

Sian Bonnell: A Context

Sian Bonnell's work can appear, at first sight, almost disarmingly simple. By this I mean that it can be seen as the antithesis of the type of atmospheric, determinedly complex work of a landscape photographer like Thomas Joshua Cooper. Something of this disarming 'simplicity' is apparent when one tries to describe her images from memory. For example, one image comes to memory as:

'A child's toy lighthouse has been incongruously placed on a large, curving boulder and photographed in such a way that it cuts the horizon at exactly the point where the distant sunlit beach fades into the shadow cast by clouds gathering over a cold, blue green sea'

Another as:

'A cheap metal jelly mould, in the generalised form of a sea horse, is photographed from above as it lies, almost in the centre of the image, in the sand caught by a roundish depression in a slab of striated and weathered slate-blue rock'

Both descriptions do give a reasonable account of what the two photographs, from the *Undercurrents* series, do present to the viewer's eye. But this literal account of what we see, however superficially accurate, gives little or no sense of the richness and complexity that results from a reflective viewing of these two apparently simple images.

Bonnell's work has been exhibited extensively and also reproduced in a variety of publications. In both cases the work is usually framed in terms of her relationship as a woman to traditions of landscape photography. She was included for example, in Derby Museum and Art Gallery's *Shifting Horizons: Women's Landscape Photography Now* earlier this year. Typically, the introduction to *Groundings*, an earlier solo exhibition at Watershed in Bristol in 1998, described her as drawing on and enjoying the traditions of landscape photography; while also sidestepping 'its romantic and nostalgic limitations, positioning her work firmly as a critical reading¹'. On the basis of such statements it would be convenient to unquestioningly accept the view that Bonnell's work is a type of 'contemporary' (and so, by implication, critically-oriented and in some sense 'feminist'), 'landscape photography', and then simply to move on to other issues. However, although the phrase 'contemporary woman landscape photographer' is undoubtedly one way to describe Bonnell, such a label seems to me to subtly misrepresent both what she actually does as an artist and how the work's potential is best realised by viewers.

It is not a question of rejecting this description of Bonnell as a contemporary woman landscape photographer, but rather of reflecting on some of the assumptions which underpin this description as a means of understanding more fully the richness masked by the apparent simplicity of the work. A 'critical reading' of the landscape tradition of photography implies that Bonnell takes

into account that the term 'landscape' is problematic. It is often claimed, for example, that 'landscape' as a term is inextricably bound up with a particular masculine vision generated by aesthetes, antiquarians and the landed gentry, within the historical context of the emerging capitalist world of Western Europe and that, as a result, it is the product of a particular class and gender. (This 'negative' understanding of the term 'landscape' is not 'wrong'. It may, however, need to be balanced by an understanding of the way in which, for example, eighteenth-century English garden designers themselves understood what they were doing, including the way a more natural and irregular arrangement of gardens represented English tolerance and liberty in deliberate contrast to formal gardens of French autocracy. This balancing can help us to avoid the situation of merely reading our current prejudices onto the past). Whatever our perspective, this 'negative' view of landscape is appropriate only when applied to those panoramic, idealised landscapes which served a particular, and ultimately political, definition of taste within a particular historical context. There remained (and remain) other, more everyday, understandings of landscape as 'actual portraits of views, and representations of enclosed, occluded landscapes, with no great depth of field'. The majority of landscapes, which can be seen as mundane in that they exhibited not the ideal but 'the accidental forms of nature'², were seen as an inferior sort of landscape that was of no interest to men of taste; but none the less remained landscape in the wider sense. All of which is relevant to Bonnell's approach to the land.

One response to the contemporary 'negative' view of the seventeenth century revival of the term landscape is to ask that we keep in mind that there were, even then, broadly two categories of landscape: firstly, the ideal landscape designed to appeal to the independent man of taste and, secondly, the mundane, literal, everyday landscape which might appeal to 'women and the vulgar'. Bonnell's approach to the landscape is clearly oriented by a perception of her environment that deliberately cultivates an exploration of this second, traditionally 'inferior', sense of landscape. As a result, her understanding of what constitutes landscape is closer to a much earlier, and largely forgotten, Anglo-Saxon use of the word. Barbara Bender reminds us that this earlier usage is related to the German term '*Landschaft*' – meaning a sheaf, a patch of ground, something small-scale that corresponded to a peasant's perception, a mere fragment of a feudal estate, an inset in a Breughel landscape'³. This is a 'domestic', 'small-scale' view of the land as immediate environment; one experientially closer, perhaps, to our contemporary relationship to a family back garden, a vegetable plot or an allotment. If Bonnell is to be seen as a 'contemporary landscape photographer', then it is important that we understand the word 'landscape' here as closer to that archaic sense of an intimate relationship to a particular 'patch of land' rather than to the seventeenth century ideal, or indeed its modern equivalents.

