

## Constructed Landscapes

Landscape photography, much like the tradition within painting, presents us with a composed and conventionalised picture of the countryside as though it were evidence of something elementary, something external to human invention. Of course, this is not always the case. Debates and creative practices interrogating the nature of landscape have moved us on, and the archetypal landscape of hills and lakes, hemmed in by side-screens of arching trees and ruinous forms, have been corralled together into the category of cliché. For some, this is an irrelevance and such landscapes remain affirmative of something deeply important. For others, however, such photographs are facile confection and an anathema to serious photographic practice. Indeed, we might say that within contemporary engagements with landscape, it is the deadpan style that now rules supreme.

Yet even among those of us who see the cliché for what it is, it is hard to deny that the invocation of nature as a timeless idyll is difficult to resist. Its invitation to romanticise the view, to simultaneous look inward as well as outward, is compelling. Our general susceptibility to this is seemingly proven by the plethora of such visual expressions that still surround us in current day media culture. In such places as birthday cards, screensavers, food packaging, and a whole range of TV genres, the guilty pleasure of the picturesque lives on.

It is at this confluence of the reasoned grasp of the mapped cultural terrain and the lingering desire for the romantic landscape that the body of work in *The Image Awry* declares its meaning. The images speak of the way in which landscape is imbued with cultural resonances – national identity, collective memory, social division and exclusion – yet remains an irrepressible force in the realm of the imaginary. Landscape, we might say, is nebulous. Like a rainbow, it can never be reached, disappearing as one approaches it. In reading the work, we might immediately connect the employment of digital construction (through which these non-actual landscapes are brought into being) with a disregard for *genius loci* – the sense of place that drives a poetic purview of physical terrain.

In the work, cherished landscapes are something to be quantified in the same way that an ethnographer might decode a totemic artefact. Of more interest than the perceived natural beauty are the mental processes that endlessly resuscitate the romantic landscape, and keep it entwined with desire and an affirmation of self. Turning for instance to the series *Landscape with Ruin*, which features abandoned and dilapidated petrol stations, the ruinous beauty that is presented to us feels a little tainted when we learn that these are digital constructs. Nonetheless, the allusion to ruin as a motif within picturesque landscape remains affecting. As far back as the 18th century, the ruin was felt to be evocative of nature as a reclaiming force, with a pleasing melancholy being found in nature's eventual annulment of all human endeavour.

The 'gas station', in contrast in this, took on an entirely different meaning during its emergence as a cultural symbol. Long before anxiety over toxic by-products and diminishing oil reserves, the gas station was a potent signifier of freedom. This use of

the gas station is easily found in Hollywood cinema but a more unusual treatment of the filling station and the freedom it offered is found in Shell's television advertising campaign of the 1950s, where the poet John Betjeman spoke of the pleasures of exploring the British countryside with the aid of Shell's network of fuel stops. Shell also funded a series of tour guides, which a number of renowned artists and writers (including Betjemen) contributed to.

In the current day, such an optimistic, view of motoring has passed. In addition to anxieties over costly, non-sustainable energy use, a streamlining of the industry has placed many filling stations beyond the point of economic viability and the gas station ruin is now a not uncommon sight. In the series, a digital transplanting of the ruins to a remoter landscape links their meaning to the original picturesque motif. Perhaps ultimately they signify that an era is reaching its end and the technology of oil powered transportation may soon be viewed with romantic affection.

In the *Climbing Frames* series, there is a suggestion of the rural environment being invaded by structures from the inner city. The climbing frames, each shaped as a form of transport, are rusting and antiquated and seem slightly at odds with their countryside setting. In actuality, the frames were photographed in urban environments (mainly London) and digitally transferred to the fields and villages of Kent. Such forms of recreation are probably a familiar sight to anyone who grew up in the 1960s and 70s and spent their time in municipal play areas of the British townscape. Now eradicated from the more safety-conscious playgrounds of today, the tubular steel frames of the postwar years have been condemned to history, relics of the past that encapsulate an earlier, perhaps more innocent, perception of the world.

In their day, the steel-framed jet planes and rocket ships offered fantasies of escape and adventure. The ability of children to use the frames to play out narratives drawn from movies and television could be said to reveal the powers of youthful imagination, given that many of the inner-city areas where the frames were located were far less expressive of escape and 'open road' opportunity. For many working class Londoners, the Kent countryside was an achievable place of escape, but often only as a temporary one: for many, the yearly exodus to the hop farms of Kent served as an enjoyable working holiday.

Paradoxically, many of the movies fuelling ideas of escape and adventure were rooted in a sense of protection and exclusion. British sci-fi movies of the postwar years have been linked to a fear of outside threats. Movies such as *Quatermass II* (1957) and *Children of the Damned* (1964) point to anxieties over changes taking place in the modern world: a fear that technology or immigration might bring about irrevocable change to life within the green and pleasant land.

Allusion to Otherness in cinematic narrative is found also in the *Bosson Heads* series. Here a peculiar form of bric-a-brac object, speaks of a landscape of exotic fantasy. Intricately modelled plaster wall plaques, popular in British homes in the 1960s and 70s, depict the heads of national and ethnic types such as 'Syrian' and 'Kurd', and their

manufacture was likely to have taken inspiration from the exotic alterity found in movies such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).

Science fiction and invisible barriers in the landscape are brought to mind in a later body of work entitled *3G Hinterland*, which probes the dead zones in the cell phone network. The videos and photographs that make up this series represent actual rather than invented landscapes, but the preoccupation with dead zones, where even a simple call on a cell phone cannot be made, conjures up an idea of rural enclaves under threat from external forces.

The work provides a survey of the 'remoter' regions of the English landscape at the end of the 3G era – anticipating subsequent waves of cell phone technologies that will eventually lead to full UK signal coverage. As well as putting us in mind of science fiction, the work connects with ideas of early landscape painting. The original Picturesque movement of the 18th century has been discussed as a reaction to the industrial revolution, and this conception of picturesque as anti-industrial and resistant to change can be traced through to present day photographic forms. Images of the dead zone environs express an atmosphere of 'wilderness' but at the same time mark out topographical information – the tracts of land where the communications infrastructure is in need of improvement. In the work, the dead zones take on an almost mystical significance as areas where technological communication breaks down and some kind of alternative state seems to be represented. In this way, although the work avoids digital construction, it remains a coherent part of a larger oeuvre where landscape is treated as mythical, divisive, yet somehow irresistible.