

7. Landscape and Time

Landscape above all implies a collective shaping of the Earth over time (Crang 1998)

7.1. The landscape as a palimpsest

Landscape can be regarded legitimately as a *palimpsest*¹ of its environmental and cultural history, so the question arises can a landscape painting be a palimpsest either literally or metaphorically? Can one, like Robert Rauschenberg when he systematically erased a de Kooning drawing, take an erasure to landscapes of the past yet leave their trace implicit in our reading of the current landscape and its representation, in the way that de Kooning's lines nonetheless remained discernible (Cumming 1985). The answer is emphatically yes, in the context of the Highland landscapes central to this project.

Indeed, many of the works produced in support of the project bear witness to just such a view and depict several layers of human occupation and cultural shaping of the land, the earlier phases sometimes blurred and partly or wholly erased, sometimes clear and extant in the representation of the current landscape (see Cat. No. Paintings 5., 6. and Concept 1. for example). None of these pieces have a direct human presence. However, in all such a presence is implied and it is this implication that gives the works meaning. Indeed, part of the fascination of these works is that they approach an important human narrative indirectly or tangentially allowing them to present it afresh. When interpreted correctly the absence of a direct human presence gives the works a power that more traditional works dealing with the same narrative do not have, particularly when they veer towards the sentimental.

This view emphasises the people/land linkage and implies that the landscape has been shaped by the society living there, and by the same token it has had a role in shaping that society over time. The landscape has become a "bank of cultural memories" (Crang 1998), some current, some vestiges of past practices and knowledges.

"What I'm painting is historical landscape, that's to say landscapes related to the chain of events. It's time and landscape that interests me. The way it has been affected by the people living in it." (Andrews 2001)²

To regard the landscape as a palimpsest is akin to the notion of the landscape as a text to be read and the same parallels exist with the local and regional landscape histories of historians such as Hoskins (1955) and Darby (1948).

¹ A palimpsest derives from the Greek for *again* (*palin*) and *rub* (*psaein*) and was originally used for manuscripts, usually on papyrus or animal skins, or wooden writing blocks or tablets that had been used repeatedly earlier inscriptions rub out or erased at least partially before each use. Applied to landscape it is the repeated writing and erasure of pattern, leaving an accretion of symbols, marks, and partially obliterated traces of cultural influences over time.

² From the mid 1970s Michael Andrews spent his summers in the Highlands at Glenartney painting the Perthshire landscape

However, not all representations of landscape acknowledge this property of repeated cultural overwriting. More often works depicting the landscape are consciously or unconsciously selective in the particular iconography they represent. A very straight forward example pertinent to the focus of this project is evident when Ordnance Survey large scale maps of the Hebrides are compared with aerial photographs of the same areas. The maps show the current settlement and field boundary pattern and some selected historical sites, particularly individual ancient monuments, as point symbols. Of course, all of these features are visible on the photographs. However the photographic images are dominated visually by the linear pattern of runrig cultivation that predated the current field systems. This earlier pattern is entirely and selectively absent from the formal mapping. In a similar fashion much landscape painting is highly selective (artistic licence!). The omissions in these paintings and in the official mapping are dictated by the purpose of the finished product and the expectations of their respective audiences.

Other approaches are more contrived in the symbolism used to inform the relative space they created. The group of British artists that came to be known as the Neo-romantics including Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, John Piper, Ceri Richards, John Minton and Michael Ayrton all produced work with a mystical poetic quality that reflected their own quests for the command of some symbolic imaginary space.

7.2. The development of regional landscape personalities.

Whether the landscape is regarded as a palimpsest or a text, the question remains how does the change through time captured in the landscape's memory come about? Put another way this question seeks to identify the processes of landscape change through time. The notion of environmental change at a variety of spatial and temporal scale has been considered in Section 6. so here discussion will be directed at cultural change and its manifestation in the landscape.

7.2.1. *The growth metaphor and the quasi organism.*

In the early part of the twentieth century several branches of the natural sciences appropriated the notion of organic growth to construct explanatory models that could be applied to the accumulated empirical facts of their particular disciplines, the subjects of which were treated as "quasi-organisms". Pertinent examples would be the concept of plant and animal succession and the climax community concept in the developing science of ecology (Clements 1916, Cowles 1910, Tansley 1935), youth, maturity, old age, the cycle of erosion and the concept of landscape evolution in geomorphology (Davis 1909, Gilbert 1880, Penck 1924). The same metaphor was also applied in the social sciences where it is Carl Sauer and the Berkley School that is most germane to this project.

Carl Sauer's approach to landscape was *idiographic*, seeking to explain in ways that rejected the overly simplistic conclusions of environmental determinism³ how landscapes come to be shaped the way they are. He saw landscapes as both the products of cultures, and as reproducing them through time, seeing the surface of the Earth as differentiated into more or less distinct cultural regions and their matching landscapes that together possessed regional personalities:

“... the art of seeing how land and life have come to differ from one part of the Earth to another” (Sauer 1941 in Leighley 1962).

Therefore, inherent in the Berkley School's approach was the concept of the growth and development of regional personalities through time. From the 1970s onwards Sauer's treatment of culture in a monolithic or holistic fashion and his cultural regions as “quasi-, or super-organisms” came in for criticism as it reduced the cultural interplay with landscape from a complex of individual actors to a single entity, culture, as a single uniform actor.

A great deal of topographic and ethnographic art practice can be construed as attempts to record the aerial differentiation of the Earth's surface and to capture the regional personalities of Sauer's cultural regions. Fashionable trends in art such as orientalism, or Gauguin's recording of Tahitian ways of life and Matisse's pursuit of the *odelesque* are examples of cross-cultural engagement that has some ethnographic purpose if only sub-consciously. The extent to which such works also embody the paradigm of growth and development of that same regional personality explicitly is questionable.

7.2.2. *Cultural diffusion, invasion, and colonisation*

The idea of *in situ* evolution of regional cultural distinctiveness is limited in its utility, for much change is effected by the diffusion of innovation from outside the culture either through a static population (Hagerstrand 1937), or by the transmission of innovation by invading or colonising cultures.

The first of these processes is represented in the Northwest Highlands and the Western Isles by the spread of cultural innovation along the coastal trade routes of the Irish Sea, the Atlantic seaboard and the Minches through the Bronze and Iron Ages and is well documented in the archaeological literature (Armit 1996, Henderson 2007). A further example would be the diachronous diffusion of a type of feudal system under the clan chief or laird with its attendant reorganisation not just of the society but of the entire landscape as well referred to by Dodgshon (1993).

³ A school of thought that saw the development of cultures as a neo-Darwinian response to environmental, and particularly climatic, selection. It was strongly criticised for incipient racialism.

Of more immediate relevance to this project is the second process. Here the arrival of landowners from outwith the Highlands and Islands with wealth generated from estates and industry to the south together with *colonising* lowland Scots and English sheep men brought in as tenants to realise the commercial aspirations of the new landowners had wide reaching and profound effects particularly in the early nineteenth century.

7.3. The transience of landscape.

The overriding conclusion that emerges from this consideration of landscape and time is the transience of landscape. In other words we have arrived at where we started, with Mike Crang's assertion:

"Landscape above all implies a collective shaping of the Earth over time" (Crang 1998)

In the remainder of this section the success with which some selected artists have addressed what can be termed the *elusivity* of landscape will be assessed. In coining this term it is hoped to capture not just the transience of landscape but also its timelessness. At first these terms seem to sit in antithesis to each other, but here timelessness does not imply a static fixed landscape, but rather one that has a continuity through time. It is the continuity of an ever present backdrop to human activity a stage set against which human life is acted out individually and collectively. Like a stage set it can change with each act of the play, but is always there, an active and integral part of the play, shaped by it, and performing a role in shaping the experience of actors and audience alike over time.

The first artist that I wish to cite is Karin (Mamma) Andersson⁴.

