

## **The Dying of the Light – Atmospheric Effect**

“To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. “

Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756)

The effects of light, shade, weather, the time of day and the season make their own contribution to unsettling atmospheres. In his writings on the sublime Edmund Burke suggested that ‘obscurity’ or darkness in a scene increases our discomfort. This is echoed in Mark Fisher’s idea that ‘The eerie concerns the unknown, when knowledge is achieved, the eerie disappears’. Freud would tell us that this is also reinforced by the return of night terrors from childhood.

The encroaching gloom of dusk and the spectral light of the moon lend themselves to eerie effects seen in the ghostly tree forms of Joseph Webb’s *Pippin Lane* or Blaze Cyan’s *Lady Down, Tisbury*.

Artificial light can be a comfort during the hours of darkness but there is also the question of what might be revealed by unnatural brightness intruding into the mysteries of the night. The unease that such effects can inspire can be sensed in Gertrude Hermes' *Through the Windscreen* and Stanley Donwood's *Dark Hedges*.

Obscurity is also generated by rain, dark clouds, mist, fog and shadow. In Leslie Ward's *Storm in Stone Wall Country* the glimpses of human habitation are dwarfed by threatening hills and clouds. In *Joyce's Pool*, Kurt Jackson has just enough light to reveal the surface of the water and suggest the trunks of trees on the bank beyond, but it is the intense darkness between that creates a feeling of mysterious expectancy. Burke would surely have approved of Paul Kershaw's *Lud's Church*, where towering cliffs flank a natural chasm and loom over the figure below, plunging his pathway into darkness.

Even the sun can play its part. In Algernon Newton's *A Gleam of Sunlight* the dark trees that frame the view seem to bar the way to the golden valley beyond. In Richard Eurich's *Stormy Morning, Mid-Wales* some brightness

escapes the clouds only to draw attention to the watchful and sinister presence of the house.

Winter is naturally the season of the eerie: a time when the sun is lacking, days are short and colour has drained from the landscape. The chill that grips the land and the absence of life suggested by naked trees and shrivelled plants are reminders of mortality. This is powerfully evoked in Alan Reynold's *Bleak November* with its bare hop poles and skeletal vines. John Stewart Collis wrote of working in the woods in winter: 'I used to grope my way ... into the deeper darkness ... peering round with something of the expectancy and the fear of a man in a haunted house'.

## **Elizabeth Magill (b.1959)**

### *Outlying (2)*

Oil and mixed media on canvas, 2021

Courtesy of Anthony Wilkinson Gallery, London

‘Sometimes a landscape seems less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which ... struggles achievements and accidents take place ... landmarks are no longer geographical but also biographical and personal’, wrote John Berger in his last book, *Landscapes: John Berger on Art*.

Landscape in my work alludes to an exterior view, perhaps shaped by an interior one, or vice versa an inner landscape being shaped by an outer one. I navigate this terrain with an awareness of what it means to make art today. All around our globe movements of people, political decisions, climatic changes, shape and alter the land and its inhabitants in profound ways. With this in mind and within the language of painting I try to incorporate our histories, our fears and joys. I hint at beauty as a conveyor of hope but also to heighten what I perceive as an imminent and prevailing sense of loss. *Elizabeth Magill*

## **Graham Sutherland (1903-1980)**

### *Red Landscape*

Oil on canvas, 1942

Southampton City Art Gallery

During the 1930s the wild and dramatic landscape of west Pembrokeshire was where Sutherland said he began to learn painting, fascinated by what he described as its 'exultant strangeness'. He continued to make annual visits until the outbreak of war, captivated by the magical and transforming light. Sutherland was particularly preoccupied with darkness, which he employed to effect in *Red Landscape*, such that it appears blood-drenched, contributing to an atmosphere of imminent violence or impending apocalyptic disaster.

The painting reflects Sutherland's technique of paraphrasing what he saw and experienced emotionally, translating its impact rather than merely copying nature. He depicts the distinctive profile of Carn Llidi, transforming the hill into a twisted, tormented presence rising up to do battle with humanity.

## **Alan Reynolds (1926-2014)**

### *Bleak November*

Watercolour and gouache on paper, 1955-56

The Ingram Collection of Modern British and Contemporary Art

Alan Reynolds' early work was influenced by his interest in the shapes and forms of the landscape, particularly fields and hills. His Neo-Romantic landscapes of the 1950s owe much to Samuel Palmer's Kent with its cornfields, orchards and hop-poles.

