

A Study of Contemporary Artists Who Work In Direct Response to the Landscape of the British Isles

“Visual art reveals cultural traditions and beliefs in ways that are both obvious and obscure, in a voice that may be declamatory or hushed, employing images and symbols that may be conscious or unconscious. Meaning may float on the surface of a work of art, or be enfolded into its depths. And it is not simply through subject matter that meaning and cultural context are revealed: style, medium, formal elements, spatial concerns, even the refusal of representation, all reveal complex systems of belief” (Laurence, 2003, p.2).

Introduction

What is so extraordinary about the artist as a person who has thoroughly immersed their artistic process in an exploration of revealing, sifting, and merging a creative and aesthetic practice with the natural environment? How do the resulting aesthetics of such works and processes allow and encourage the spectator to re-examine their own situation, be inspired, to take joy in the unique sense of the environment in which they live, and to examine their own surroundings with new vision.

It appears that we are living in a time of change. Contemporary society is rapidly developing through technological advances that are profoundly affecting the way in which individuals regard their surrounding world, and, in consequence, the way in which they live. Physical boundaries are diminishing through immigration and the merging of cultures as people seek better lifestyles, but society seems to place its values on the gain of material wealth, rather than on humanistic values, which has led to fast-paced lives that leave little time for sustaining and nourishing the human spirit.

This failure to appreciate the humanness of life is also reflected in society's retreat from the natural world and the sensibility of a direct experience and connection with the Earth. In visual art, one could almost be of the opinion that the observer has had to learn to analyse a form of expression that is now detached from any spiritual or universal meaning. The artist and the viewer both have, consequently, become more self-conscious, wanting more from the world, but afraid to speak out for fear of ridicule from critics as our art becomes increasingly personal.

I plan to explore the way in which three artists, including myself, are responding to their landscape, with an emphasis on the profound manner in which they become completely absorbed within the sense of place. Although there are a number of important aspects that influence creative responses, such as human history, archaeology, and/or human experience, I will show that an artist's inspiration extends beyond these, with such creativity being drawn from an intense emotional connection to a landscape that transports the individual into the realm of the sublime in nature and an aesthetic experience.

For many artists, the landscape is a source of infinite inspiration that is used to generate an aesthetic response. It portrays a complex world of texture, colour, patterns, and shapes, such as eroded footpaths and lichen growing on rocks, which equips the artist with a continuous supply of transcendent material, and which fosters a rich and immense relationship with nature between the artist and the surrounding environment. I will address this artistic response with an aim to exploring connections to the natural world, the essential reasons for artistic inspiration, and the role that landscape plays in realizing creative vision. Included within this, will be an investigation on how these artists have challenged perceptions of the natural world and provoked a fresh look at the landscape.

The basis for the theories presented in this dissertation are based on initial research and investigation, which included a number of books, reviews and journals that have researched the language of the landscape through artistic interpretations. This topic has been limited to looking at two ceramic artists' works, in order to reduce the scope of this topic, who are both responding to the British landscape to which my own work draws some parallels, as we seem to be sharing similar visual language when interpreting the landscape. However, the focus of this dissertation is to inspire thought and contemplation of the impact of landscape in artistic expression, and to broaden the scope of understanding of the works and their individuality, thus creating a deeper understanding of my own work. I will therefore refer to historical perspectives and cultural aspects to inform my research.

Ceramic artists Jenny Beavan and Jane Jermyn are both artists that are inspired through their surrounding landscapes. Jenny's work is profoundly influenced through the coastal and inland formations of Cornish landscapes, while Jane, who was drawn to West Wales because of its natural environment and its landscapes, is a ceramic artist who was originally from Ireland. She claims that the inspiration for her work "comes from the natural world – geological formations, strata and textures" (Jermyn, 2005). Through considering the work of these two artists, I will provide speculative reasons for the artist's creative responses to their surrounding environment, which will be based upon the notions of contemporary writers, viewers, and personal reflection. I came from a city to rural Wales and have found I have a deep emotional connection to Wales that is not historically based as I have no family roots here. Rather, I seem to have a deep spiritual connection that helps to inspire my work. Following this, I will consider the work of two Land artists, Chris Drury and David Nash, in order to create a baseline against which any differences can be evaluated, along with a personal consideration of my own work and the way in which it reflects the theories presented in this dissertation.

The Significance of Landscape, the Sense of Place, and Relationship

"The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement

forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience. It may take different forms, but it holds at bottom to the same inner thought and purpose" (Kandinsky, 1914).

The profoundly spiritual relationship that can exist between the natural world and human beings is a reality for the majority of artists who use landscape within their work. Both deeply intimate and personal, the surrounding environment becomes a rich inner source of artistic creativity. This reality has been portrayed throughout the history of art, and is evident within the various artistic disciplines. Potters, painters, sculptors, and so forth, when asked about the source of their inspiration, all point towards the significance of landscape within their work, and speak of a profound and intimate relationship with nature that is spiritual, philosophical, and deeply personal (Kandinsky, 1914).

