

Absence/Presence

“The eerie ... is constituted by a failure of absence or a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs when there is something present where there should be nothing, or there is nothing present when there should be something.”

Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016)

The strange atmospheres created by the unexpected appearance or absence of figures and the uncanny intensity that can radiate from inanimate objects seem to bear out Mark Fisher’s definition of the eerie. This is apparent in the patch of suburban woodland to which George Shaw has repeatedly returned, always devoid of people but haunted by the detritus they leave behind. In *The Danger of Death* an electricity substation lurks at the end of a dark and empty lane and it is hard to know whether it or the encroaching vegetation is the more incongruous presence. In Tristram Hillier’s *Glastonbury Fen* it is the discarded shirt and spade and their missing owner that lends an extra degree of oddness and threat to the bulbous tree forms lining the track.

The inclusion of figures can have a similarly unsettling effect. The inhabitants of Carel Weight's country lanes are part of some unseen drama that speaks of isolation and exclusion. In Ingrid Pollard's *Pastoral Interlude* the source of invisible hostility is the perception of the black walker being out of place and unwelcome in the countryside.

There is also the impact of incongruous, unexpected features such as the wall emerging from the mist, apparently in the middle of nowhere, in Jason Orton's *Staddon Heights*. Jeremy Gardiner's *Pegwell Bay, Kent, A Recollection* takes us into the realms of hauntology and lost futures: a coastal landscape is marred by an empty expanse of tarmac and its painted markings: remnants of a hoverport that once embodied a bright future to be ushered in by the latest technology, but now an obsolete relic.

Fisher also saw the concept of agency as a key component of the eerie: the idea that an unseen presence is influencing our experiences. This is a feature of some of the most successful 'weird' literature such as Algernon

Blackwood's story *The Willows* in which two travellers realise they have intruded upon a place where the boundary between our world and another, inhabited by inconceivably powerful and alien beings, has dissolved. The idea of 'thin' places, portals to the spirit world, was very much part of the pagan Celtic concept of the universe and perhaps a residual belief in the influence of such sinister agencies still lingers on.

In the artwork included in this exhibition none of this is made explicit. It may be suggested that something strange is afoot but the cause is left to our imaginations. In some cases the artist may not have consciously intended any such effects, rather it is the experiences and impressions of the viewer that invokes the uncanny.

Tristram Hillier (1905-1983)

Glastonbury Fen

Oil on board, 1980

The Ingram Collection of Modern British and Contemporary Art

Glastonbury Fen is one of Hillier's last paintings inspired by the Somerset Levels close to his home in the village of East Pennard, where he had lived since being invalided out of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve during the Second World War.

As a young man he had been inspired by surrealism and its influence is seen in the subtle alterations to reality that Hillier uses to create unsettling, dream-like atmospheres. *Glastonbury Fen* conveys an eerie sense of stillness. The pollarded willow trees with swollen forms like clenched fists dominate the desolate landscape. They lean threateningly across the lane toward the discarded jumper and spade, the owner having vanished. These abandoned, unexplained signs of human activity together with the broken gates suggest something sinister is afoot.

Paul Nash (1889-1946)

The Tide, Dymchurch

Lithograph, 1920

Southampton City Art Gallery

Between 1919 and 1923 Nash produced a series of paintings and prints based on the Dymchurch sea wall.

The Tide, Dymchurch takes a viewpoint above the sea, emphasising the dark waves breaking against the beach's wooden groynes. As a child Nash had almost drowned on a seaside visit and later said he associated spring and winter seas '*with cold and cruel waters, usually in a threatening mood, pounding and rattling along the shore*'.

In his autobiography Nash described the period after the First World War as the 'struggles of a war artist without a war'. Perhaps there is also a connection between the assault of the waves on these coastal defences and the scant protection offered by the trenches against the onslaught of artillery and machine gun fire.

