***Meta Landscapes: Representations and Perceptions***

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*We are tied to nature, not only by our entwined material existence but also by our interior emotional landscapes that are stirred by any encounter with the sight, smell and sounds of rivers, mountians and trees. [[1]](#footnote-1)*

Landscape is a genre with a long tradition in both Western and Eastern art, with a history of which extends back over a thousand years. However, work exploring and celebrating aspects of the natural world by moving image artists is comparatively recent, especially in the case of the electronic and digital. “Meta Landscapes: Representations and Perceptions” presented work by artists who have pioneered the electronic and digital moving image as an art form, to extend the landscape tradition. The exhibition presented a diverse range of attitudes and approaches to the genre, featuring works that explored the potential of the moving image to represent and explore subjective, emotional or imagined exterior spaces.

The exhibited art works incorporated or depicted personal, intellectual, and cultural perspectives through images (and sounds) of the natural world- often, but not always, in juxtaposition to man-made artefacts or situations. The exhibition presented works centred on spatial, acoustic and temporal experiences and perceptions. Each work sought to create complex relationships to multiple spaces- the space and time represented on the screen and the emotional/psychological spaces of the artist and viewer, together with the physical relationship of the architectural spaces of the gallery.

The term *meta,* from the Greek for “beyond” implies that the real subject of the exhibition was not limited to the depiction or reproduction of any particular or specific landscape, instead seeking to question what an experience of landscape might suggest or reveal beyond its immediate appearance. Artists have always been interested in the relationship between “vison”; the act of seeing and its relationship to external reality, what we see and how we are perceiving it. This is a central theme in the genre of landscape art. The camera (and all the related constituent parts of the imaging system- lens, recording device, display, etc) is a tool which can enable us to engage and reflect on what it means to look at and interrogate the surrounding environment and try to make sense of our relationship to it.

Although there was a notable diversity of approaches to the theme of the exhibtion in the selection, six of the featured artists presented works in a double screen format, exploring the potential of contrasting and/or parallel imagery; either splitting a single image frame or installing two indentical screens within the gallery space.

Norbert Attard’s *Horizon* (2022) consisted of two identical light boxes, each containing photographic transparencies backl-lit with LED strip lights electronically programmed to repeatedly fade in and out at a graduał pace. The striking and timeless beauty and colour of the sea was caused to emerge before the eyes of the visitor first confronted by their own mirrored reflection. The work had a purity of purpose and a hypnotic tranquility reminicent of gazing outwards from the seashore and yet also evoked a sense of awareness of the act of looking and of seeking that which might lie beyond the horizon itself.

Attard is an accomplished artist in a range of media, but his most recent conceptual works demonstrate his mastery of image/terxt combinations. *Horizon,* Attard’s most recent work, extends and refines the metaphor the artist expored in his previous photographic and text work *In the Offing*, which created a tension betwwen the familiar and the unknown, between the land and the sea, between interior „reflection” and exterior appearance.

Madelon Hooykaas has been exploring the video medium’s potential to express and describe the intangible and spiritual interconnectedness of all living beings for many years. Her split-screen video *As Above, So Below* (2019) makes reference to an often-quoted phrase originally found in a late eighth or early ninth century Arabic source and later translated into medieval latin:

*Quod est superius est sicut quod inferius, et quod inferius est sicut quod est superius.*

(That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above.) [[2]](#footnote-2)

Hooykaas presents us with images intended evoke a sense of the interconnections between inner and outer reality, making references to the relationships between those things that we can see, and those that are beyond our abilty to grasp directly; the interdependances and interconnections betwen the macrocosm and the microcosm.

Gary Hill’s mixed media installation *Sine Wave (the curve of life)*, 201, (subtitled in memory of Donald Young) consists of a double video projection of a half full glass of water (or perhaps half empty?) set against a backdrop of lush green leaves onto a pair of specially constructed wooden screens- one concave, the other convex. The screens, arranged to resemble a sine wave, present the viewer with the illusion of a continuous panoramic image of alternating movement; as the camera pans it accentuates the refracted image of the woodland within the water. The life-size scale, the immersive imagery and continuous breathing on the soundtrack, suggest the human presence behind the camera, looking, thinking, reflecting- and wondering.

