

Film Courtesy of lux, London

Sleeve

An installation by Stephen Lee

PhantasmaGloria Film Events

presents films by Liane Lang, Andrew Lanyon, Pat Naldi, Lizzie Hughes, Lee Holden and Patrick Keiller.

16th April to 16th May 2010

The Belfry, St. John on Bethnal Green next to Bethnal Green Underground Station, London

Exhibition opening and film event:

Sunday 18th April

After Nature: Notes on Stephen Lee's Sleeve



Diffuse, plaster, flowers, wax, 30cm x 30cm, 2009

The title of Stephen Lee's installation, *Sleeve*, a work positioned within the belfry of St. John's Church in London's Bethnal Green, is curiously ambiguous. A sleeve is a device affording protection and warmth, but it is also a means of obfuscation, a way of holding

something back, of trickery perhaps, as in the expression that makes reference to keeping something "up one's sleeve". Holding a thing in reserve may be conceptually connected to ideas of preservation in the sense of long-term storage or a museological archive. Lee's title

thus implies that he is presenting something to the viewer, staging it, encasing it in a frame, yet simultaneously keeping some of his cards close to his chest. On further reflection it becomes apparent that what exactly the title points to is also open to ambivalence. Is Lee's installation the container or is it in fact what is contained, an entity placed within an even greater structure, a single cell within a series that encase each other like Chinese boxes or Russian dolls? In this reading, Sir John Soane's church, more exactly its tower and belfry, would be the exterior limit of the sequence, a canopy (to use the term rather loosely) which both allows Lee's work to exist whilst yet hiding it away.¹

The intimated narrative of enframing can, in any case, be extended in both directions. Within the fragile cardboard casement inserted by Lee into the southern belfry wall the artist has placed a number of modestly-sized sculptural works. These objects, made from clay and other natural materials, represent a number of facets of nature, notably several animals: an eel, owls and a tortoise, itself arguably further encased in its own natural "sleeve". There are cultural forms too, representations of books, more devices of containment and concealment, though here they are assertively opened out. Through this act of insertion within a deliberately weak wall of paper, one nonetheless gets a sense of selection and preservation, like a depleted but more choosy "Noah's Ark" of potentially lost things. Lee is adamant that in making sculptural objects derived from natural forms an act of selective presentation is being carried out. What is of great importance in our own time, he has suggested, is the frighteningly finite state of nature, as humankind continues to destroy, intentionally or indifferently, the earth's once plentiful resources, together with vast swathes of its animal populations. Lee would agree, I think, with Gustav Metzger's proposal that we should



Sleeve, visualisation of the sculptural installation, cardboard with mixed media, 4m x 3m x 0.5m, 2010 (All works are by Stephen Lee except where stated)

now deliberately employ the expression “damaged nature” when referring to our environment, for the state of destruction has reached a seeming point of no return.²

Soane himself, notably in the house that now, as a museum, bears his name, constructed a protective environment for potentially lost objects. Collecting a multiplicity of ancient fragments, statues, paintings, vases and other items, Soane cemented these myriad entities together into a concatenation of fragments that is most certainly greater than the sum of its parts. Lee’s considered assemblage echoes in miniature the entire Soane house whilst also mimicking one small but highly important part of it, the Picture Room, wherein several layers of paintings are comfortably and secretly stacked.³ Lee’s *Sleeve*, a kind of mirror image of this room, might well be called the “Sculpture Room”. Herein are brought together surrogate sentient creatures and paradigmatic

mnemonic devices, the elements of a perhaps soon-to-be-lost world. Mostly bleached in a Mallarmean whiteness, such objective correlatives, to use a term from T.S. Eliot, set up a tight configuration of references. The carefully posed owls, for example, trigger thoughts of that major theoretician of history G W F Hegel’s “Owl of Minerva”, whilst also alluding to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the present-day association with wisdom may also be conjectured as apt.