Keith Vaughan (1912-1977)

School House, Yorkshire

Gouache, black ink, crayon and wax resist, 1945

The Ingram Collection of Modern British and
Contemporary Art

School House, Yorkshire was painted towards the end of the Second World War when Keith Vaughan was working as an Orderly Room clerk and assistant German interpreter at Prisoner-of-War Camp Number 83 in Malton, Yorkshire. Vaughan, the only conscientious objector employed in the camp, worked steadily when not on duty, making do with available materials, seeking subjects on or near the camp and working up his sketches on his return.

Outside the sinister looking school house boys in drab grey uniforms linger, two embroiled in confrontation, while another walks home; the drama seems about to unfold. The restricted palette of Vaughan's gouache with wax and ink with its range of muted hues and variations in tone contributes to the feeling of unease.

John Minton (1917-1957)

Recollection of Wales

Ink and bodycolour on paper, 1944

British Council Collection

Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War John Minton registered as a conscientious objector. His exemption from military service was rejected at a tribunal and he joined the Pioneer Corps in 1941. He was discharged in June 1943 on health grounds, although his homosexuality appears to have been a major factor in this.

The evocative and frenetic landscape of *Recollection of Wales* reflects something of the tensions Minton was wrestling with. This wild North Wales landscape shares some of the mystical qualities he admired in Samuel Palmer's work, but it is no pastoral idyll. Notable is the solitary androgenous figure, classically draped, standing as if embedded in the tree. He/she, with hair lifted by the wind, looks towards distant peaks while surrounded by writhing, dense foliage that menacingly frames the scene.

John Piper (1902-1992)

Portland Foreshore

Oil on canvas, 1948

Southampton City Art Gallery

During the Second World War Piper was asked to make drawings of Windsor Castle and enjoyed depicting the royal residence against stormy summer skies. King George VI commented that *'you seem to have very bad luck with your weather Mr Piper'*. The 'louring clouds that belong to Romantic painting' perhaps reflected the sombre mood of wartime and became a recurring feature of his landscapes and architectural studies.

During the 1940s Piper also discovered the Isle of Portland's abandoned stone quarries and felt that to cross the causeway from the mainland was to enter another world. He was impressed by the huge blocks of stone that still littered the ground but there is a sense of desolation in this landscape - once the scene of purposeful activity that supported a whole community, but now marked only by the ghostly presence of the stones and deserted buildings.

Jeremy Gardiner (b.1957)

Pegwell Bay, Kent, A Recollection

Acrylic and jesmonite on poplar panel, 2019

Courtesy of The Nine British Art, London

I painted this picture as a homage to William Dyce and his painting *Pegwell Bay, Kent: A Recollection of October 5th, 1858* (c.1857-60). I have visited the site of Dyce's painting over a number of years and became particularly interested in the approach markings of a derelict Hoverport around the corner, in the next bay. This Hoverport came and went in the space of twenty years; between 1969 and 1987, showing how rapidly coastal locations can change.

My painting looks back in time to the site of Dyce's picture. I show a momentary effect of dramatic light as the sunlight turns the cliffs to a dazzling white against a dark, threatening sky. The chalk cliff face is some 70 million years old, yet in a short time, perhaps only 500 years, it will have disappeared, washed away by the action of the wind and waves.

Jeremy Gardiner

Laurence Edwards (b.1967)

Lacuna

Bronze, 2019

Courtesy of the artist

Repeatedly tying, threading this fragmented head to the ground, felt like the sewing of the self to a site. The resulting object spoke paradoxically of something light leaving and something forever tied down.

