

PICTURING LANGUAGE BACK INTO THE LAND

MIKE COLLIER

Background

I was born in Sefton and lived there for eighteen years. It is the place, undoubtedly, that shaped many of my ideas about how we experience and perceive the world. I have talked at some length about the importance of walking, space, place and memory in my introduction to this book, so I want, here, to look more closely at some other aspects of my own work. I will do so by referring to the pictures in this exhibition, work that relates directly to both my memory, and my recent experiences, of the Sefton Coast. For me, the importance of place is paramount; I can't operate as a creative tourist. I need to get to grips with a place: to get to know it; to experience it and to understand it; to dig into its history, learn about its ecology and to grasp what it is that gives a place its sense of identity; to experience its visceral and emotional character—the earth, the light, the weather; the very essence of a place.

My aim when making work is pretty straightforward. I want to communicate something of what I experience when walking through the world. This sounds simple, but as soon as you start to unpick exactly how we really do experience things, and then how we might creatively interpret or translate this experience, then complications arise. This is the 'territory' I want to explore in this chapter. What, for instance, is the relationship between our pre-cognitive, intuitive experience (our immediate response to things experienced and felt) and our cognitive experience (the accumulated knowledge of that place)—the relationship, indeed, between art and science—and what language can we use to best communicate this complex experience? Although I talk here about the importance of foregrounding our intuitive, direct and sensuous response to the world, my work often uses words—sometimes many words; words which could be seen as getting in the way of a direct, unmediated experience of nature. Whilst I want my work to get us closer to the earth, to a more grounded experience of nature, I often use technology to communicate this experience (computer graphics, Photoshop, photography and print); is there a contradiction here? And what of the colours I use in my work? Many people think of landscape colours as being green, blue and brown (or 'sandy' in the case of the coast)—and yet I use many different bright colours (pinks, purples, yellows and oranges etc) in my work. Why is this? And in a short conclusion, I suggest that my use here of the word nature is inclusive. I don't see a split between town and country, nature and culture. We are nature—culture is nature—and my work (like that of all the other artists in this exhibition) explores the way we, as socially and culturally informed people, interact with the natural environment.

I. The relationship between art and science; intuition and cognition

'Modern science is trying too hard to be rational. Scientists have been at their best when they allowed themselves to behave as sleepwalkers'(1) —Stephen Toulmin

'The basic building blocks of nature are few and profoundly simple ... the world of objects is vast, infinitely various, and inexhaustible. Understanding the basics more deeply cannot undo the richness of experience. It can, and does, illuminate experience, and empower us to enrich it further'(2) —Frank Wilczek

I wasn't able to study art in the sixth form at Waterloo Grammar School (it wasn't deemed an academic subject), but my interest in art was, paradoxically, stimulated by an inspirational physics teacher, Alan Thompson. He taught me to appreciate the beauty inherent in the equations of great scientists like Albert Einstein. He fired my imagination and stimulated my latent curiosity in the

relationship between the arts and the sciences, an interest that has developed and grown over the last forty years.

Over this period, I have become increasingly aware that whilst intuition (which I had always associated with art) plays a key role in the way that we translate our experience of the world into actions, the collection of scientific knowledge (in my case usually relating to natural history) is itself not only fascinating, but also very instructive in interpreting my intuitive feelings in relation to a more complex understanding of my place in the world.

Lived experience is essentially intuitive—but our intuition is also layered, based on previous experiences. And it is immersed; a sum of more than the parts we experience. We are in the world and our bodies ‘touch’ the world, we use all our senses—sight, of course, but also smell, touch, and hearing—and we ‘navigate’ our way through this world as a part of it, not separate from it. However, from the Enlightenment onwards, we have come to see science as the most important tool for understanding the world and our Cartesian place in it. One of the issues raised by the philosopher Martin Heidegger was that, in our centralising of the role of science and technology over and above that of a pre-reflective intuitive engagement with the world, we have lost touch with a set of knowledge systems and values that are crucial to our developing experience. We isolate the senses and place too great a value on a decontextualised, discrete form of enquiry. Heidegger himself pointed out that *ta mathematika* originally meant in Greek ‘that which man knows in advance of observation’. The lesson here, I think, is that we need to embrace both a poetic response to the world as well as a scientific understanding of it. If we want to ‘save the earth’ we need both art and science.

