CLARE WOODS

THE UNQUIET HEAD

with texts by Michael Bracewell and Chris Stephens
The relationship between urban and rural environments has been particularly important in Yorkshire given how the cities and large towns in the county do not sprawl for long before opening out on to the countryside. This dialogue and tension between the city and countryside informed Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore’s work, with both artists having grown up in the Wakefield district. Hepworth would often contrast the blight of industrial landscapes with a sense of the redemptive beauty of the hills, moors and dales of the county. Much of the immediate environmental impacts of the former industries in this area have now been cleaned up, often at great social cost, but wider ecological concerns mean that we are still engaged with new tensions between the natural world and the urban environment where most of us live. It’s a conflicted, and at times, contradictory relationship, informed by Romanticism, heritage, religion and a sense of national and regional pride juxtaposed with an imperative to exploit nature for short-term gain and ever increasing standards of living.

Yorkshire’s landscape is rich and varied given the sheer size of the county, and as such has long provided inspiration to artists, writers and poets, as well as those of us who want simply to walk through the countryside to temporarily escape urban life and be calmed by nature. Hepworth said, “all my early memories are of forms and shapes and textures. Moving through and over the ‘West Riding landscape with my father in his car, the hills were sculptures; the roads defined the form. Above all, there was the sensation of moving physically over the contours of fullness and concavities, through hollows and over peaks – feeling, touching, seeing, through mind and hand and eye. This sensation has never left me. I, the sculptor, am the landscape. I am the form and I am the hollow, the thrust and the contour.”

Clare Woods’ work furthers this close engagement with the complex experience of landscape as subject matter for her atmospheric and dense paintings, often realised on an immersive scale. Woods’ work is alive to the romantic imperative of losing ourselves in nature, being subsumed and having our mood reflected in shifting light and weather, entangled grasping foliage, craggy anthropomorphic outcrops of rock, and vast empty moors. Her works re-engage with the ambiguous brooding quality of spirit of place to which artists such as Jacob van Ruisdael (1628–92), Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), Joan Mitchell (1925–92) and Paul Nash (1889–1946) all responded poignantly. Woods’ paintings contain a strong sense of the supernatural, as both a comfort and threat, with atmospheres, hauntings, pagan rituals, accumulated
histories – some buried, some visible – and an overarching vibrant lushness.
Woods’ art is not a literal interpretation of a place, rather it is an invocation of a genius loci, something that perhaps we are all affected by in finding ourselves confronted with nature and the impression we have made on it as it has been worked through agriculture and symbolised in art over the centuries. Woods’ work is an intensification of this experience embodied in paint, a medium still so resonant for exploring and conveying the full range of experiences of our natural environment. The history of landscape painting helped define our contemporary attitude towards nature. When further developed here in Woods’ work it continues to provide a powerful way of opening up meaningful experiences for viewers as we find new ways of mapping our emotional and physical lives onto the rural landscape.

Simon Wallis, Director

Against darkness, crepuscular around their edges, arcs, tunnels, vortices and strata of colour create tableaux of semi-abstraction that almost tip into figurative coherence – yet prefer to remain on the wild side, like geology, like cyclones, or like some labyrinthine underworld of nature, wormholed through altered states.

On first encounter, or close encounter, such could seem the visual language of the vast, multi-panelled enamel and oil on aluminium paintings by Clare Woods. They appear to have a sense of twilight about them, yet bring to mind bark and rock and lichen, the black water in freezing ditches and the fluorescent green light beneath a canopy of summer leaves. Two vast panoramas, The Intended and Mistaken Point, assert ancient landscapes, sacred places where sheep now graze, the ‘sky’ blood red and violet pink, eternal and not a little savage.