Laurence Edwards

Sara Hannant (b.1964)

Recover / Fissure

Archival pigment print, 2021

Courtesy of the artist

Force Fields

Occult forces of nature are evoked in antique magic lantern slides of British landscapes. Ethereal energy fields appear to be emanating like auras from trees and rocks. These picturesque views are seemingly inhabited by psychic phenomena. The products of once frozen photographic moments are enlivened through air and moisture into a process of transformation. Decay and disintegration merge with the image on the glass forming patterns shaped like roots, leaves and ectoplasmic fissures, reclaiming the mechanical capture to become a sensory language that is used to describe a newly imagined and haunted landscape. Some of the marks appear corrosive pointing to an intrusion or imbalance with the natural world alluding to our environmentally challenged existence.

Sara Hannant

George Shaw (b.1966)

The Danger of Death

Humbrol enamel on board, 2013-14

Courtesy of Global Art Holdings Limited

Just on the outskirts, before the countryside really got going, sat the electricity substation. Set back off the road down a muddy lane among the trees it hummed quietly to itself. Despite the tracks of cars and vans and numerous fly-tippings no one appeared to come or go. It would have been buildings like this that were responsible for lighting our houses and for turning them off in frequent 70s power-cuts.

Perhaps it was the public information films telling of the dangers of such places. One such film even had the hooded figure of death lurking as children played innocently. The signs on the outside of the building told us all that death lived there. In the end such warnings are always invitations; we can all be Pied Pipered into its doors. And it always seemed that this building of death consumed more than it produced.

George Shaw

Carel Weight (1908-1997)

Deep Lane

Oil on board, 1974

Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

Carel Weight was drawn to the human condition likening his method of painting to the writing of the great Victorian novelist Charles Dickens who created his characters and then let them run away with him. Weight's skill lies in his ability, through careful placement of his characters in their settings, to tell a story in his distinctive, imaginative way.

Deep Lane is infused with a sense of mystery as to what human or spiritual drama may already have taken place or might lie in wait around its shady corners. The changing light adds to the disquieting atmosphere: the tranquil veneer of the leafy lane belying the immanence of danger. Weight completed *Deep Lane* shortly after retiring from his post as Professor of Painting at the Royal College of Art. Like much of his work it was founded on and inspired by memories of his lonely and unsettled childhood.

Jason Orton (b.1967)

Staddon Heights, Devon

Photograph, 2018

Courtesy of the artist

The 300 metre long buttressed wall is a remnant of one of the integrated military landscapes built during the mid-nineteenth century. In sea mist, the wall creates an uneasy feeling. Without any historical context it might not be entirely clear to the viewer what the structure is, and why it was built in the first place. And even with the historical context, there could be other reasons why the wall was built. There is a narrative around the wall that is somewhat unconvincing.

I'm aware of the tradition of the picturesque and the pastoral in British landscape art, but the photographs I make often create a sense of unease, rather than comfort. The process of making these photographs is a multi-layered one, often shaped by the interrelationship between geography, history, and memory.

Jason Orton

Stanley Donwood (b.1968)

Hanging Hill

Screenprint with graphite powder on copper leaf, 2021

Courtesy of the Whistleblower Gallery

This is a drawing of an ancient track that winds its way down from Hanging Hill, one of the flat-topped heights that circle the city of Bath. The etymology of the name is obscure - might it have been the site of a gibbet, for surely hills do not hang? Well, around here they do, on cold mornings when mists fill the valleys and the hilltops appear as islands in a sea of gently rolling fog. Although I suppose that it is much more likely that the more prosaic naming might be more likely. The decaying corpse of a hanged human being would certainly be visible from afar on the top of this lonely plateau. And people have trod this way for many centuries, stumbling over tree roots, making their ways with intent, good or ill.

Stanley Donwood

Ghost Box

'The Gone Away' by Belbury Poly

Promotional Poster No. 1, 2019

Design by Julian House

The Gone Away was an album of electronic music that had strong folk influences. It's themed around fairy folklore and reported fairy encounters. Julian and I plundered old fairy tale books for reference, painstakingly making digital decoupage of various fantastic characters. The process and the early results instantly put us in mind of the Cottingley Fairies - the famous 1920s hoax that took in Arthur Conan Doyle and many others.