And so, in *48 Flowers of the Sefton Coast* (2015), I aim to link art and science (natural history). In my childhood, I spent many early summer afternoons with my family walking along the Sefton Coast. My mum would use her copy of *Illustrations of the British Flora* by W. H. Fitch and W. G. Smith in tandem with the *Handbook of the British Flora* by George Bentham and Sir J. D. Hooker to identify the many wildflowers we found and she would hand-colour the illustrations and date them in the book. This work uses 48 of Fitch’s scientific illustrations to represent some of the key flowers of the Sefton Coast. However, the pastel colours I use are not representative of the colours of the individual plants; rather, they are a sensory reminder of the total experience of walking along the coastal footpath; the space, the heat, the dunes, the physical materiality of the land and the intense colours of flowers, butterflies and insects. The book in the display case next to this work is the actual book used by my mum on these forays along the coast over fifty years ago.

A second work, *Indicative Flora of the Sefton Coast*, 2015, also references closely this link between art and natural history. ‘The Sefton Coast supports a bewildering variety of plants’, writes Phil Smith in *The Sands of Time: An Introduction to the Sand Dunes of the Sefton Coast* and ‘this outstanding diversity is the result of many factors, including the great variety of habitat types found on the coast, ranging from derelict land to dune-slacks and woodland. Also relevant is the position of the Sefton Coast halfway up the west coast of Britain. This means [there is] a mix of plants with both northern (*the rare Isle of Man Cabbage*) and southern (*Yellow Barstisia*) distributions in the country as a whole.’ (3) For instance, *Sand Couch* dominates the embryo dunes and *Prickly Saltwort* can be found along the strand line. *Marram Grass* is the dominant plant of the mobile dunes in which can also be found *Sea Holly*. The fixed dune system is the most extensive habitat and typical plants here include *Yellow Wort* and the grass *Sand Cat’s-tail* whilst the scarce *Dune Helleborine* can be found in the dune grasslands. During my walk along the Sefton Coastal Footpath in 2014, I recorded many plants in my notebook. For this work, I have selected a group that, I hope, could be considered key indicator species of the Sefton Coast. It is a list that anyone with a little knowledge of plant-life might identify with the Sefton Coast. Again, the colours I use do not relate specifically to the colour of the individual plants named; rather, they reflect my total experience of walking

through the area.

II. Images, Pictures and Words

'The names of butterflies draw us into a world where art meets science, often producing names which scintillate in the mind and engage our feelings'. —Peter Marren

'Our task is that of taking up the written word, with all of it's potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land'. —David Abram

Abram's book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, poetically suggests that language came from our engaged relationship to the environment. We once had a wonderfully rich and expressive range of words for our local landscapes/soundscapes and the flora and fauna within it. However, increasingly, we now

'make do with an impoverished vocabulary for nature and landscape. The nuances that are observed by specialised languages, whether scientific or vernacular, are evaporating from common usage. As more people are brought up to live in towns and cities, the land beyond the city fringe has increasingly become understood as consisting of large generic units ('field', 'hill', 'valley', 'wood'). It has become a blandscape ... As the vocabulary of nature and landscape falls into desuetude, so does the knowledge that such vocabulary holds and enables, and so, too, does the ethos that such a vocabulary might embody or encourage. As we further deplete our ability to name, describe and figure particular aspects of our landscape, our competence for understanding and imagining possible relationships with non-human nature is correspondingly depleted.'(6)

And so, in the piece *Everything Seen and Heard in a Walk over Two Weekends Along the Sefton Coastal Footpath in 2014, 2015* I make reference to some of the plant folklore, the colloquial names for the birds and flowers (and how those names came into being) as well as interrogating the derivation of many of the area's geographical and place names. For instance, the common place name of Formby, ending -by, is from the Scandinavian byr meaning 'homestead', 'settlement' or 'village'. The village of Formby was originally spelt fornebei and means 'the old settlement' or 'village belonging to Forni'. At that time Fornibiyum was also a well-known Norse family name. He could have been the leader of the invading expedition which took possession of this coast. Until its closure in 1998, Oslo airport in Norway was situated in a town called Fornebu.

