

## **Edward Chell: Soft Estate**

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**Spacex Exeter 8 March to 3 May**

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'Make the city eat its own dust,' wrote Arthur Rimbaud in 1873. The anarchic avant-gardism of this communard poet, who inspired the situationists in the 1950s to early 1970s to a critique of the capitalist spectacle of cities, remains today as traces in the work of the edgeland artists exhibited here: Edward Chell and a handful of invited others. Likewise the 19th-century environs of Paris, painted by Georges Seurat and Vincent van Gogh, that depict the edge of modernity – factories, fields, leisure time – resonate within this exhibition as power stations, agro-chemical fields, allotments, trash dumps and motorway verges.

From this historical perspective of the margins of the country and the city, Chell has produced a body of paintings of plant forms along with an academic study comparing the history of the picturesque in the UK with the planning of motorways and their accompanying green verges, bridges and cafes, referred to by the highways department as 'soft estate'.

In one of the essays supporting the exhibition, Richard Mabey describes a fast-forward version of William Wordsworth's picturesque: 'Authentically wild daffodils – the very same species that Wordsworth rhapsodised about – splash the Ross spur of the M20 in two tones of yellow in late March.' Chell's paintings embody these personified crowds of flowers as a sallow picturesque: a populace of weeds and wild plants dancing amid the polluted, soporific buzz of passing traffic. The ecological subject matter is reminiscent of Gustav Metzger's dramatically gassed plants in *Mobile*, 1970/2005. Chell's large-scale oil-on-shellac paintings, which represent the complexity of verge flora, exude an aura of imagined purgatory or afterlife rather than termination. A finely painted, muted, congealed surface appears as a shifting, disintegrating image. The unfocused photographic quality, where reflection is removed, is similar to the effect of a Claude landscape. It is as though we are invited into an academic daydream, via the Elysium fields. Nearby, elegant silhouetted prints of elongated motorway plants are made directly from pollution – literally from roadside dust.

In Day Bowman's paintings we see painterly fragments of the studio floor with rings left by paint-pots and spillage, plus grease and grime which are incorporated into depictions of an industrial

no-man's land. The disparity between the floor as a marginal yet familiar zone within the studio, and the sense of a self encountering the awkward boundaries of the edgelands of the city, is both craftily decorative and slightly vertiginous. It describes with precision the transition into the unfamiliar.

A cavernous sublime rather than the picturesque characterises the collaborative practice of Tim Bowditch & Nik Rochowski. In *Hindland*, 2012, the artists identify places along the motorway which have the potential for surround-sound recording, in this case a cave-like left-over non-place with no features, whether stream or walkway – just earth and a bit of graffiti beneath the motorway. Patterns of traffic hum are recorded using an ‘Acoustic Bat’ designed for surveillance. The experience becomes hypnotic: a sound event akin to John Cage’s music which, in turn, is close to the meditative presence of the so-called Buddha mind. Like Chell’s work along the motorway verges, the transgression into geographically contested space beneath the motorway and into areas that could well be haunts of the homeless takes us closer to the spirit of the vagabond drift of the situationists. Rather than replicate this event, the artists make a new object for the gallery environment: a video monitor with a photographic still of concrete surfaces and the view beneath the road, plus several pairs of

headphones and a poster. This, the artists claim, suffices as an archival element in an expanded practice. To appreciate the scope of the project the public must, as Jerry Salz has said elsewhere, ‘read-to-see’ – and, in this case, to hear.

The possibility that psychogeography has developed into a mannered genre beyond its original ambitions is, I think, hinted at in John Darwell’s photograph *Collapsed Brussel Sprout – Allotted Space series*, 2010, where limpid and no-longer-cultivated plants lean in spent wild abandonment having gone to seed. What emerges from this exhibition is that the political questioning of land ownership remains critically vital, even with echoes of a Chartist picturesque. Meanwhile the forms, while still full and articulate, are passing into subterranean meditation, into the afterlife of a pallid sublime in the late-capitalist era of the soft estate of Modernism.

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