The fairies of folklore and modern sighting are far weirder and more sinister than these Edwardian fancies but when Julian took our accidental collage and added some plant silhouette photos he'd created, an image of the moon and a de-focused photo of rain on a windowpane, it seemed to summon up a world that was instantly familiar to me as composer of the music.

Jim Jupp

Ghost Box Records Sleeve Design

Ghost Box specialises in what used to be called concept albums. It has always been our intention to make them feel episodic, with each release part of a greater whole. Julian House is responsible for all our design work which gives our records a sense of continuity. The sleeve art and digital art always feature a catalogue number and the label's name and logo displayed as prominently as the recording artist's name. This enhances the idea that releases are interrelated and somehow from the same imagined or parallel world.

Jim Jupp

Co-founder of the Ghost Box record label,
who makes music as Belbury Poly.

Francis Mosley (b.1957)

The Tractate Middoth

Hand-coloured etching, 2007, illustration for

M.R. James Collected Ghost Stories (Folio Society)

Courtesy of the artist

Ghost stories are nearly always about a disturbing breakthrough from the past. They are often set in eerie places where the past is more tangible. Something is more often felt rather than seen and in terms of imagery it is in the liminal spaces at the edges of night where atmosphere is most evocative. A ghost story needs an otherworldly atmosphere. The rich blacks and textures of etching and aquatint help to suggest this.

The Tractate Middoth is the tale of two wills made by an eccentric clergyman. The first names his nephew John Eldred as the beneficiary but a later one, hidden in an old Hebrew book, leaves everything to his niece. Eldred is determined to destroy the disinheriting will and is shown clutching the book, anxious to remove the offending document. He begins to tear the page but is engulfed in a poisonous mass of blackness ...

Francis Mosley

Jeremy Millar (b.1970)

A Firework for W. G. Sebald

Four framed colour photographs, text upon wall, 2005

Courtesy of the artist

Chapter four of W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* opens with a photograph of the lighthouse in Southwold, a town on the Suffolk coast to which the author walked from Lowestoft, further along the coast, in August 1992. One can also find the same lighthouse in the opening scene of Peter Greenaway's 1988 film, *Drowning by Numbers*, which was made in the town and its environs.

A meditation upon death, also, the film concerns the amorous entangling of a local coroner, Madgett, with three women — a mother and her two daughters — whose husbands all drown in quick succession, and in mysterious circumstances. Sharing Madgett's inquisitive nature, and his delight in arcane information and games of bewildering complexity, is his son Smut, who accompanies the coroner on the increasingly compromised investigation.

One of Smut's more extraordinary rituals — of which there are many — is to mark each death that he encounters with the lighting of a firework, whether it is a drowned husband or an animal in a hedgerow; even his own eventual suicide.

In memory — and celebration — of the extraordinary life and work of W.G. Sebald, a firework was lit by the side of the A146 in Framingham Pigot, the place in which he was killed in a car crash on 14 December 2001.

George Shaw (b.1966)

The Boys All Shout for Tomorrow

Humbrol enamel on board, 2014

Private Collection

The title comes from The Jam's 1980 single *Going Underground*. Like most kids at the time I didn't really have any idea what the song was about and even what the lyrics were. I thought it might have something to do with nuclear war and survival bunkers probably because the video had a recurring image of a mushroom cloud. During the late 70s and early 80s the Protect and Survive public information films haunted my world inside and out; the home would become a tomb and the landscape would kill you. The end of the world was coming in a matter-of-fact kind of way like the ice cream man. Of course the end of the world is always just around the corner. Or in this case the end of the road appeared at the end of our road. It is simply that some workmen have dug a hole to lay a cable or fix a pipe but its sudden appearance and disappearance offered up a glimpse of something commonly out of view, something just beyond, a tangible monument to what we may have come from and return to.