As D.K. Harrison, in *When Languages Die*, says (2007, inside cover):

We do not even know exactly what we stand to lose when languages die ... An immense edifice of human knowledge, painstakingly assembled over millennia by countless minds is eroding, vanishing into oblivion ... languages are the accretion of thousands of years of people's science and art. (7)

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins understood this. Hopkins 'invented' the term 'inscape' to suggest that our direct experience of the world was, somehow, also embodied in a sense of the 'essence' of life. He saw that words have their own, very particular, 'inscape', and he created new words based on listening to the sounds of the world around him.

In *The Language of Gerard Hopkins Manley*, James Milroy (1977) suggests that 'Hopkins is clearly concerned with the full semantic suggestiveness of the word, its association with shapes and textures, curves and spirals, and the sensory impressions of touch and sound as well as sight'

Furthermore, he notes that:

'the words he discusses in the diaries tend to be monosyllables used in everyday speech, and these

monosyllables are usually of Anglo Saxon origin ... only very rarely does he interest himself in a long word or a Latinate one. When Hopkins speaks of current language he means the spoken language as opposed to a literary one; but he goes further than most of us would. The essential spoken language is not the educated language of university graduates and the middle classes of large urban centres; it is at its most perfect in the mouths of country people, and, since it is ephemeral, and not committed to paper, its interesting features must be jotted down in the diaries just as the inscapes of nature are. Clearly this current language will be Anglo Saxon in vocabulary; and this brings a bonus to the poet, since Anglo Saxon words are on the whole richer in emotional suggestiveness than is the French or Classical vocabulary of English.' (8)

Hopkins was aware of the theories of a number of important etymologists of the period (the middle of the nineteenth century)—for instance Hensleigh Wedgwood, who espoused the ‘onomatopoetic theory’. Language, he suggests, was invented by imitating the sounds of nature. He looks at bird names as examples—cuckoo, ulula (owl) and peewit ‘whose melancholy cry gives rise to names in different European dialects’.(9)

However, it is what Hopkins does with words that is also of particular interest to me. Hopkins realises not only that words are, of themselves, representative of social orders; he sees that sentence structure itself reflects social and political hierarchies, losing contact with the real world of direct experience at the same time. So Hopkins deliberately subverts the accepted norms of language. In *The Search for Synthesis in Literature and Art*, Ann C. Colley explains that:

flung from their usual arrangement, words lose their habitual sequence ... in his attempt to conquer grammar Hopkins lards his poems with clumps of words—new units of meaning ... this new order of meaning brings the reader closer to the subject’s psychological reality. And, more significantly, it allows Hopkins to recover the natural function of the mind for which the linear model of grammar is not sufficient. The new order restores for the reader a pre-linguistic unity of experience in which the world is not divided into verbs and nouns. (10)

Hopkins subverts the structure of language and experiments with the form of words in a way that is expressive of what he calls ‘inscape’. He breaks down the structure of language so that it mirrors more correctly our pre-linguistic sense of the world—a sense not overlaid with hierarchies of meaning. This is how I hope my use of text operates. In *Six Birds of the Sefton Coast, 2015*, for instance, I have deliberately sought out colloquial and Anglo Saxon derivations of the bird names, and the order in which these names are presented is based on a sense of the formal, poetic, structure of the words irrespective of any scientifically accepted structure of bird classification or any other hierarchical knowledge system. So:

WASHTAIL
DEVELING
YARWHELP
GELVINAK
SPARLING
LAVEROCK

The colloquial names for flora and fauna are often a poetic reminder of a closer understanding and feeling for the natural environment we once had, and they frequently refer to the look, behaviour or sound of the bird. For instance one of the many colloquial names for a swift is DEVILING—perhaps because of its inaccessibility—its speed in flight. The name WASHTAIL (Pied Wagtail) arises from the similarity between the constant up-and-down movement of the bird’s tail and the action of dipping and lifting made by a person washing or scrubbing clothes (or dishes) by the waterside. Avocets utter loud yelping cries when disturbed, hence YARWHELP. SPARLING makes

reference to the harsh call of the Common Tern and LAVEROCK (Skylark) is from Middle English *laverok* and Old English *lawerce*.