Art and spirituality have shared a strong bond since the beginning of humanity, and have habitually been intrinsically intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Usually inspired by internal reflection, art has addressed every aspect of human need and life's greatest mysteries: the nature of the cosmos, the role of humanity within the universe, concepts of death, notions of an afterlife, and moralistic codes that society imposes upon individuals and groups. The spirituality of art, however, does not always address conventional understandings of religion, but attempts to seek deeper meaning beyond the conception of self. It reaches into the abstract to find meaning and purpose in the reality, probing at the sources and nature of life and death, while also seeking to understand and acknowledge the indefinable, ethereal forces at work in the universe.

Abstract art, despite it being widely considered as a modern art form, has its "roots in ancient history showing up in early decorations for textiles and pottery" (WWAR, 2007), and is conceived through the artist's relationship with the surrounding environment. This deeply spiritual rapport, which is reflected within each individual piece, is revealed through tone, texture, colour, and shape, all reflecting artistic impressions of a natural connection and relationship with the environment. Each work, consequently, is more than just an isolated, single creation. Instead, it reflects the context, the environment, and the culture in which the piece was created. More importantly, however, it portrays the highly personal conceptions and worldview of its creator – in particular his or her sense of the spiritual within nature. The importance of Landscape and a sense of place, within this should not be underestimated. Laurence (2003), states

"As with our understanding of culture, our sense of place is immediate and particular yet also historical and comprehensive. Place signifies far more than geographical location or topographical description. Place is constructed out of our shared knowledge and beliefs about the nature of the world – and the world of nature. Place comprehends our feelings of belonging or estrangement, our identification with or refusal of certain forms and elements,

whether urban or rural – a horizon line jagged with mountains or skyscrapers, a beach strewn with driftwood or sunbathers, a tree standing in a forest or on a busy boulevard – and our understanding of where we fit in and where we don't" (p.2).

Contemporary artists continually stress the significance of place. However, this does not concern the placing of the artist in the landscape or simply portraying a scenic view. Instead, it concerns the interaction in "which both the art work and the landscape are more than sums of their parts. Art is no longer mimetic but becomes part of the land" (ucl.ac.uk, 2007). Consequently, the landscape, rather than being something to be duplicated or copied, becomes the artist's "primary source for the genesis of the work" (ucl.ac.uk, 2007). It is the place, the actual setting, which is rooted in place, and it is this that essentially moulds creative activity, while the artistic meaning and identity found within place is transferred from the artist into the work.

The evidence of the importance of space can be seen throughout the work of numerous contemporary artists. Andrew Palin's work, for example, clearly portrays recognisable characteristics of both the landscape and seascape, with strong suggestions of geographical locations. Palin, who studies coastal erosion and rock formations, captures the essence of a place through introducing glaze to clay. Kiln firing then facilitates "a synthetic and accelerated re-enactment of environmental effects upon the earth's surface (transforming)the glaze into a bas-relief of fauna and flora, limestone cliffs and mineral deposits" (Ashley, 2006. p.89). Jeff Minchham's work also depicts strong images of place and landscape. As noted by Ioannou (1998), "His earthy, freehand vessels can transport us into a cool, northern hemisphere of highland mountain and lake landscapes, where the textures and colours of dark craggy cliffs, weathered stone, copper-green lichen and the steely blues of deep-water lakes." This affinity with landscape and space is, therefore, at the very heart of contemporary art, and is reflective of each artist's profound and deeply personal relationship with their surrounding world.

The natural beauty of the earth, its mystery, and its inner life, which is reflected in the way in which it is constantly shifting and changing, has been a significant source of inspiration for artists throughout the history of humanity. An artist's relationship with the Earth, however, rather than being based purely on the visual, is founded within nature's mystical or spiritual qualities. Although visual excitement both supports and renews artistic inspiration and creativity, within the vast majority of artists "there often runs a current of feeling akin to religion" (Baur, 1958). The way in which such a relationship is experienced, however, can take a number of different forms, for example, some artists consider themselves a fundamental part of nature's order: "Man is part and parcel of the total ecology of the universe and fulfils his function ... along with plants, animals, stars and galaxies. I am nature" (quoted by Baur, 1958, p.8). Jilly Tinniswood, a Welsh-born artist, points towards the importance of "the fusion of the ancient and the contemporary that has shaped (her work)." She goes on to say, "You can only be so deliberate when

creating. The rest is up to something else that we still cannot define. Sometimes the whole process has such a life of its own that we might consider the artist to be the medium ...” Through these examples, we can see that no matter how such experiences are expressed, it is clear that the artist’s rapport with the natural world is both real and intensely personal.