*Bleak November* shows a hop garden in late autumn set against a mottled, foreboding sky. The stylised and spectral composition is indebted to Paul Klee and his '*semi-geometrical signs for natural phenomena*'. This influence and the sombre palette add to the disquieting atmosphere. The bare hop poles rise like spears embedded in the ground, ready to battle an unseen enemy. The low perspective makes the ghostly dandelion leaves appear enormous as they reach into the unwelcoming landscape.

## **Bryan Wynter (1915-1975)**

### *Foreshore with Gulls*

Watercolour and bodycolour on paper, 1949

British Council Collection

Bryan Wynter moved to Cornwall in June 1945, renting The Carn, a near-derelict cottage on the hill above Zennor, which he later bought. Located on Penwith Moors it had a marked effect upon his work, resulting in many small gouaches of Cornish landscapes and animals.

Wynter's approach was for a short period influenced by his visit to the Georges Braque exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1946. *Foreshore with Gulls*, with its strange angular shapes and viewpoint, defies easy categorisation combining elements of Cubism with a Neo-Romantic style to evoke a dark melodramatic scene. The hooded gull, with watchful eyes and long razor beak, perches menacingly on the anchor. The peace of the cottage occupants could be shattered should the predatory gulls, with their piercing calls, swoop down to forage on the foreshore.

## **Richard Eurich (1903-1992)**

*Stormy Morning, Mid-Wales*

Oil on canvas, 1969

The Ingram Collection of Modern British and Contemporary Art

Richard Eurich admitted to being deeply moved by influences from his formative years. Like the great Romantic 'painter of light' J.M.W. Turner, whom he had admired since his youth, he was fascinated by passing light and shadow. Eurich was often drawn to the sea but the beauty of the landscape in all its moods also caught his attention.

This atmospheric landscape painted near Newtown, is full of latent drama. His command of technique and intense, dream-like vision creates a feeling that something out of the ordinary is occurring behind the red brick walls of the austere looking country house. The play of light and blustery blue-grey clouds hang ominously, threatening to deluge the landscape, adding to the unease.



## **Algernon Newton (1880-1968)**

### *A Gleam of Sunlight*

Oil on canvas, 1966

Tate: Presented by the Trustees of the Chantrey Bequest

Algernon Newton's paintings of the streets and waterways of London are largely devoid of people and focus on the capital's slightly seedy backwaters, all bathed in sunlight that fails to lessen the atmosphere of emptiness and neglect. Andrew Graham-Dixon has suggested that Newton's haunting canvases reflect traumatic experiences from schooldays and married life, but particularly during his service with the army during the First World War.

Newton's portrayals of rural landscapes carry a similar burden. They are marked by the rich light of morning and evening but there is little warmth in the paintings.

Shadows dominate *A Gleam of Sunlight*. The golden fields in the valley beyond are bathed in sunshine but the viewpoint is in deep shade and the trees flanking the opening, with their unnaturally dense foliage, seem to bar the way. Almost all of Newton's landscapes seem to be marked by a subtle and incipient threat.

**Stanley Donwood (b.1968)**

*Dark Hedges*

Pencil on paper, 2021

Courtesy of the Whistleblower Gallery

Usually, switching on a light makes a place less frightening, more homely, and chases away the shadows. Here though, switching on the car headlights has the opposite effect, granting a strange and tortured life to the boughs of trees, a thousand places for anything or anyone to hide, concealing more than it reveals. It's just a country lane in Ireland. It's just a little lane, lined with trees. It's just night. Just dark.

*Stanley Donwood*

## **Kurt Jackson (b.1961)**

### *Joyce's Pool*

Oil on canvas, 2006

Courtesy of the artist

Our ancestors saw water as a precious and sacred resource and the birth of a river, the first trickle and flow, the spring, well, bog, was a holy site. Many of these places have kept their special ambience – a combination of the holy, the wild, the spiritual; nature as sacred. Joyce's Pool is no different; a quiet corner of the countryside, surrounded by agriculture but remaining secluded and isolated. This small body of water, dark beneath the trees of her wooded banks; a mysterious place, hiding her subterranean springs and secrets. But this silence, this disquietness, the over lit scene hides other concerns of our twenty-first century lives. This source is a collecting point, a sink to drain into. In our over-treated, over-sprayed industrialised agricultural country these precious hollows are being emptied of life – too often they now appear empty because they are empty; the nitrates and herbicides in their deadly solutions taking their toll.