III. Colour and the process of making

'Colour is alive, it alone can convey living things' (11) —Paul Cézanne

'Colour is the place where our brain and the universe meet' (12) —Paul Cézanne

Working with pastel is like laying pure pigment onto (indeed into) the surface of the paper. When I make a picture, I work intuitively, laying colours alongside each other quickly and without prior thought (in the same way that I feel, move through and respond to my environment, making intuitive decisions about what to do).

I build up an image that has areas of individuality and uniqueness, and yet the picture only works when the effect of the marks and images becomes more than the sum of its constituent parts (just as in the real world, I experience a strong sense of the ecological diversity of a place whilst at the same time intuiting a feeling that adds up to more than just the sum of the parts of my experience; this is, in fact, what gives meaning to my experience). The gestural marks I make are clearly the result of movement—an active engagement of my body across the surface of the paper and within the environment of the studio. They are, I would suggest, an equivalent to the way I move through an environment and interpret this movement.

But, of course, as discussed previously, my experience of a place is so much more than visual. We experience the world through all our senses, not just sight. So how can I express this sensuous experience visually? Indeed, can it be done? Cézanne, for instance, 'solved' the problem of mediating this multi-sensual experience of landscape through paint and visually managed to convey a sense of smell, of light, of warmth, etc. He suggested that we must open ourselves up to other sensual responses. 'Tell me, what scent emanates from [this canvas]? What odour does it give off?' He says to the author, poet and critic Joachim Gasquet, who replies 'The smell of pines'. Ah, says Cézanne, that is because there are pine trees in the picture: 'that's a visual sensation'. It is a connection Gasquet makes because he can see the pine trees in the painting and because he was asked, what can he smell. Cézanne, however, is interested in capturing not just the particularity of that smell of pine—what he describes as 'the strong scent of the pines, which is sharp in the sunlight'; he wants, too, to convey other smells and sensations. The smell of pine, he says, 'must combine with the green scent of the meadows that, every morning, freshens the fragrance of the stones and of the marble of the distant St. Victoire'. In the light of Gasquet's response to his questioning, he concludes that he hasn't yet succeeded in conveying these smells and sensations. How can he do this, he asks himself? 'It must be conveyed', he says, 'through colours'. (13)

So, Cézanne believed that colour had the capacity to express our multisensory perception of the world in painting. He said (in the same conversation with Gasquet), 'There is only one way that everything can be conveyed, expressed: colour. Colour is organic, if I may put it that way. Colour is alive, it alone can convey living things'. This 'synaesthesia', the working together of different senses, 'is of the essence of perception as we actually live it, although it is very hard to explain in the objectivist terms of science, in which lived experience is set aside in favour of a physical explanation of the causal relations between organised bodies and objects'. (14)

So how do I use colour? Like many people, I am, of course, aware of the 'signifier' landscape colours—blue for the sky, brown and green for the land, etc. But, crucially, for me, my memory of a walk is made up of far more than just this superficial visual experience. So, for instance, the

memories I might take away with me include the shiny blue (often with a touch of lavender) of the Common Blue butterfly, the frosted leaves and powder-blue flowers of the Sea Holly, (15) the startling and beautiful pink of Common or Seaside Centaury; the ‘egg-yolk orange and yellow’ (16) of Bird’s-foot Trefoil; the pale blue spots and yellow flecks of the Migrant Hawker, the orange-brown of the Dark Green Fritillary butterfly, with its beautiful green hindwings inset with sliver ‘pearls’ (17). All of these flora and fauna were seen on the walks along the coast in 2014. It is these colours as much as, indeed more than, the greens and browns that stick in my mind. They acquired a significance for me that I felt should be acknowledged in the work. And then there is the temperature. On three of the four days we walked the coastal footpath, the weather was warm and sunny, while the other day was warm with leaden skies and dark, brooding clouds that presaged impending rain. How can I express these sensations with colour? And sand isn’t just yellow—it is in fact many different colours—but just as importantly, sand is hard to walk ‘through’—your feet sink inexorably into it: it’s like walking through treacle. Colour has the capacity to express all of these different sensations ... if you let it. So, my use of colour isn’t, generally, illustrative; it is, rather, experiential.