In placing these pieces within the broader box of a cardboard shroud or series of shelves, Lee also calls to mind the several *Merzbau* produced by Kurt Schwitters during the first half of the twentieth century. These materialised fantasy structures, particularly the famous and largest example in Schwitters’ home city of Hanover, were, like Soane’s house, both dwelling and museum, chamber of preservation and theatre of repose. One may consider these perhaps “untimely” sculpted objects as being, in an uncontroversial sense, homely, which is not a substitute word for “mundane” but a way of pointing to their status as extract-translations of the natural world, realistically rendered components of an environment which needs to be seen as concurrent with our own, not something of which we are no longer a part. Nature, as depicted in *Sleeve*, may have been purposefully arranged for display at several removes, but the distance is a critical, indeed essential element of this complex and recursive work.

Peter Suchin

Peter Suchin is an artist and critic.

Notes

1. The paradox of effects upon artworks which their consignment to the museum brings about is discussed in Theodor Adorno’s “Valery Proust Museum”, available in English in Adorno’s *Prisms*, MIT Press, 1983.
2. See Metzger’s important book *Damaged Nature, Auto-Destructive Art*, Coracle Press, 1996.
3. The Sir John Soane Museum is located at 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3BP. The Picture Room is on the ground floor of the house, which has, extending beneath it, a substantial cellar, an area of which is termed the “Sepulchral Chamber”. There is a (probably inadvertent) echo of this structure at St John’s, beneath which there is an extensive series of rooms and, adjacent to the building, Bethnal Green Tube Station, wherein 173 people were killed during an air raid on 3 March, 1943. On the theme of Soane and (individual) extinction see Giles Waterfield (Ed.), *Soane and Death*, Dulwich Picture Gallery, 1996. John Summerson’s essay on “Sir John Soane and the Furniture of Death” is also apposite. See his *The Unromantic Castle*, Thames and Hudson, 1990.





Eels, acrylic plaster, 120cm x 40cm x 20cm, 2008



Circular Book, cement, 20cm x 20cm x 30cm, 2009



Hand, acrylic, 10cm x 5cm x 18cm, 2009



Bird Book, plaster, wood, watercolour, 20cm x 30cm x 10cm, 2001



Turtle, acrylic plaster, acrylic paint, 40cm x 30cm x 20cm, 2010



Symmetry, plaster, wax, flowers, 20cm x 30cm x 10cm, 2010



Escarpment, watercolour, 30cm x 30cm, 2009



White Swan, watercolour, 50cm x 30cm, 2007





Forest of Symbols, metal, wax, plaster.
30cm x 90cm x 16cm, 2009

The Belfry, St. John on Bethnal Green

The installation, *Sleeve*, conceived as an interpretive membrane enveloped by the belfry of this John Soane designed church, aims to integrate themes of nature into architecture. The room features consecutive, double rounded arches with shadow lines and is approached by symmetrical, curvilinear stairways. Two elongated niches flanking each of the stairways reinforce a sense of height. This formal architectural arrangement is classic Soane.

On the other hand, and quite within the oeuvre of Soane and his eccentric, visionary collaborator and draftsman Joseph Gandy, a more imaginative response could perceive the belfry as an elevated Fingal's Cave: a lofty Piranesi-esque evocation of the cavernous sublime; where snaking stairways symbolically connect the natural and divine worlds as two giant curving serpents.

The notion of nature and architecture as deeply enmeshed is evident throughout the Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields. In addition to elements of nature in the revised classicism, a saturation of picturesquely arranged fragments and sublime vistas offer a complexity of possible paths of interpretation. One such path comes to the fore. Stephen Astley describes below how, for Gandy and Soane, the search for the origin or beginning of architecture in nature was mythic.