George Shaw

George Shaw (b.1966)

The Heart of the Wood

Humbrol enamel on canvas, 2015-16

Courtesy of Anthony Wilkinson Gallery, London

The woods and the fields that backed on to where we used to live were never empty though I rarely saw anyone there. The promise of solitude and romantic escape that I packed on my ventures outside was always just over the hill, just 'round the next bend or turning, just behind the thicket further off the path. And just at that moment, in that moment, there would be the crisp packet, the butts, the crushed can of McEwans, pages of porn, the carved initials, a muffled giggle, a whistle, mumbling, the twig cracking, leaves rustling, the whiff of an unfamiliar fag, burning maybe, solvent, fragments of furniture, half a carpet, the home inside out, some broken branches leant up against a tree, a sock, scuffed soil, a circle of bricks, ash and the remains of something, something that looks like a warning or something that looks like a burial. Something for tomorrow and something for yesterday. The footsteps I hear are mine, behind me, out of sight as always, tip toeing through time.

George Shaw

Stanley Donwood (b.1968)

Ness – The Long Unbroken Line

Ink, copper, silver and 23ct gold leaf on paper, 2018

Courtesy of the Whistleblower Gallery

The drawings of Orford Ness I made for the book called *Ness* were an attempt to capture on paper the slow and beautifully melancholy decay of the military-industrial architectural detritus left on the lonely, windswept shingle spit that lies, longshore drift-wise, along the coast of Suffolk. The location and conditions of the Ness made it 'ideal' for the secretive actions of the Cold War military, who decamped swiftly following the 'cessation of hostilities' towards the end of the last century, leaving behind mysterious, puzzling and also deadly ruins. Seabirds whirl and cry in the grey air above what look like nothing other than the inexplicable remains of a vanished civilisation.

Stanley Donwood

Fay Godwin (1931-2005)

Pill Box near Appledore Royal Military Canal

Silver print, 1977

British Council Collection

Fay Godwin was best known for the stark simplicity of her sombre, elegiac black and white photographs which documented in unsentimental ways the changing British landscape. This photograph reflects her interest in the marks left behind by people and events. A relic from the Second World War it was built in 1940 following the fall of France when it was feared that south east England would be invaded by the Germans.

Godwin's misty, atmospheric composition shows her willingness to wait for the exact weather and light to capture the long-abandoned structure. The gun loopholes resemble the eyes of some strange being engaged in surveillance, watching the unsuspecting passers-by. A haunting, mystical presence, it is testament to her aim of taking photographs that leave something to the imagination.

Ingrid Pollard (b.1953)

Pastoral Interlude, No. 4

Hand-coloured gelatin silver print and text, 1988

Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

Ingrid Pollard took her first photographs on family holidays. Since the 1980s she has developed a reputation for photographic work documenting the lives and creativity of black people in Britain. The *Pastoral Interlude* series from 1988 focuses on rural landscapes but confronts often unspoken prejudices by raising the hidden histories of colonialism and slavery. It also challenges the twin misconceptions of the countryside as exclusively white and black people only being imagined in urban settings. The motivation to explore this theme stemmed from her own experiences: *'I used to go with friends to the Lake District. I wouldn't see another black person for a week, and you would notice. It was hard. My white friends would be going to relax, and it would create anxiety for me. I appreciate the countryside, but it wasn't particularly relaxing. I just wanted to do something about that.'*

Ingrid Pollard (b.1953)

Pastoral Interlude, No. 5

Hand-coloured gelatin silver print and text, 1988

Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

The hand-coloured photographs recall early twentieth century tinted holiday postcards and all their associations with a restful stay in the country, but instead these images reveal the feelings of isolation, exclusion and threat experienced by a lone black walker. In several of the photographs the figure is physically separated from the scenery by a wall, fence or railings. As the series progresses Pollard's texts move from unease to an outright fear of violence. She draws a parallel with the brutality meted out to slaves and reminds us that their exploitation once supported landowners who shaped parts of the countryside we know today.