And colour can also express space. I have always admired the quality of space in Cézanne’s work—the way the work seems to breathe, to come alive, and, as such, to draw us into it. Cézanne arrives at this experience (I won’t say effect, because it is so much more than that) through the concerted use of colour contrasts and the harmony that results from the successful use of such colour contrasts, establishing colour ‘relations’ which are analogous to the experience found in nature. This is not a mimetic copy; another term for this effect of colour contrasts is ‘atmospheric’. Cézanne says that: ‘Atmosphere forms the immutable ground upon whose screen all the oppositions of colour and all the accidents of light are decomposed’.(18) Furthermore, the use of blue in Cézanne’s work is crucial—as are the areas of the canvas which have been left white and unpainted. It is this combination of colour contrast and breathing space (the unpainted, white areas) that gives Cézanne’s painting its spatial and atmospheric quality, I believe, and so I too use the spaces between colours, the edges of the marks I make and the white of the paper, to activate space, and I ‘populate’ my images with different qualities of blue. Writing to Émile Bernard in 1905, the year before his death, Cézanne observed that, in his old age, ‘the sensations of colour, which give light’ prevented him from filling his canvas and from continuing the delimitation of objects when their points of contact are fine and delicate, ‘thus leaving his paintings in irremediable incompleteness’. (19)

IV. Using technology

‘The idea of an essential contrast between the character of modern and pre-modern science is, it seems to me, just a myth’. —Julian Young (20)

Until quite recently, I separated out text and image in my work. Perhaps I was worried about what a proper integration of text and image might say about my seriousness as painter—after all, I still do consider myself a painter; I love colour and the sensuality of the various mediums I use. However, the more I thought about the ideas developing behind my work—the importance of using embodied language expressively—the clearer it became that I should somehow try to properly integrate the image with the text. But how to do this? By this I mean literally (and not just intellectually), how to do this, since it is technically quite a difficult thing to do, and there are a number of different ways to go about it.

It appeared that the best way, for me, would be to use new technology—Adobe Photoshop, InDesign and Illustrator. For most of my career as an artist I had always been against using technology in my work; part of the point of using the pastels in the first place was that the materiality of the medium, and the purity of the pigment, would have a visceral impact on the viewer. There was also, I guess, a kind of inherent Luddite resistance on my part to using

technology. It seemed incongruous to, on the one hand, be looking at how to get the work closer to the Earth, deliberately using Old English, colloquial language and raw colour to suggest this, and yet at the same time using the newest technology to achieve my aim.

However, as Kuhn points out, the idea that there ever existed some Eden in the distant past when science and art, thought and interpretation, action and reflection were as one is: ‘a myth ... no more in the natural than in the human sciences, is there some neutral, culture-independent, set of categories within which the population—whether of objects or of actions—can be described’.(21)

Indeed, in *Heidegger’s Later Philosophy*, Julian Young writes that earliest humanity ‘possessed science’ in the sense that it ‘postulated in advance of observation’ a world of gods and divine laws based on sensed rather than observed phenomena. ‘The idea of an essential contrast between the character of modern and pre-modern science is, it seems to me, just a myth’, (22) says Young, who suggests that modern science is just more effective than pre-modern science.

I realised, of course, that a pencil, a stick of charcoal or a brush is only a tool, just as a computer programme is a tool. It is what you do with these tools—perhaps how you combine them; not dispensing with one (the stick of pastel for instance) in favour of another, more modern tool (like a computer programme such as Photoshop), but using one in tandem with the other. And using technology has also enabled me to reach a wider audience, as I have taken some of these images out of the gallery and onto the street (on billboards). This is important too.

