

Island Life

ARTISTS' BOOKS An unusual island landscape that captivated Otto is represented in a new artist's book with poems by Chris Scully, writes **Sarah Bodman**

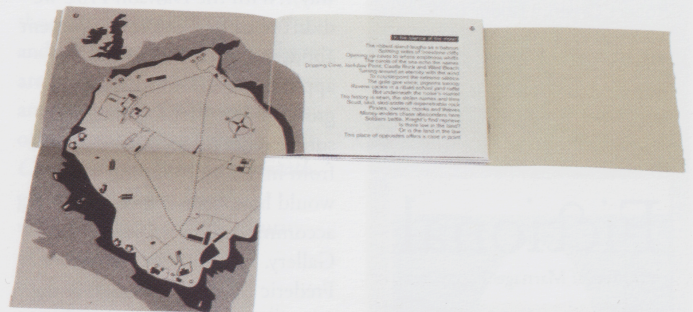
The graphic artist Otto has completed an artist's book after a six-month research project visiting the conservation island of Flat Holm (Ynys Echni) near Cardiff in the Bristol Channel, UK. A tourist boat trip taken to the island in April 2014 motivated his curiosity to further explore the island's terrain, with regular trips from May to September. Armed with materials to draw in situ (A2 sheets of film, crayons, acrylic and brushes), Otto began working onto transfer film, capturing his experience of the landscape in the moment. He soon realised, as intense gale force winds ripped away his drawings that the environment itself was hampering production of the results he desired. He returned instead with notebooks, sketchbooks and a camera to record his experiences and go back to the controlled studio environment where he could achieve better results. Otto describes the limestone island as a place of dramatic scenery and unforgiving environment. Other than a warden and volunteers the island is uninhabited in order to protect the wildlife. The nature reserve includes a gull colony, native species of birds that become aggressive during the tourist-heavy summer months, and a large population of wild rabbits. Otto was amazed by the number of carcasses littered over the landscape, a reminder of the harsh realities of nature.

Human interaction with the island dates back to the Bronze Age. A lighthouse was established in 1737, and the island was designated as a fortress in the 19th century. A cholera isolation hospital was built, and in WWII, an army base. This rich history added to the impression the island made upon the artist. Each time he visited, Otto would station himself in a particular spot that he was drawn to, capturing as much as possible in response to the place each time. His imagery became more powerful, conveying an emotional response as well as accurate description of his surroundings.

Back at his studio in Marshfield near Bath, Otto began developing a suitable colour palette to reflect the particular colours of the island. The channel water full of sand is brown, yet when hit by sunlight the spray has a purplish tinge. Strong brown, blue, orange and grey hues echo the intense contrasts in the landscape; the starkness of the tall white lighthouse towering over the brown and orange tinged rocks that plunge into the seawater below. A dash of dark blue in the water reflects the sky above, foreboding yet captivating.

As he progressed, the artwork soon evolved not as the intended suite of prints, but in the format for which Otto is well known – a book. Having realised this, he returned to the island, seeking inspiration for narrative to combine with his images. He met Chris Scully – one of the island volunteers – who sent him some of his poetry inspired by the island. Otto felt an instant connection with the texts and asked for more. On receipt, he found them a perfect fit; both poet and artist had been to exactly the same locations. Otto matched text to image for each site, a relationship forming on paper as each evoked the essence of the other. Otto explained that in doing so, he was also inverting the 'rules': 'I take the term "authorial illustration" quite literally, I match text to image, they are of equal value to me – in real life, that isn't always so. Traditionally you wouldn't think of an illustrator being the author of a book. I like the quiet subversion of the role reversal.'

The book is screenprinted in an edition of 100 on brown lining paper for the text, and heavier, smooth paper for images (to withstand four-colour screenprinting on one side, two-colour on the reverse).



Hand-torn page edges indicate the value of the artwork and reflect the jagged edges of the island's cliffs. The manila cover indicates the island's military history, becoming a dossier compiled and published. Two sections in the book unfold to double size, changing pace whilst indicating the scale of subject: a map and a large rock face. The book is a departure for Otto whose usual practice entails precise and organised image-making. There is drama and tension in his organic, responsive mark-making, true evidence of place. His understanding of the island is echoed throughout; rugged yet refined, materials and content united in a book signifying a unique environment and the history of its making.

Otto will launch *Flat Holm* in the UK, with a reading by Chris Scully at the Bristol Artist's Book Event, Arnolfini, 11–12 April 2015. www.ottographic.co.uk

Images

Flat Holm (2014) Screenprint, 175 x 250 x 5 mm, edition of 100

Flat Holm (detail: island map) (2014) Screenprint, 175 x 250 x 5 mm

Flat Holm (2014) Screenprint, 175 x 250 x 5 mm