

## **Synthetic Landscapes..**

**Curated by Meadow Arts**.....

**Weston Park 4 June to 3 September**.....

**Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery 24 June to 3 September**.....

The use of the word synthetic broaches the complexity of thinking about landscape in this elaborate show. The word is usually associated with something that is fake, pre-packaged; something artificially synthesised to imitate nature. In terms of philosophy, a synthetic proposition is either true or false depending on experience of the world. In this show, these meanings form a circumlocution that is used to interpret the notion of an ideal landscape.

The show has three parts: an extensive prologue to this historical interpretation takes the form of paintings in a conventional white-walled gallery. The main setting and context is a Capability Brown pleasure garden in the grounds of the Elizabethan country house Weston Hall. This picturesque landscape is echoed in artists' use of qualities of Claude Lorrain's paintings and his influence on the genre of the picturesque. A

contrasting setting provides further context for the show in the nearby industrial revolution era Coalbrookdale. The implication is that the exhibition aims at a synthesis of pleasure idyll and industry – a ‘Machine in the Garden’, to reference the title of Leo Marx’s book.

If any of the contemporary history paintings conjure sentimentality or nostalgia it is of the unhomely variety: Ged Quinn’s large-scale painting *The Rule of Grace*, 2016, reproduces in affectionate detail a Claude landscape, selected trees, rocks, bridges, within a centralised oval composition and immersive, poetic light. The cover of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* is painted onto the landscape as a trompe l’oeil visual quote, alongside painted blurry 20th-century photographs of warfare and massacre. The nostalgic grace of a Virgilian idyll and the pleasure of reading are pierced by the machinations of violence. In Quinn’s adjacent Claude-type painting, *Events Arrive on Doves’ Feet*, 2014, several references to Modernism appear in the foreground: one such device is a small, compartmentalised, construction featuring a Picasso-esque eye, Sonia Delaunay-esque circles and Duchampian machines – in short, a visual cluster of quoted curiosities. The title refers to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: ‘It is the stillest words that bring on the storm.

Thoughts that come on doves' feet guide the world.' Yet another quoted complexity. Nietzsche's narcissistic aphorisms are tricky to pin down, yet the artist seems to be setting up a synthetic juxtaposition between quietude and anxiety: thoughts that arrive through meditative creativity and thoughts that accumulate in the heat of revolution or in doubt, second guessing and hindsight.

Artifice and materiality make up the fantastical 'Landscape Drawings' of Hélène Muheim. Paper, graphite and eye shadow combine in fan-like, bejewelled paper crucibles viewed up close. Rococo-esque figures in naked encounters, wind-swept trees amid English Lakes and a hint of decorative Chinoiserie fold three-dimensionally into enchanted, fairy glens. These cosmetic surfaces allow the viewer to assume the role of a sentimental traveller through the historical picturesque. Sentiment merges into uneasy satire as the viewer realises that through the overworked surface, which is plain to see, a raw self is obliquely sensed.

While in the passenger seat driving along the M6 through Birmingham heading to Weston Hall, I tested out the setting for Edward Chell's *Motorscapes*. I imagined the wing mirrors of my car functioning like Gilpin's Claude mirrors attached to his carriage in the 18th century to frame fortuitous vistas while touring. A valley of warehouses, red cliffs and trees, a serpentine

motorway: variety, roughness and an amber tint to blend tonality bring the ingredients of the urban picturesque together. In his synthetic pictures, Chell focuses on the marginalised wilderness of flora found on motorway sidings. The wild flowers that survive amid the fumes are painted with delicacy in oil paint on a surface of shellac. Chell's drawings of plants exude Claude's golden light as they congeal into diseased grotesques.

In the middle of the pleasure garden Pablo Bronstein's architectural, billboard-style facades, *Chinese Bridges in Landscape*, 2017, ironically and amusingly incise themselves as a theatre of forced perspective within a vista. Adjacent, situated against the red-brick wall of the garden, lie the remnants of David Bethell's *Contraption: After Telford and Brown*, 2017. Forming a link with the nearby industrial revolution landscape of Ironbridge, this quirky, medieval-looking machine, reminiscent of Alice Aycock's early work, mixes agrarian apparatus with industrial machinery. The whole shebang, a humorously constructed DIY theatrical work, was dragged around the grounds and filmed as a Buster Keaton-style performance. The work is now located at nearby Shrewsbury Museum and Art gallery surrounded by 18th- and 19th-century paintings from the collection. The paintings

depict bridges and smoke-stacks and along the edges pack horses, working people with packs and wheelbarrows discharging coal.

As a category the picturesque is mutable and awkward to define. Its qualities of meandering forms, emphasis on variety, artifice and perceptual play, line-up with contemporary art and architectural theory as non-fixed categories with an emphasis on margins or edges. In the 18th century the taste for the picturesque reflected the laissez-faire capitalism of the day and frequently ruined cottages or urban slums along with their impoverished inhabitants were depicted. Whether the eclecticism of a contemporary picturesque confirms or disaffirms the tastes of late capitalism is a question provoked by this show.

On the edge of the pleasure garden a series of once thriving pineapple sheds represent the vestiges of the exotic tastes of empire and are oddly tasteful today as ruins. As marginalia to the house and garden they present an opportunity for post-colonial dialogue, a play inside a play – one exotic ruin inside another. Salvatore Arancio's *The Arrival*, 2014, for example, consists of two films running simultaneously and converging in the middle. The subject matter of the films is the ruined Garden of Tropical Agriculture built in 1899 near Paris. Situated in one of the ruined pineapple sheds, the imagery of overgrown plants and glass hot-house

windows, mirrored and converging, attest to the politics of the picturesque stroll run amok.

An exaggerated pearl is a useful description of a larger-than-life scagliola-surfaced worm that writhes in one of the derelict sheds. *Untitled (If This Isn't Nice What is?)*, 2017, a fabulous Baroque sculpture by Heather & Ivan Morison, the arrested motion of which has the quality of a curling slug and a surface of colourful polished marble. Both lumpen and opulent, the installation is an apt synthesis of the luxurious surfaces of the house and the decaying surfaces of the sheds.

Jasleen Kaur describes her work for the darkened pineapple sheds thus: '*Cairns* is a series of three touch lamps influenced by the act of my parents who for 30 days ritualistically prepared a joth [a ghee candle] and placed it on a derelict plot of land by their house within a shelter of bricks and tiles,' put together ad hoc from rubble found on the site she explains, 'They were advised by a saint to light the joth at sundown for 30 days to ward off negative energies that remained on the site.'

Kaur is interested in the transformation of taste and meaning through transculturation and hybridity which inevitably produces newness as a synthesising of cultures and landscapes. However, for this show the quote above demonstrates the intensity of activity, of

parents crouched over a shrine on wasteland now reconfigured in a pineapple shed. The work forms a critical hinge for the show where hybridity is neither historical fragmentation, pastiche nor eclecticism but represents a cultural position.

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