Robert Cahen’s 2014 double screen video *Entrevoir* blends panoramic tracking sequences of forests and fields, saturated greens and yellows draw in the viewer with an evocation of nature which is simultaneously distanced by the break in continuity between the two parallel images. The intimate soundtrack, produced in collaboration with the Spanish video artist Fransisco Ruiz de Infante is derived from Ingmar Bergman’s 1957 classic film *Wild Strawberries*. This subtle blending of woodland landscapes and cinematic narrative creates a sense of alienation and uncertainty, drawing the viewer in whilst simultaneously creating a sense of distance and disorientation.

Vince Briffa’s installation *Outland*, oringally commissioned for the Maltese pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale, explores a complex set of themes and preoccupations. Drawing on and adapting an episode from Homer’s Odyssey, *Outland* weaves a blend of sound and video imagery of the land and the sea with those of actors portraying the protagonists- Ulysses and Calypso/Penelope.

Briffa’s overriding concern for the co-existence of dualities is at the forefront of this work, which strives to create and sustain multiple narratives depicting the complexity of human relationships. Briffa presents Ulysses as the embodiment of an “obsessive indecisiveness” consumed by his attraction to Calypso, whilst simultaneously longing to return to his wife Penelope. Drawing on ideas articulated by the French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan, Briffa’s installation depicts the human struggle with desire and the paradoxical relationship with the ideal.

South Koren artist Yeoul Son’s two-channel video *The Data Sea* (2021) is a passionate call for a better understanding of the use (and misuse) of computer data. Son has created a visually compelling digital projection which constantly changes in relation to the daily cumulative number of COVID-19 cases in China and the United States which had been recorded during the early stages of the pandemic. The images of the wave height and strength change according to the data values she applied to the algorithm. Son’s intention with this work, and in her approach generally is to question the reliability and accuracy of understanding and engaging with natural phenomena through data. The artist belives it is crucial to rethink the accuracy and value of data, given that it can be so easily manipulated.

Although my own installation *Nothing More Remains* (2022) is a single screen projection, it was created by digitally stitching together two 180 degree video recordings to create a complete 360 image. Recorded at Xledi Bay during a residency at Gozo Contemporary in October 2021, the work presents images of a landscape without any human presence; the sea, the sun, the sky, the clouds and those huge worn limestone formations that are the central image of the work. To me they suggested the remains of some ancient sculpture- remnants of a forgotten human civilisation, making a direct connection to the final stanza of Shelley’s famous sonnet Ozymandias:

*Nothing beside remains. Round*

*the decay*

*Of that colossal wreck,*

*boundless and bare*

*the lone and level sands stretch*

*far away.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

The remaining works in the exhibition are all contained within a single screen, creating a virtual window onto the gallery wall, a transporting portal into which the visitor is invited to gaze.

Steina Vasulka’s videotape *Summer Salt* (1982) is part of a larger episodic work entitled *Southwestern Landscapes* exploring the New Mexico landscape in which the artist manipulates space and time using of a variety of recording and camera handling techniques. In *Summer Salt* Vasulka placed a mirrored ball in front of the lens of her video camera, creating a sense of the camera not only as an independent eye looking out at the world, but also as a kind of surrogate body, occupying space and creating a presence within the landscape.

Steina and her husband Woody Vasulka (1927-20129) were pioneers in the development and recognition of video as an art form, creating a substantial body of innovative works across numerous forms and formats including single and multiple screen video and installations. Passionate advocates for the fledgling medium, they also developed a number of specialised imaging machines and devices bridging the transition from analogue to digital.

Michael Snow’s Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids) (2004), creates a window consists of an unedited 62-minute video recording made at Snow’s summer cabin in the rural countryside in central Newfoundland. The artist had been observing a fascinating natural phenomenon and had waited for an opportunity to record it. Just around sunset on summer evenings, when the cabin window is open, the curtain begins to rise and fall, billowing in the evening breeze.

For Snow, there is often a process of recognition and translation involved in the making of his work, espically those involving photographic and filmic processes. He understands this way of working as the discovery of a Duchampian ready-made; the observation of ordinary things or moments that develop or are seen to repeat. Snow describes these phenomena as being “taken by surprise” when they are drawn into the realm of art. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Peter campus’ *uprooted* (2022) is part of a set of single screen videos entited *straf das meer* (punish the sea), the most recent works in his *myoptiks* series. For more than a decade Peter Campus has been exploring the coastal shores of Quoque on the east end of Long Island around Shinnecock Bay in New York State with his digital video camera. It is a landscape and a coast he loves and knows well, and has engaged with on many levels:

*I know the land here, and the light. I have swum in the ocean and the bay. I have walked the dunes and the beach. I have seen a solar eclipse here. My comprehension of its infinity is part of my life. [[5]](#footnote-5)*

Campus’ approach to his subject matter at the recording stage is initially physical, emotional and spiritual. Through his work he seeks ways to contrast and compare that with the function and operation of his camera and by extension, the post-production processes he later employs to complete and refine the work.

*The camera takes a sliver of the landscape, a small bit of time, a restricted field of view. The images imply what is outside, but must express what is in its boundary. The camera is foveal, set within a larger field. It is selective and simplified. [[6]](#footnote-6)*

Terry Flaxton’s consumate video *Another Sun* wasrecorded on a volcanic Island off the African coast. Originally intended for projection, the work was presented on a desktop computer in the exhibtion, allowing the visitor to engage with the work on a more intimate scale. The poem on the soundtrack (which is also presented as superimposed text on the screen) was inspired by the Russian poet Arseny Tarkovsky’s "First Meetings".

Flaxton developed a syntheised computer voice to read this text, as he wanted to suggest an alien mind having to comprehend human emotions via an artifical intelligence:

*Maybe if we made ‘contact’, we both would speak and have our thoughts translated to each other via machine: They might tell us how they would live, love and exist - and what is of importance to them. My choice was based upon wanting to bring back life with human and alien intervention using the dead soul at the heart of the machine, to echo the sentiments of the the poem. [[7]](#footnote-7)*

Flaxton’s reference to the poetry of Arseny Tarkovsky deliberately echoes those of his son, the film-maker Andrei Tarkovsky, who used his father’s poems in *Solaris* (1972), *Mirror (1975)*, and *Stalker* (1979), films which were often concerned with our relationship to the universe and its possibilities, which, in Falxton’s own words, „bleed across from narrative cinema into art.” [[8]](#footnote-8)

Bery Korot’s video projection *Florence* (2008) also explores the relationships that can be expressed via a sympathetic and accomplished juxtapostioning of image and text. Korot’s skilful pacing of these elements creates dynamic rhythmic relationships between image and text. In her video work Korot drew on her interest in the paralells between the process of weaving cloth and the creation and construction of the video image. In *Florence* the artist has woven and blended flowing images of water patterns she recorded together with extracts from writings by Florence Nightingale during her time in Crimea working a a nurse in the most appaling conditions. Korot has explained that she concieved of this work as a kind of soliloquy - a tribute to the courage and faith of the individual: *…people whose actions transcend fear—not in a momentary, instinctual way— but over a sustained period of time. [[9]](#footnote-9)*

Video and its more recent digital offspring is a complex and continually evolving medium. In its early beginnings it was perceived as a crude and unlikely poor relation to cinema; a live electronic blend of sound and image whose main virtue was its immediacy. But as video developed technologically and culturally it attracted the attention of artists and activists who saw the medium’s potential as something well beyond its one-way broadcast possibilities. As a medium for art, it presented opportunities for disenfranchised groups as well as those who felt ostracised by mainstream and more traditional artforms. With the development of the internet and the digital, video’s versatility, flexibility, accessibility and ubiquity give it a power unrivalled by any other medium. *Meta Landscapes: Representations and Perceptions* offered an opportunity to glimpse at the potential of this medium to revitalise and refresh our sense of the natural world and our relationship to it.

(2,468 words)

1. Catherine Elwes, *Landscape and the Moving Image*, Intellect Books, Bristol and Chicago, 2022, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/As_above,_so_below>, consulted, 18/05/22 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ozymandias, Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/michael-snow/key-works/solar-breath/consulted> 20/05/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Chris Meigh-Andrews*, peter campus, dredgers,* Cristn Tierney, 2014.(Peter Campus quotations are from *notes on landscape*, http://www.peter camapus.net, consulted 02/2014.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Terry Flaxton in an e-mail to the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/beryl-korot-florence>, consulted 20/05/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)