Having qualified how we might understand 'landscape' in relation to Bonnell's work, I now want to suggest a similar qualification in relation to seeing her as a 'photographer'. Bonnell trained as a sculptor and this continues to inform her work in a variety of ways. For example, in *Scrub*, an image from 1999, sixteen coloured nylon kitchen pan scrubbers are arranged along two strands of barbed wire. Between these strands and the brightly coloured rectangles which, along

with grass and cow parsley, make up the foreground of the image, we see a field and, between it and the sea, an area of scrubby woodland typical of coastal Dorset cliff tops. The complex pun embraces both the literal play on the two senses of the word 'scrub' and an underlying sense that is human labour – whether in the form of cleaning pots and pans or in agricultural work – which provides the implicit continuity between the visually incongruous items, drawn from 'culture' and 'nature' respectively, which constitute the subject of the image. The paradoxical sense of shifting and merging unities and disunities that result in, however, considerably extended if we also read the coloured rectangles of the pan scrubbers as equivalents to the formal units – often coloured Perspex – from which the new generation sculptors Anthony Caro and Philip King made their work in the 1960's. This kind of sculpture is obliquely and humorously referenced, I think, in some of the images in this years *Putting hills in Holland* and *Putting bigger hills in Holland*. Reading the image in terms of these additional references then raises a number of questions around gender and status in relation to nurture, work and creativity – questions which so often form one strand within Bonnells' work.

I think it is both possible and entirely legitimate, to see Bonnell as an environmentally-oriented performance artist; someone working in ways not dissimilar to those of Hamish Fulton, Richard Long, Chris Drury or Peter Hutchinson. Like other sculptors working with performance, who have rejected the powerful orthodoxy of a formalist or minimalist aesthetic married to industrial fabrication and the conceptualist orthodoxy which replaced it, Bonnell proceeds by first carefully selecting and placing objects in environments that are usually part of what we call the 'natural' world, and only then by framing and recording the result with a camera. The role of performance in its simplest form, that is the selecting and placing of manufactured objects in the landscape (or, more rarely, in an interior), is arguably every bit as important to her work as the fact that she then photographs the result. This sense of Bonnell as a sculptor is reinforced by the installation elements in this exhibition.

If we see Bonnell's working processes in this light, I think much of her work is best understood in terms of Stephanie Ross's argument that environmental art can be seen as an avant-garde form of gardening. Ross argues that environmental art rearticulates strategies which can be related to traditions of landscape gardening which, at least in eighteenth-century England, was itself considered as a fine art on a par with painting and poetry⁴. To link Sian's work to such an argument may seem to contradict my earlier claim that she works within a mundane, and not a 'high' or 'ideal', tradition of landscape. As Ross reminds us, just as eighteenth-century landscape had more than one model, so there is more than one prototype for the garden. The ideal garden (and through it the ideal landscape), ultimately has its roots in 'sacred groves and Nymphaeum dedicated to the pagan deities'; while the mundane garden has always been rooted in 'utilitarian kitchen and medical gardens' – gardens, that is, created primarily to serve practical concerns of human welfare. What Bonnell has in common with the first, 'high art', tradition of gardening – with its artful arrangements of statues, grottoes, obelisks, fountains, hermitages, follies, bridges, etc. – is the organisation of meanings in and through the structuring of the landscape, via the placing of objects to create systems of analogy. That

these objects are deliberately drawn from mundane cultural artefacts at the opposite end of the cultural spectrum to those of 'high art' can be seen as both a continuation and a critique of that tradition. The recent work made in Holland, with its 'sculptural' arrangement of food and flowers, perfectly illustrates this play between two traditions; although it is a form of play that remains gently subversive.

What Bonnell develops in terms of the second, mundane, tradition of the garden is a commitment to the interplay between the everyday world of mundane work, including nurture, childcare and the utilitarian in general, and the organic world⁸. Consequently, the underlying strength of her work is, as I understand it, her ability to redeploy some of the rhetorical strategies which were used to generate what Ross calls 'the symbolic powers of eighteenth-century English gardens'; but do so while working in ways which emphasise the mundane landscape as 'plot of land' or worked fragment, in the tradition of a perception of the land which is oriented by taken-for-granted or routinely utilitarian bodily work. One way in which to locate Bonnell's work more fully, in relation to Ross's original and provocative argument, is to examine the ways in which her practice both relates to, and radically departs from, that of an artist like Richard Long.

The critic Robert Rosenblum has described Richard Long as a rare type of contemporary artist; rare in that he is a particular type of Romantic, working without irony, and concerned with continuing 'those endless magical communions with nature by walking it, touching, feeling and accumulating'. Long appears to Rosenblum, together with artists like Wolfgang Laib, as part of an 'ecological last gasp of communion with the pure and beautiful stuff of nature'⁶. While Bonnell also works without irony, she differs from Long in using a gentle sense of humour or incongruity to create a distance from any directly Romantic reading of her work – as when a magnificent detail of spiral fossil is paired with a cheap metal dinosaur shaped cookie cutter. Rather than taking sides in the 'either/or' stand off between Romanticism and irony assumed by Rosenblum, she deploys a 'both/and' approach in which the childlike sense of wonder so prized by Romanticism is held in check by deployment of a sense of incongruity or humour. If her subjects often preserve something of a sense of 'communications with nature by walking it, touching, feeling and accumulating', this is as much the result of an almost loving attention to small scale elements within the landscape, and by the use of objects which have to do with the 'naturalness' of play or nurture, as any explicit emphasis on the 'pure and beautiful stuff of nature'.

Peter Bishop reminds us of another aspect of Long's perceived Romanticism, drawing attention to the way in which, for example, Long and Constable have 'been invoked in the same breath'; where both artists are seen as sharing a 'deeply geological, archaeological and archetypal vision'. What the work of these two artists is taken to share is a sense that 'space and time unite in a feeling of enormous extension, continuity and coherence', so that the 'uncertainties of contemporary cultural and psychological fragmentation are bypassed or shrunk to an insignificant layer in geological time'⁷. An observation of particular relevance, for example, to our understanding of Bonnell's *Fossil*

series as both a continuation and a critique of Romantic attitudes. Here, however, the references to childhood reintroduce a sense of fragility and transitoriness, alongside that of wonder, in the face of 'geological time'.

I would suggest that Bonnell's work can be seen in terms of an attempt both to engage with something of the Romantic tradition perpetuated by Long and Fulton – although within distinct limits derived from her understanding of her own experience – and, at the same time, to refuse the sense of high ritual or poetics which pervade their visual rhetoric. (While a sense of both ritual and poetry are often present in her work, they come modified by a very clear sense of the child's 'let's pretend that' which. Psychologically, might be linked to James Hillman's concept of 'healing fiction'⁸).

Rather than seeking out distant, high or lonely places which carry a sense of the exotic, spiritual or sublime, as a sign of an archetypal 'nature' in which to trace, as Long does, a minimal, abstract sign of ordering intellect (straight line, circle, etc.), Bonnell is happy to work with everyday objects in a mundane, worked, even taken for granted, rural landscape; to engage with a fragment of natural environment, a thicket, patch of grass or corner of a field; or with the 'enclosed or occluded landscape' identified by Burrell, particularly when working on the sea shore.

Having made these points, however, it is important to keep in mind that Long has quite explicitly refuted the claim that he is a Romantic, insisting that he is what can only be called a 'realist':

*'My work is real, not illusory or conceptual. It is about real stones, real time, real actions. My work is not urban, nor is it romantic. It is the laying down of modern ideas in the only practical places to take them.'*⁹

The difficulty in this statement is that the notion of the 'real' here is highly problematic.

I would suggest, however, that if we substitute the word 'literal' for the word 'real', it becomes considerably easier to make sense of this statement. This substitution also illuminates the key difference between Sian's interventions or placements in the 'natural' world and those made by Long. If Long is a 'literalist' in relation to the objects he manipulates, Bonnell uses objects to create 'fictions'. This difference between the two artists is best indicated by reference to James Hillman's discussion of the psychological functions of fiction. Hillman writes:

*As we muse over a memory, it becomes an image, shedding its literal facticity, slipping its causal chains, and opening into the stuff of which art is made. The art of healing is healing into art. Of course, not literally....*¹⁰

Long is not directly concerned with memory (although much of the aura which clings to his land pieces stems, in my view, from our memories, cultural or personal, of remote Romantic landscape sites) but, for example, with the literal reality of geometric forms made with real stones in real time. While Long

conforms to a 'what you see is what you get' approach that derives from Minimalism, Bonnell constantly invites us to 'see through' the literal elements of her work (in both senses of that phrase) to the meanings conjured up in her playful, but never less than serious, fictions.

Bonnell's *Waterworks* series from August 2000 may not substantially extend the way she has been working for some years but *Mont St. Michel souvenirs*, also made in August 2000, seems to me to restate an aspect implicit in a good deal of her previous work. Here the objects that signal the everyday world of popular consumption are souvenirs, with a corresponding shift from images that play with the signs of childhood to a wry reflection on adult nostalgia. Is Bonnell extending her dialogue with the natural world here, so that it engages with what a Jungian might call the 'natural' archetypes of certain historic sites and the phenomena associated with them? The distance – literal and in terms of focus – between the cheap plastic artefacts that 'remember' Mont St. Michel and the Mount itself in these photographs becomes, for me, a metaphor for a certain, perhaps doomed, longing. (The use of straw and stubble in these images – with their undertones of cutting and burning – introduce a new reference to violence which reminds us of the danger of archetypes and 'natural' myths.) I am tempted to see these works in the same light as the historian Norman Davis' recent comments on 'Celticity' – one form of identification with an imagined community by which ordinary people find an antidote to the stresses of contemporary life and to the dominant interests of an increasingly professionalized and self-regarding cultural establishment¹¹. Both acknowledge and question the value and power of a certain type of mythology.

The constructions made from cakes, tarts, jelly moulds and tulips that appear in *Putting hills in Holland* are simultaneously a wonderful take-off of the follies and other landscape constructions traditionally used to dignify the mundane landscape; a humorous review of certain stereotypes (at least one resembles a typical Dutch doll); and a sober reflection on the play between the increasing 'unnaturalness' of our food and the way in which this has come to overwhelm the 'natural' landscape – an issue that has become profoundly tragic as BSE and Foot-and-Mouth savage rural Britain. This approach takes up issues explored in *Ice Installation: Frozen Fish*, a photographic record of Bonnell's contribution to *Sea Level* (a one day event from 1998), and *Go Shopping...*, a series of works from December 2000. Both read as explicitly engaged with issues of the environment and consumption. However, while they signal a shift in emotional tone in Bonnell's concerns to something 'darker', less playful, this shift is always indicated via particular emphasis that changes from one group of work to the next. In the more recent Dutch work, the shift is to a growing sense of unease signalled by excess. This shift deepens what I take to be one of the central concerns of Bonnell's work: namely, to ask, as the historian Simon Schama does in his analysis of Anselm Kieffer's art, whether it is possible to take myths (in Bonnell's case those of nature, innocent or childhood pleasure, and 'redemptive' archetypes) seriously on their own terms; to respect their coherence and complexity, without becoming morally blinded by their poetic power? Schama's answer to his own question is, I think, singularly appropriate to any reflection on the underlying dynamics of Bonnell's work.

He writes:

Of one thing at least I am certain: that to take myth seriously in the life of an ostensibly “disenchanted” culture like our own is actually to impoverish our understanding of our shared world. And it is also to concede the subject by default to those who have no critical distance from it at all, who apprehend myth not as a historical phenomenon but as an unchallengeable perennial mystery.¹²

Bonnell’s work will neither suffer the impoverishment of our understanding of the world, by sanctioning the abandonment of metaphors and myths of the ‘natural’ world as a force in our culture, nor will it take inherited myths at face value. Her approach to what Schama calls ‘the Kiefer syndrome’ is neither ‘Romantic’ (‘modern’) nor ironic (‘postmodern’), but is embodied in what philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls ‘critical solicitude’. She understands that, myths and metaphors of the natural to continue to do their work within the ‘healing fictions’ of art, one must suspend disbelief while, above all, avoiding seeing them as literal or real; that is, one must never take them literally but obliquely, imaginatively. This approach seems to me the heart of Sian Bonnell’s project as an artist.

*Iain Biggs
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- 1 Phil Goodall in publicity material for Groundings, Watershed Media Centre, 14th Feb – 19th Apr 1998
- 2 John Barrell ‘The public prospect and the private view’ in *landscape, natural beauty and the arts*, eds. S.Kemal I Gaskell Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.2.
- 3 Barbara Bender ‘Landscape: Politics and Perspectives, Providence & Oxford, Berg Publishers Ltd. 1993, pp.158-182.
- 4 See Stephanie Ross ‘Gardens, earthworks, and environmental art’ in *Landscape, natural beauty and the arts*, eds. S. Kemal I Gaskell Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993. pp. 158-182. The quotations from Ross below are all taken from this article.
- 5 This emphasis is common to a number of women artists, for example the painter Andrea Thoma. See my ‘Andrea Thoma’s Thought Dwellings’ in *Dialogue in Place: Joyce Lyon and Andrea Thoma*, Bretton Hall College of the University of Leeds in association with the University of Minnesota, 2000, pp.20-24.
- 6 Robert Rosenblum ‘Towards a definition of New Art’ in *New Art*, eds. A.Papadakis, C.Farrow & N. Hodges: London, Academy Editions, 1991, p.48.
- 7 Peter Bishop *An Archetypal Constable: National Identity and the Geography of nostalgia*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995, p.198.
- 8 James Hillman *Healing Fiction*, Texas, Spring Publications Inc., 1983.
- 9 Quoted by John T. Paoletti in ‘Richard Long: Art in the Nature of Things’, *Art Monthly* No. 101, November 1986, p.5.
- 10 James Hillman *Healing fiction*, op. Cit. pp.42-43.
- 11 Norman Davis *The Isles: A History*, London: MacMillan, 1999, p.81.
- 12 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, London: Fontana Press, 1996, p. 134.