

An investigation into how artists engage with the wasteland and derelict buildings of our urban and rural landscape: how are such landscapes reinterpreted within a creative context?

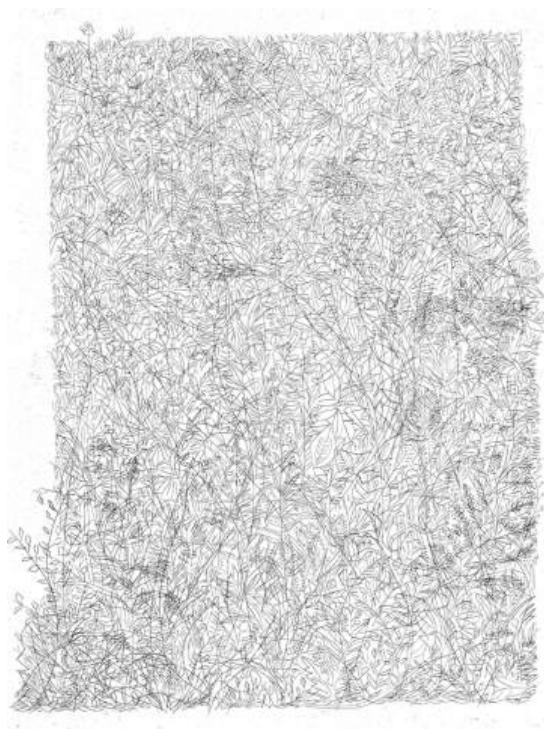
By Steven Ingman, 2016

This essay will explore my interest in wastelands, edgelands and derelict buildings and consider the contemporary issues of these locations becoming important sites of interest in the public domain. I will look at how wasteland has developed as area of interest and explore other artists who have considered such areas as a medium. To conclude I will put forth an idea that these areas of urban and rural wasteland could be seen as something more like a monument or historical ruin of importance.

As an artist I am interested in the relationship between the natural and man made world. The main catalyst in my current work is an abandoned Great Northern railway station in the Midlands. BBC Derby (2008) demonstrates this contrast through referencing the simultaneous attraction to both wildlife and drug users of this abandoned urban wasteland. The idea of venturing into a wilderness of both natural beauty and with an added element of danger is something that I find somewhat appealing to me. An interest in such inner city landscapes is highlighted by Farley and Symmons Roberts (2012), who suggest that developers are now cutting small peek holes to suffice our curiosity into these wastelands. It is suggested that the viewer will seek “to find the gap in the shiny advertising hoardings or a bent-back sheet of

corrugated iron which affords a view on to an open wasteland carpeted with flowers in the summer” (Farley & Symmon Roberts, 2012, pg137).

If allowed to thrive these wasteland sites can become something of beauty, a carpeted meadow. There is documentation of this happening, albeit under saddening circumstances, “In the summer after the Blitz, there was weed-storm across London. The bomb sites were covered with a purple surf of rosebay willow herb (unfamiliar then but quickly tagged ‘bombweed’).” (Mabey, 2012,). Weeds are common in the rural and urban wasteland, they quickly spread if left untamed. The artist Jacques Nimki takes his inspiration from the world of weeds and flowers, “Weeds are usually described as a plant in the wrong place, the unwelcome visitors in man made environments” (Jacques Nimki, accessed 2016). The artist Michael Landy also worked with weeds and he describes them as “street flowers” (British Council, accessed 2016)



Jacques Nimki, 'Florilegium', white silkscreen ink on drafting film, 57x38cm, 2003.

The wastelands have sense of freedom and can be somewhat lawless of the confines of our day-to-day existence. Farley and Symmons Roberts (2012) suggest it “opens up great possibilities for all kinds of licit and illicit pastimes, including the infamous trio – sex drugs and rock’n’roll.” (Farley & Symmon Roberts, 2012, pg151). This notion of the wasteland being an escapism and lawless is also dramatised in much of popular culture for example the film (Chappie, 2015) or even art exhibitions (Don’t Follow the Wind, 2016).



George Shaw, The Back that used to be the Front, Humbrol enamel on board, 2008

George Shaw is well known for documenting his childhood home of Tile Hill in Coventry. His work focuses on the housing estate, woodland and wastelands of which he describes “But like me, the estate is putting on a bit of weight, falling apart a bit; it’s got a receding hairline” (McNulty 2011). Shaw’s work “records the mundane, the quotidian and the overlooked” (O’Hagan 2011) Like him I reflect on past experiences. I remember a disused quarry close to the village I grew up in. It was my first taste of what you would describe as wasteland, and I consider this influential in my choice subject matter and how

it reflects on what I create. Like Shaw, I look to capture an essence of the place, to move beyond the mundane and as Shaw states “My work is not historical or social documentation. It grows out of my imagination, my own heart and my own anxieties.” (as cited McNulty 2011). Shaw’s work can be considered a romanticised take on his subject and “If a romantic landscape is a place so atmospheric that it offers deracinated human beings a sense of the sublime, then edgelands ruins should be tourist magnets” (Farley & Symmon Roberts, 2012, pg153).



John Latham, Five Sisters Bing 1976. Tate © The Estate of John Latham

The consideration of wasteland or ruin as a tourist attraction could be plausible. In the book *Ruin Lust* Dillon (2014) details a task set by the Scottish Development agency to the artist John Latham. This task asked the artist to find solutions to the problem of rural and urban wasteland. In 1976 Latham, as a founding member of the artist placement group, proposed that the five shale heaps (or bings), sited in West Lothian know as the Five Sisters, to be preserved as a national industrial monument rather than be destroyed. Latham also proposed that five sculptures in the shape of books be placed aloft each bing. In adding a sculptural element Latham is himself making the

brings a work of art. This idea “is also part of a much wider tendency, in the period of land art and conceptualism, towards the designation of such bleak zones as memorials or works in themselves – in short ruins” (Dillon, 2014, pg 45).

In conclusion, the book *Landscape and Power* describes how ruins and monuments became an important part of our landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and discuss the ideas that surrounded the boom in tourism and the appreciation of the landscape (Mitchel 2002). I can see the possibilities of this phenomenon happening in our cities, town suburbs and villages, with some of our urban and rural wastelands and decaying structures. If left over time they can develop into a sustainable ecosystem, allowing a vast array of nature to re-inhabit and colonize parts of our urban environment. They become something much more than a pile of rubble but something of beauty to be marveled at. There is historical importance to these sites, something that George Shaw considers in his memories that he reproduces in paint in a heartfelt and romantic sense. The solution in combining wasteland or derelict sites with art has also been demonstrated. I feel that if selected wastelands were allowed to flourish then they can become something else, something of inspiration, an escapism from the real world, a new wilderness of life and beauty, an inner-city wild meadow or a more contemporary take on the concept of a ruin or monument. In consideration of these ideas my work will seek to create powerful pictures that capture the essence of these environments.

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