*Kurt Jackson*

**Blaze Cyan (b.1969)**

*Lady Down, Tisbury*

Etching, 2017

Courtesy of the artist

Lady Down is a small area of woodland in Wiltshire between Tisbury and Chilmark, and this work was created after a winter walk in howling winds through the wood one Christmas. The trees swayed perilously above and the light was dim, the whole wood seemed to come alive and speak its own language.

*Blaze Cyan*

## **Edgar Holloway (1914-2008)**

*Wolstonbury*

Etching, 1990, signed and numbered 4/50

Stuart Southall Collection

Edgar Holloway's mystical etching of *Wolstonbury* was based on one of his bold, lyrical watercolours completed in 1982. Wolstonbury is close to Ditchling Common in the South Downs where the deeply religious Holloway had moved to join the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic in the late 1940s. His keen observation and technical expertise were put to good use in this etching with its wide-open vista looking to the isolated chalk spur, Wolstonbury Hill rising in the distance.

The dramatic lighting evokes a dream-like world. The mesh of rays radiating out from the low sun highlight the large, uprooted, twisted tree stump contributing to the heightened atmosphere. Holloway eliminates the unnecessary details of the scene to capture the essence and 'mood' of the ancient Neolithic site.

## Joseph Webb (1908-1962)

*Pippin Lane*

Etching, 1938, final state

Stuart Southall Collection

Much of Webb's work was in the pastoral tradition, although his interest in dramatic lighting effects and the deep shadow created by low sun or moonlight sometimes conveys an otherworldly atmosphere. *Pippin Lane* is a notable example where the moon throws ghostly light on blossom-laden apple trees lining a rutted track. It is by turns beautiful and uncanny. The works generally seen as Webb's masterpieces are *Rat Barn* (1928) and *Dream Barn* (1929), imaginative etchings of huge, eerily deserted buildings that recall Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*.

The artist Kenneth Woodbridge recalled the 'strange brooding atmosphere' of Webb's studio and the artist's interests in Theosophy and occult mysteries: '*I listened to him talking of faraway things: astrology, planetary chains: ancient races of men who lived before the dawn of history, in lost Atlantis*'.

## **Gertrude Hermes (1901-1983)**

*Through the Windscreen*

Wood engraving, 1929

Julian Francis Collection

Gertrude Hermes was one of the leading lights of the inter-war wood engraving revival. *Through the Windscreen* is a sophisticated study of artificial lighting that recalls the eerie effects achieved in German Expressionist prints and films. Fences and telegraph poles suggest the ordering hand of humankind and the car, with its electric lights and stylish mascot, represents technological advancement and speed. Yet there is a sense of such things invading the timeless rhythms of nature and an air of expectancy as to what those gleaming lights might reveal lurking among the trees and undergrowth. The mechanical intrusion is fleeting and in a few moments darkness and quiet will reign once again.

## **Leslie Moffat Ward (1888-1979)**

### *Storm in Stone Wall Country*

Lithograph, 1943, third state, signed and numbered 11

Stuart Southall Collection

Leslie Ward's quest to discover quirky and overlooked old buildings, bustling quaysides and expanses of unspoilt country took him across England. For landscape works he preferred the wide-open spaces of Dorset heathland, the lakes and fells of Cumbria or the beaches and estuaries of the south coast.

In *Storm in Stone Wall Country* a fleeting patch of sunlight plucks the winding form of a drystone wall from the surrounding gloom. Incredibly fine mark-making reveals the foreground furrows, patchwork fields and low cloud clinging to hills that loom over the valley. The unnaturally deep darkness and driving rain suggest the awesome power of nature. It is perhaps the strong diagonals and darkness that recall the lithographs made 25 years earlier by Paul Nash and Christopher Nevinson to depict the nightmarish mudscapes of the Western Front.