Stephen Lee

Joseph Michel Gandy and 'Architecture; Its Natural Model'

By 1830 Joseph Michael Gandy's meagre architectural career was over. He had resumed his financially chaotic life as an architectural artist, flitting between rented properties in Soho. He moved his family out of choleraic London in 1833 to Chiswick and devoted himself to architectural history and theory, expressed in copious writings and drawings. He was trying to prove that the development of architecture was fundamentally linked to the development of language and of myth. In common with almost all Gandy's projects his vast ambitions were to remain unfulfilled.

Architecture; Its Natural Model, the first of a proposed thousand drawing sequence, was also the last work Gandy was to show at the Royal Academy. The caption in the catalogue explained how the picture demonstrates man, animal and nature all taking the very first steps on the path to architecture. It details every rock formation, plant and animal. The caption also shows Gandy was in touch with current scientific, geological and theological debate, as well as the growing literature of world exploration.

In the foreground an orang-utan, having built a shelter for his perfect nuclear family, sits plaiting vines into rope in imitation of the intertwined creepers behind him. He sits however on a perfect basalt column, an echo of the fallen classical columns Gandy had seen in Rome, and in front of Fingal's Cave, called by many of Gandy's contemporaries 'nature's cathedral'. At the back of the picture, perched on top of Mt. Ararat is Noah's Ark, or as Gandy put it 'the first object of the second world and the last of the first'.

The picture is a summation of Gandy's attempt to combine nature and architecture in a scientific, aesthetic, picturesque and mythographic manner.

Stephen Astley

Curator of Drawings, Sir John Soane's Museum
January 2010





Joseph Michel Gandy, *Architecture; Its Natural Model*, approximately 100cm x 80cm, 1838. By courtesy of the Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum

PhantasmaGloria: films at St. John on Bethnal Green

St. John's amusing title for its screenings transforms the term phantasmagoria into a psalm. Originally used to describe a fashion for pre-cinema, ghostly projections, the word has been extended with reference to Gloria Patri: 'Glory be to God... as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end'.

When asked to select films under this umbrella title to work with my installation, *Sleeve*, which is focused on nature and architecture, I began with the unifying, topical theme of pattern. I chose films that share this idea formally as an aesthetic. Some of the artists consider pattern further as psychology or as a physics of nature and society. Reflections on how we perceive time and space, and utopia, with a sense of lost innocence are also themes that develop from formal patterns. The series culminates in Patrick Keiller's, *The End*. Visually rich and saturated with literary reference, the film reflects on philosophical notions of beginning and of ending.

Stephen Lee



Liane Lang, *Nature didn't care so I left*, video still, 2003



Liane Lang, *Utopiary*, video still

Nature didn't care, so I left

DVD projection, 3 minutes, sound, Ernst and Young Collection

The piece is made with a salt crystal garden solution and filmed time-lapse over 12 hours, compressed into 3 minutes. The model originates from a kit and represents an oriental style paradise landscape. A blue mountain sits in between two cherry trees that blossom and dissolve.

Like the mythical Schlaraffenland (the land of milk and honey), this utopia is unwholesome and has no substance. It is fragile, floating and life could not exist there. It's promise dissolves with the blossom. The fakeness of the model is gently superseded by the fascination of the real event, the chemical reaction, the textures and the movement of the clouds. As a brief vision of heavenly paradise it's unconvincing, badly defined at the edges - a poxy yet magical absurdity.

Liane Lang

Liane Lang lives and works in London.



Andrew Lanyon, *As a Gliding Wave*, video still, 2004

As a gliding wave

As a gliding wave is a lyrical film by Andrew Lanyon, where the wailing pattern of the voice is carried with an approaching and then receding wave. Connected directly to the materiality of both nature and the medium of film, the sensibility is close to sculpture.

Stephen Lee

Andrew Lanyon is a painter, publisher, author and filmmaker. He is based in Cornwall.



Pat Naldi, *Between Here and Elsewhere*, 12mins, 12 seconds, video still, 2010

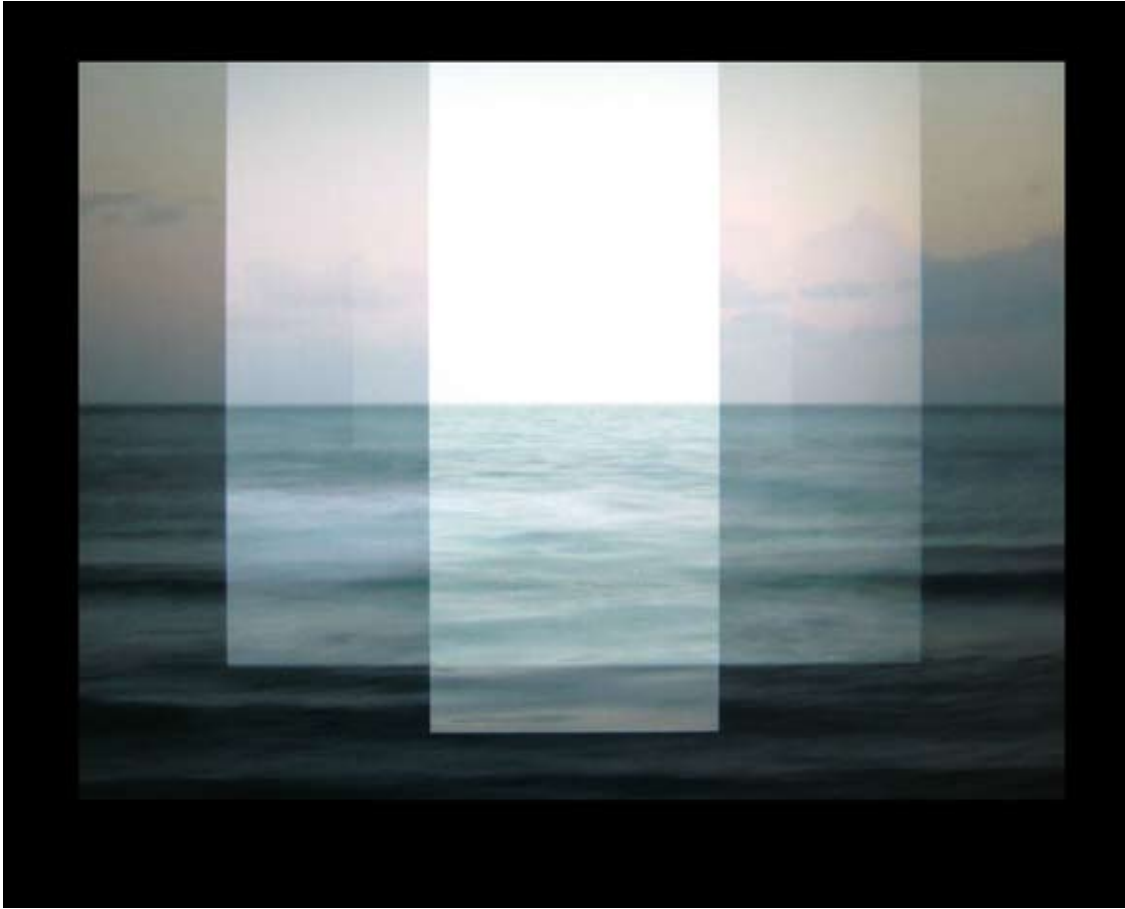
Between Here and Elsewhere

I have always been interested in the activity of journeys, the time and space that exists between the departure and destination of getting somewhere. Paul Virilio argues that the transport revolution of the nineteenth century brought about a change in the phenomenon of 'arrival', "Spatial distance suddenly gave way to temporal distance... the most distant journeys being hardly anything more than interludes." (*Polar Inertia*, 1990).

In this panoramic slow-motion video sequence captured from a train window, departure and arrival are suspended; space-speed frozen in space-time.

Pat Naldi

Pat Naldi is an artist, lecturer and researcher at Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design. She lives and works in London.



Lizzie Hughes, *4,007 Horizons*, 2mins, 40 seconds (continuous loop), video still, 2007

4,007 Horizons

4,007 photographic images (one for each ten Kilometers of the earth's circumference) were sourced from photo sharing websites. The images, largely holiday snaps, were cropped to exclude any geographical, architectural or other reference points before being ordered on a time-line according to colour. With the images being sourced from unknown locations across the globe, the work aims to document an imaginary line, which ultimately describes the curvature of the earth.

Lizzie Hughes

Lizzie Hughes studied at the Slade School of Fine Art and lives and works in London, she was recently commissioned to make new work for Stations at The String Room Gallery, Aurora, New York.



Lee Holden, *SPY_WARE*, video still, 2010

SPY_WARE

Lee Holden's work deliberately draws out the normally suppressed connections between areas such as drug abuse, violence, homelessness, poverty and unemployment, and Capitalism's celebration of glamour, war, and economic success. He examines the operations of advertising, television news, the National Lottery and other stereotypical forms of address so as to lay bare the fundamental contradictions inherent in their production and presentation. His installation, performance and video work employ a wide range of found materials (redundant computers and TVs, advertising literature, industrial furniture, film footage), reinscribing their values and

implications so as to render their naturalised meanings problematic and open to dispute. The viewer is subjected to an intense, multilayered audio-visual display, one that parodies the media spectacle, turning its own technologies against itself.

Peter Suchin

Lee Holden is an artist who lives and works in London. Recent exhibitions include his solo show *Hoax!* at Magazin 4, Bregenzner Kunstverein, Austria.



Patrick Keiller, *The End*, 18 mins, 1986, film still,
Lux London

The End

Ex-architect, Patrick Keiller, brings a graphic and compositional sense of landscape to this complex essay film following a conceited modern-day flaneur who conjectures ruminatively over images of a curiously ill-defined European landscape. From within these images of construction, roadways and the never-ending to and froing of Europe's numerous train stations can be glimpsed the visage of the old Europe, defined by borders, varied cultures and a distinct sense of place. At one point the camera lingers accusingly upon the dated futuristic symbol of the 1958 Brussels World Fair.

Keiller's film is book-ended by two extraordinary images echoing Europe past. In the opening sequence a boat rocks plaintively away from the white cliffs of southern England, furnishing us with a longing look, graphically similar but not afforded to the steely-eyed emigrants of Ford Madox Brown's epochal mid-Nineteenth century painting *The Last of England*.¹ In the last images the decaying footage of a group of tourists assembled in the Piazza Navona is looped, slowed down and scored by Brahms melancholy "setting" for Goethe's *Winter Journey over the Harz Mountains*. These odd, layered, extremely moving moments seem to almost stand in for the feeling of loss, displacement and restlessness evoked by Keiller's less than celebratory gaze upon the landscape, both physical and mental, thrown up by contemporary Europe. Yet this is not an angry or necessarily pessimistic film, and the gruff poetic voiceover, which both rhymes with and grates against the image, emerges as an inappropriately nostalgic and pretentious vision of the zeitgeist. Keiller's complex film, as a whole, allows more space than this, and in its final

moments offers both a vision of a lost Europe and an admission of the inadequacy of such a neo-classical subjectivity. A sensibility to be more fully explored in London.

Adrian Danks

Head of Cinema Studies, School of Media and Communication,
RMIT University

Notes:

1. An inspiration for Derek Jarman's 1987 film of the same name, a nightmare vision of Thatcherite Britain.

CTEQ: Annotations on Film no. 1 (1996): 30.

Source: VF Dir: Patrick Keiller Scr: Patrick Keiller Phot: Patrick Keiller & Julie Norris Sound: Derek Taylor Mus: Johannes Brahms, Alto Rhapsody Op. 53 & a setting for Goethe's "Winter Journey over the Harz Mountains", sung by Kathleen Ferrier.