Artistic inspiration through landscape is also depicted by the way in which nature becomes so detailed, with intimacy being so close between the artist and the natural world that his or her experience and understanding of the environment reflects an almost physical association. Each individual aspect of nature becomes vital, alive, and full of story and colour. “I have always been fascinated with the colours of the native woodland, mountain and moor land,” writes Patrick Cooper.

“I am struck by harmonies of colour such as the reddish upper branches of scots pines contrasting with their pine green foliage or the maroon heather and yellow autumnal birch leaves. To gain inspiration and ideas for paintings I will sometimes make 2 to 4 day trips to remote places” (Greenart.info, 2007).

As we have seen, artistic response toward landscape, their individual sense of space, and their intensely personal reaction and relationship with the natural world, is based on a number of aspects that involve subjective interpretations. A number of individuals have exhibited and written in relation to notions of the social construction of landscapes. The majority of this work has emphasised that the natural world cannot be detached from its association with culture, or with the accumulated thinking and worldviews of art, religion, science, and philosophy. Experts within each of these disciplines have illustrated the way in which the given culture “shapes our understanding of and relationship with our natural environment, and thus its representation in our art” (Laurence, 2003, p.2). In consequence, “our perceptions of nature are never ‘pure,’ merely the simple psychological register of our senses, but always socially mediated” (Laurence, 2003, p.2).

The way in which culture affects the relationship between the artist and landscape is demonstrated by the almost universal concern among artists for planetary issues and preservation. An artistic relationship with the natural world involves the notion of love, which is expressed through the desire to care for the planet through actions and works that depict such feelings. Jimmy Pons art, for example, is a permanent and visual reminder of humanity’s reliance on, and exploitation of, a resource that is rapidly disappearing, and with which humankind continues to destroy the environment. Pons basic material is the “tar biscuits,” which are dumped by oil tankers at sea, and which find their way onto the beaches of Spain. His work, which is truly inspiring and thought provoking, is created through dissolving the tar to make pigments. “I found that so many different colours came out of it, from black to creams ... I wanted to create something beautiful and positive out of such a negative and pollutant material” (Greenart.info, 2007).

Jennifer Sanders

Finally, all personal understandings and conceptions of the concepts of landscape, space, and relationship, are mainly subjective. Mark Tobey stated that the artist is interested in what they feel about it and therefore paints that, while it can also be suggested that artists desire to give an objective form to their own subjective feelings about nature. Firstly the artist sees the object, for instance a mountain which expresses something to him/her, essentially it is the same phenomenon which attracts many other artists. But when the particular artist begins to use their individual materials, something else comes out. It is this artistic response that is essential within contemporary art and their own personality emerges. (Hyde Solomon 1958) *You cannot measure what occurs* .

Contrasting Uses of Landscape

As this research has shown, different artists have different perspectives and conceptions of the way in which landscape influences their work, and each artist has their own personal understanding of individual space and relationship. The way in which landscape is used within art, therefore, is different for each artist. It is highly personal, even intimate, while also being significantly spiritual. The personal side of this cannot be overstated; each individual work portrays often intense and private thought and feeling in relation to a whole wealth of subjects. An artist's work, consequently, reveals a part of its creator; it reveals passion, creativity, thought, mood, beliefs, values, and so forth, while each piece is the creative result of the artist's use of landscape.

Jenny Beavan

"The piece I made from my Israeli trip has that quality; it is based on containment; containment of so much of what I experienced in Israel, such as the politics, the history, and the desert. A couple of months after my return I responded to those memories of experiences that had stayed with me" (Beavan, 1998).

The focus and heart of Jenny Beavan's work is found within Cornish landscapes, which includes the coastal and inland formations. Drawn by an interest in "movement in relation to natural change" led Jenny "on a personal quest into the exploration of changed states of matter: decay, disintegration, movement, relocation, and reformation" (Beavan, 1998). This involved spending time recording and studying the cycle of water in the clay mines of Cornwall, in order to assess the way in which the water's movement shaped and created the surrounding landscape.

Jenny's journey into landscape, which she considers as being a profound mystical experience that has enabled her to make "links between the development of the vessel in ceramics, the development of the geological vessel of the earth, and the human vessel of our bodies" (Beavan, 1998). Through exploring decay in nature, in particular that of land movement caused

Jennifer Sanders

through both humans and the natural disasters such as geological faults and volcanic activity, Jenny studies changing patterns in the landscape. She then uses the natural elements indigenous to her inspirational sites as a way of both extending and capturing the sense of change, including mine spoil, decomposed stone, beach and volcanic sands, minerals, river mud, through which she “implants a strong representation of ‘place’” (Beavan, 1998).

Word Count: 3,003