## **CASE CAPTIONS:**

### **Ghost Box**

*'Peel Away the Ivy' by The Pattern Forms*

Promotional Poster, 2016

Design by Julian House

### **Ghost Box**

*'The Owl's Map' by Belbury Poly*

Album sleeve and inner sleeve, 2006

Design by Julian House

### **Ghost Box**

*'From an Ancient Star' by Belbury Poly*

Compact Disc, 2008

Design by Julian House

### **Ghost Box**

*'The Belbury Tales' by Belbury Poly*

Compact Disc, 2011

Design by Julian House

## **Ghost Box**

*'The Willows' by Belbury Poly*

Compact Disc, 2004

Design by Julian House

## **Ghost Box**

*'The Gone Away' by Belbury Poly*

Compact Disc, 2020

Design by Julian House

## **Ghost Box**

*'As the Crow Flies' by The Advisory Circle*

Compact Disc, 2011

Design by Julian House

## **Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988)**

*Oread*

Watercolour, 1970

Private Collection

In 1939 Colquhoun's began her life-long experiments with automatism. She learned from European surrealists, such as Roberto Matta who *'was using automatism in an attempt to give form to those things which cannot be seen except as an inner vision'*. She also used the technique of stillomancy, in which the paper is folded to make a symmetrical image as in this watercolour of an Oread, a mountain nymph.

## **Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988)**

*Dryad – Oak*

Watercolour, 1971

Private Collection

Colquhoun produced a series of drawings of tree nymphs using the automatic process decalcomania, which involved transferring images from one surface to another by pressing them together. They were intended to evoke the spirit of various trees. In her illustrated book of poetry *Grimoire of the Entangled Thicket* she wrote that '*Some of these, and the poetic sequence, I offer to the White Goddess at a time when wasteful technology is threatening the plant-life (and with it all organic life) of earth and the waters.*' In *Dryad – Oak* sexual and mythological imagery combine to disturbing effect.

**Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988)**

*The Living Stones*

Published by Peter Owen Limited, 1957

Private Collection

Ithell Colquhoun's semi-autobiographical text vividly evokes her experience of the Cornish landscape. It is illustrated with keenly observed line drawings such as *The Men-an-Tol* included in this exhibition.

**Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988)**

*Grimoire of the Entangled Thicket*

Ore Publications, 1973

Private Collection

*Grimoire of the Entangled Thicket* contains Ithell Colquhoun's poems and illustrations and was based on the theme of the Celtic lunar calendar and tree alphabets.

## **Felix Kelly (1914-1994)**

Illustration for *The Green Child* by Herbert Read

Published by Grey Walls Press, 1945

Private Collection

Felix Kelly left Auckland, New Zealand in 1935 to establish his artistic career in London. In 1939 he enlisted with the Royal Air Force but continued painting and exhibiting.

The writer and critic Herbert Read asked Kelly to provide illustrations for the second edition of his philosophical novella *The Green Child*, which mixed fantasy and reality.

Kelly's illustrations add a dark and haunting atmosphere to the story of Olivero (president of an unnamed South American country), who after faking his own assassination returns to his English birthplace. When he arrives Olivero notices that the stream now flows backwards upriver.

In this picture Olivero stands against a contorted tree transfixed by this strange sight. He later traces the stream to its source and on his way rescues the Green Child.

## **Paul Nash (1889-1946)**

### *Monster Field*

Black and white negative, 1938

Tate Archive. Presented by the Paul Nash Trust 1970

Nash discovered the 'Monster Field' while staying with friends at Upleadon in Gloucestershire. It contained two trees which had been felled during a severe thunderstorm. Nash recalled that '*Both trees were now bleached to a ghastly pallor wherever the bark had fallen away*'. He acknowledged that fallen trees were a common sight and in most cases were of no particular interest but '*The trees of Monster Field were another story altogether ... Horizontally they had assumed, or acquired, the personality of monsters.*'

He took pictures of both trees from different angles and made watercolour drawings of them, but although he was happy to observe them in the daylight, he was spooked by their uncanny properties and '*felt convinced that it would not be wise to stay in the field after a certain hour*'.

**Paul Nash (1889-1946)**

*Monster Field: A Discovery Recorded by Paul Nash*

Counterpoint Publications, Oxford, 1946

Private Collection



**M.R. James (1862-1936)**

*The Collected Ghost Stories*

Illustrated by Francis Mosley

Published by The Folio Society, 2007

Private Collection

**Christina Hole (1896-1985)**

*Haunted England*

Illustrated by John Farleigh (1900-1965)

Published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1941

Julian Francis Collection

*Ghost Stories of M.R. James*

Illustrated by Charles Keeping

Published by The Folio Society, 1973

Private Collection

This illustration is for 'Oh, Whistle,  
and I'll Come to You My Lad'

*Stones with naturally occurring holes in them have been valued throughout the ages. They are said to have the power to make other worlds visible.*

*I Hagstone*, a short film about this collection of stones, by John Strutton can be seen by scanning this code with your phone:

