loop in the studio, and my mark-making fell into rhythm with the chiming bell." There's a pleasing interplay between meticulous planning and pure

chance, and a blurring of cool, clinical draughtsmanship with something evocative. The sadness of the locations, their abandonment and decay seep into Ian's calm, architectural lines in a way that's oddly moving.

Another theme that brings quiet heft to Ian's work is that of perfection and permanence slipping into failure and decay. Of present crumbling into past, the unrelenting obsolescence of technology leaving these monuments behind. Ian's work documents the cutting-edge of its day, now superseded, fading from optimistic and futuristic to mythical and nostalgic. *Mirror I* and *Mirror II* are two large-scale prints based on huge acoustic 'mirrors' on the south Kent coast, built as early warning devices, listening out for the engines of enemy aircraft. They're shaped like huge concrete bowls, balanced on their edges, their concave sides turned to the sea like giant ears. The mirrors proved fairly ineffective, however: the increasing speed of aircraft in the 1930s meant that the enemy would already be too close by the time they had been detected. Then the development of radar rendered them totally obsolete. And so they were left to stand and listen for no-one.

The ideas of permanence and impermanence find other ways into Ian's work too. Taking an immediate response – a quick drawing, say, or a photograph – and building from this into something more considered, slower, draws a creative parallel with the way one's immediate response to a place is different to the thoughts and feelings that emerge later. Our feelings shift and deepen over time. But whilst feelings may fade or shift, etchings remain unchanged once finished. “The passing of time influences what we remember about the places we visit,” Ian says. “There 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.”

Ian's drawings on location are quite quick – lots of sketches to capture lighting, textures, mood. “What I'm really interested in is the idea that you can be at the location, you take the drawings and photos, then later, in your print studio, hundreds of miles away, something quite different happens, something more abstract, the happy accident. The sustained enquiry, the slow, methodical process, the role of alchemy and chance, these things all bring in something different - that's why the etchings are so much more exciting for me than the drawings. Whether it's the graphic density, light and dark, tonal range, the physical impression in the paper – the printmaking process takes the image far beyond what I can achieve with drawing.”

“I think overall my work's optimistic, but there's definitely a real melancholy in there too,” says Ian. When many of the structures he documents were built they were new, brave or hopeful, monuments to discovery and human endeavour. “There was a can-do attitude, and Britain was at the vanguard of that,” he says. “They were built with huge effort, expense and excitement, and then were gradually superseded, forgotten, abandoned. But the technology developed at many of the sites I've explored was then taken on to other things: the Maunsell sea forts' construction informed the feasibility of oil rigs, shaping our world thereafter for better or worse; and the sound mirrors contributed to the development of radar, so there's a remnant from the sad and forgotten that lives on elsewhere.”

The notion of the forgotten, of unclear meanings, of once-certain things becoming hazy, as folklore and myth replace historical fact – is also a notion that smoulders under Ian's gaunt, imposing prints. “I think these changing stories must interest me,” says Ian. “I love telling people the reality of what these monuments was. Even as recent as they are, many people don't know the backstory. And that backstory helps me as well, on a more basic level, with people engaging with the work, especially those thinking about buying it. They definitely like to know the stories behind these strange locations. It's interesting to think that as the centuries pass the truth about these places may also fade and give way to something else.”

Mysterious though Ian's work may seem, there is an intention to reveal the unknown. An intention inspired in no small part by the work of Giovanni Piranesi (1720-1778), an Italian artist famous for his etchings of Rome and of atmospheric, fanciful 'prisons'. Ian describes the Italian's process as “speaking evidence, using observation to bring these architectural ruins to life through bold contrasts of light and darkness, revealing the unknown through his romantic vision.”

Piranesi's influence has been a relatively recent discovery for Ian. “Through a lot of what I've done, I wasn't as aware of Piranesi as I should have been,” he says. “I started reading about him and thought 'hang on, this is exactly what I'm doing, now'. It was great. It filled in a lot of gaps. His work, the weight of it, the amount of it, the relentlessness, I just found so impressive - and what he did is still relevant now.”

Like Piranesi, Ian's work combines strata of process with evermore detailed information. “My aim is to draw the viewer in, highlighting new layers of information and revealing finer levels of detail.” To achieve this, Ian combines a range of subtly different tones and surface qualities, with a strong graphic quality employing etching and related intaglio processes, including hard ground, aquatint, sugar-lift, spit bite, drypoint and burnishing.

Conflict and contradiction are found even in these practical processes. Etching can be a very controlled process, one that rewards precision of mark making, accurate mixing and timing of chemicals. Ian's preparatory drawings are

strongly architectural, rooted in a tradition of accuracy. But his finished works take on a freer, more expressive tone. He often uses a Dremel tool, expressly because it can never be brought fully under his control. “And so accidents happen,” he says, “the marks the drill produces and the energy it gives to the work can reveal exciting results. That thin line between chaos and control adds originality to my work, building on direct representation of the subject matter to embrace the idea of each plate as an evolving thing, changing throughout its creation.”

And so, despite all the planning, the unknown creeps in. “It keeps things fresh. You never quite know how things will turn out when you're using certain processes. Spit bite for example, using acid more or less as a watercolour, and then applying tissue to soak it up in some places while it bites more elsewhere. It's ferric acid, a dark brown solution, so you can't see precisely where it is on the plate. You have to let nature takes its course. Then you fight back at it, perhaps burnishing into it, and there's a physicality involved, battling with it to regain control, which I enjoy. There's an alchemy and a magic to it.”

As we talk, Ian's enthusiasm bubbles like the beer glowing on the table between us – revealing another little fizz of contradictions. He spends his time documenting bleak, sad-looking places, yet remains full of energy and positivity. He's been doing it for years – is a seasoned printmaker, teaching at postgraduate level for the University of the West of England – yet remains boyishly open and aware of how much he himself has to learn. “I'm always trying things that won't work, finding others that do. I'm always learning. There's an open-endedness to printmaking that means it'll always be able to throw up something fresh, something new.”

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