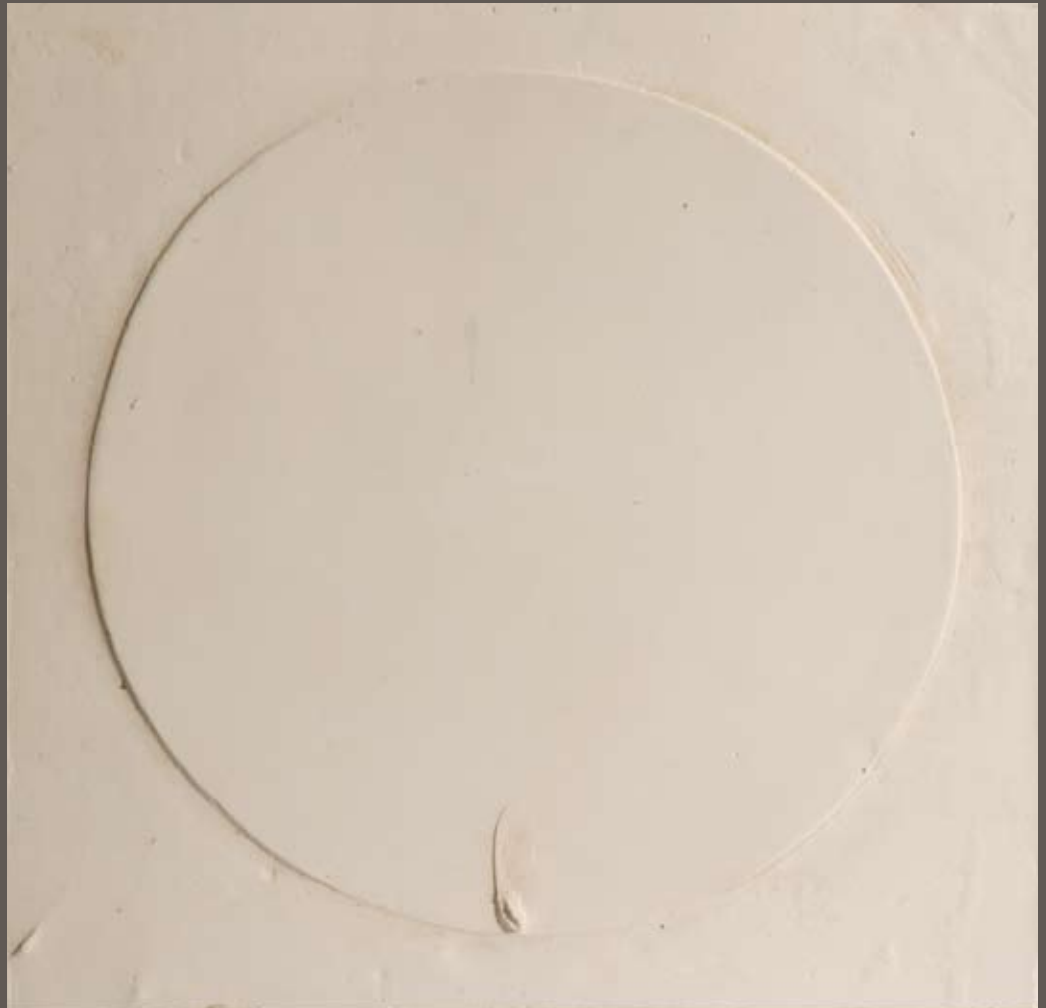
Voices: Vladek Sheybal (Narrator), Georg Saxon (Soldier), Roger Thompson (Laurence Sterne).

Addendum: The repeating use of the words 'the helmet' in *The End* is supposed to evoke Walpole's gothic work *The Castle of Otranto*.

Thanks to Ami Clarke for curatorial advice and guidance.

The Belfry and PhantasmaGloria are community arts projects of the church of St. John on Bethnal Green, London.

St. John on Bethnal Green is a registered charity: no. 1132150



Sycamore. Plaster. Stephen Lee 2010