V. Coda

I hope that my piece *The Birkdale Nightingale, 2015* manages to combine much of what I have discussed above. It presents a ‘more-than- human’ sound that is ‘of the earth’, but that reaches to the stars; it is a piece that mixes art and science. It works as a piece of art, I think (I hope), only if you understand both the science and the poetry of the ‘event’ (the mating call of the Natterjack Toad) being described. The Sefton Coast is an internationally protected habitat and one of the most important breeding grounds in the UK for its rarest amphibian, the Natterjack Toad. The Natterjack is smaller than the Common Toad, but what it lacks in size, it more than makes up for with a loud rasping croak that echoes around the dunes on spring nights as the males go in search of a mate. It is the noisiest amphibian in Europe and its ratcheting call has brought it two local nicknames: the Birkdale Nightingale and the Bootle Organ. The poet Jean Sprackland (in the Foreword to this book) talks of ‘the cosmic sound of [the toads] clamouring all around me. I knew it was the males calling the females to the mating pools, but it seemed, as I stood alone in that vertiginous darkness, that they were throwing their voices into the sky, a sound as timeless as the stars themselves’.(23)

As Strachan (2015) says elsewhere in this publication, this coast is ‘a liminal, or in-between space. It is a transitional point between the known and unknown, a place between danger and safety, between everyday settlement and wilderness, in which its natural cycles work as both an obscuring and revealing force.’(24) The mating call of the toads in this ‘liminal space’, adjacent to suburban Sefton, reminds us of the ‘intersection between the cultural and the natural world’ a theme that has defined my work, and that of my colleagues, in *Ghosts of the Restless Shore*. All the work in this exhibition and publication examines, in one form or another, ‘the way we (as culturally and socially informed people) interact with the natural environment, not just in terms of the way in which the landscape is experienced, but also the way in which it is interpreted and imagined.’(25)

Endnotes

1. Toulmin, S. (1962) *Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 59, No. 18, p.502.
2. Wilczek, F. (2015) *A Beautiful Question*. London: Penguin Random House, p.325.

3. Smith, P. H. (2009) *The Sands of Time: An Introduction to the Sand Dunes of the Sefton Coast*. Stroud: Amberley Publishing.
4. Marren, P. (2015) *Rainbow Dust: Three Centuries of Delight in British Butterflies*. London: Square Peg, p.130.
5. Abram, D. (1996) *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Pantheon Books.
6. Macfarlane, R. (2010) 'A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook', in: G. Evans and D. Robson (eds), *Towards Re-Enchantment*. London: Art Events, p.115.
7. Harrison, D.K. (2007) 'The Atlas of the Mind', in: *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World's Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.125.
8. Milroy, J. (1977) 'The Weeds and the Wilderness', in: *The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. London: André Deutsch, p.74.
9. Ibid.
10. Colley, A.C. (1990) 'Hopkins and the Idea of Mapping', in: *The Search for Synthesis in Literature and Art*. Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, pp.95–6
11. Kendall, R. (1998) *Cézanne by Himself*. London: Little Brown, p.305.
12. Baldwin, T. ed. (2004) *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*. London: Routledge, p.312.
13. Gaquet, J. (reprint 1991) *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne: A Memoir with Conversation*. London: Thames and Hudson.
14. Matthews, E. (2002) *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*. Chesham: Acumen, p.134.
15. Mabey, R. (1996) *Flora Britannica*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, p.283.
16. Ibid, p.221.
17. Marren, P. (2015) *Rainbow Dust: Three Centuries of Delight in British Butterflies*. London: Square Peg, p.251.
18. Riley, C. A. II (1995) *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music and Psychology*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England.
19. Johnson, G. A. 'Eye and Mind', in: *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, pp.126 and 143.
20. Young, J. (2002) 'The Turning', in: *Heidegger's Later Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.79.
21. Kuhn, T. (2000) 'The Natural and the Human Sciences' in: J. Conant and J. Haugeland (eds), *The Road Since Structure*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp.216-23.

22. Young, J. (2002) 'The Turning', in: Heidegger's Later Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 78–9

23. Strackland, J. (2015) in Collier (ed.) Ghosts of the Restless Shore Sunderland, Art Editions North, p.5.

24. Ibid, p.60.

25. Ibid, p.61.