"Time and space are two different dimensions. In Karin Andersson's works they concur."
(Noring 2007)

In an interview by Swedish dramatist and director Lars Nören (2007) in December 2006 when asked how time comes into her paintings she replies:

"It is supposed to be all time at the same time, around an event, the present, the past and the future" (Andersson 2007)

By no means just a landscape painter, nonetheless Mama Andersson has produced landscape works that are inclusive of present, past and future and embody this notion of elusivity (Noring 2007).⁵

⁴ First major retrospective exhibition in Stockholm, Helsinki, and Camden Arts Centre, London (visited), August, September, November respectively, 2007

⁵ Examples would be *Modern Views* 2000 (oil on 4 panels 245 x 40 cm), *Fatherland* 1994-2004 (oil on 3 panels 245 x 61 cm), *The Blank Memories always Open from the South* (oil on canvas 280 x 80 cm), *Heimat Land* 2004 (acrylic and oil on canvas 280 x 80 cm), and the pictures that among other things evidence her love affair with birch trees, such as, *Sleeping Standing Up* 2003 (oil on panel 122 x 90 cm) and *Where my Dreams Live* 2002 (oil on panel 60 x 55 cm)

Andersson's paintings can be set in context with those of Peter Doig⁶, the second painter I wish to cite in this section. Both are part of a new phase in figurative painting and both produce work that is, as Tokyo based art critic and scholar Midori Matsui puts it:

“... a vehicle for altering perception and producing an ambiguous image which attains a collective aura through the merging of extremely private sources with impersonal ones.” (Matsui 2007)

Like Andersson, intellectual uncertainty, ambivalence, and contradictions are directions often taken in Doig's paintings (Nesbit 2008) and there is often an uncanny parallel in his and Andersson's work as for example between his *concrete cabin* series and Mama Andersson's *Sleeping Standing Up* 2003, and *Cul-de-Sac* 2006 Like Andersson the ambivalence in his paintings is about time, often indeterminate time, again *all time at the same time*.⁷ They are also about memory, his own and communal memory. Andersson and Doig also share aspects of technique as painters. Their work represents a mature yet fragile painterly quality that is both accessible and enigmatic at the same time.

These two artists convey the timelessness of the landscape, its elusiveness relative to the moment. On the other hand in his monumental *landscape* works inspired by the north German heath lands Anselm Kiefer conveys a temporal direction to change. In Section 1.3.1 a quotation from my own work on anthropogenically mediated ecological change in the Highlands sought to convey the interactions of the original native forest with the cultures which at first modified, then exploited and finally destroyed them leaving the open moor land landscape of the romantic imagination. (White et al 1992). In works like the vast paintings shown at the *Aperiatum Terra* exhibition at Mason's Yard in the spring of 2007⁸, though not locale specific, Kiefer gets close to conveying the desolate destructive legacy of deforestation in his images of open windswept heath. Indeed, the contrasting themes of the exhibition were those of destruction and re-creation, violent upheaval and spiritual renewal that underpin much of Kiefer's work.

⁶ Exhibition of Peter Doig's Paintings at Tate Britain, February – April 2008 (visited)

⁷ Examples of Peter Doig's more obviously landscape works that exemplify an elusive temporal dimension are *Hitch Hiker* 1989-90 (oil on canvas 226 x 152 cm), *Milky Way* 1989-90 (oil on canvas 204 x 152 cm), *Swamped* 1990 (oil on canvas 241 x 197 cm) and *Jetty* 1994 (oil on canvas 248 x 200) amongst his earlier pieces and *Black Curtain (towards Monkey Island)* 2004 (oil on linen 275 x 200), *Music of the Future* 2002-7 (oil on linen 330 x 200 cm), *Figures in a Red Boat* 2005-7 (oil on linen 250 x 200 cm), and *Pelican Island* 2006 (oil on canvas 120 x 70 cm)

⁸ Three epic canvases were hung to create a single installation. Each is a vast panoramic landscape whose visceral surface appears strewn with flowers or perhaps on fire, at once apocalyptic and redemptive. References are made to the poetry of Victor Hugo, the fall of Troy, the Nazi campaign on the Russian front and to the prophet Isaiah amongst others, a range of sources that suggest an ongoing pattern of veneration, degeneration and renewal.

Section 7. **Landscape and Time: Conclusions**

Many artists have been able to convey the temporal nature of landscape whether it be the representation in some way of the landscape as palimpsest, as in many of the original works produced in support of this project, or merely to convey the ambiguity inherent in attempts to view the landscape at a moment in time. Here the temporal elusiveness of the landscape as an entity embodying past, present and future in a single instant has captivated some artists.

What emerges less successfully in art is the ability to convey explanation, to deconstruct the palimpsest illuminating how and why earlier imprints on the landscape came to be overwritten by later marks made by more recent human activity. In other words the facts of sequent occupance can emerge in a painting, but process is more difficult to treat directly, though it may be implied in a work.