These paintings become monoliths of form and colour, enfolding and engulfing the viewer. The colours are both clamorous and soft, at odds yet harmonious; the forms might resemble rock formations or geological ‘faces’, elsewhere; the viewer seems to find himself within a stony maze of moorland paths. Each appears dense, fluid, craggy and moss-covered, capturing the moment when natural forms achieve abstraction and, in doing so, seeming to identify some deeper instance of transfiguration. These paintings might describe the consciousness of a landscape long abandoned, dormant, yet still alert; unfrequented places, exiled in spirit, alienated by the consequences of some rift or disruption, to enter their own stillled yet volatile dream state.

Oberon, invoking his power as King of the Fairies (or ‘King of Shadows’ to his mischievous emissary, Puck), is unequivocal in his intentions towards his estranged Queen, Titania: ‘Well, go thy way: thou shalt not from this grove, till I torment thee for this injury.’

Within a wood near Athens – the countryside of Elizabethan England, drained of temporality, rendered into classical archetype – the slow brewing of hate takes floral form: ‘I know a bank where the wild thyme blows, where ox-lips and the nodding violet grows; quite o’er canopied with luscious woodbine, with sweet musk roses, and eglantine: There sleeps Titania, some time of the night…’

The English countryside, to its poets, is inlaid and encoded with both a natural and a supernatural order. To Shakespeare, the conflict between the King and Queen of the Fairies – ‘I’ll met by moonlight, proud Titania!’ – was expressed in cosmic form: the universe...
matched by a barbed tension – drums, electric guitar; female voice, bass – not heard in such intensity since The Velvet Underground, a universe away, had recorded ‘Venus In Furs’. The circle became magical, drawing the musicians to play around its edge; the resultant recordings were simultaneously ancient and modern: haunting and haunted, keening, as the poet’s west wind, as the wail of sirens over rubber-scarred asphalt.

When Englishness, as it will, exchanges its quotidian familiarity for that which is weird, unpredictable, hallucinogenic, it achieves its greatest eloquence of spirit. Such weirdness thrives in those unfrequented spaces, often invisible borders or boundaries, which appear to separate the knowable from the unknown – Rickie’s church of transfiguration in a Cambridgeshire dell; the marshy undergrowth that lies beyond the edge of a fallow field; the bend in a lane where the light shifts at dusk. Such places, to the British Neo-Romantic artists of 1933–55 – Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, John Piper et al – eschewed prettiness, anachronism and quaintness with equal force. They were untamed and canny with time-travel; place became ‘personage’, comprised of historical layers, each with its psychic stratum of tangible atmospheric being, overlain with wiry grass and foliage, pitted with millennia-old boulders, woodland debris in surrealist formation – a subject entirely suited to the enquiries of modern art, while drawn from the strange temporal crease, yet again, between nature and the supernatural. That which was ancient appeared intimate with the centuries that lay ahead, the beleaguered countryside, thoroughfare of change, derived heightened presence from advancing alienation. The art of Clare Woods, at once local and apocalyptic, in tune with nature and the supernatural, affirms the constancy of such a state.

Michael Bracewell
Writer and Novelist

being out of kilter and so too the weather, on which all natural order was dependent. Centuries before the eco-awareness of Victorian art critic, aesthete and social commentator John Ruskin, the collapse of order was described in terms that to a contemporary audience seem close to those of modern climate change, social collapse or environmental crises: ‘The spring, the summer, the childing autumn, angry winter, change their wonted livery, and the mazed world, by their increase, now knows not which is which…’ Such is the ‘progeny of evil’ that derives from the natural and supernatural collapse of cosmic order: the countryside overgrown, the weather in humid cyclone. Suppose England, then, to possess countryside both sentient and dense with ancient histories – a place of unpredictable eeriness and sudden dead drops into a curious crease between the secular terrestrial and the enchanted.

A little under three centuries after Shakespeare’s death, the supremely English novelist E.M. Forster – whose ambivalence towards England and sense of spiritual exile would make him his nation’s greatest social anatomist – described the twitching of super-nature in a wooded-clay pit near Cambridge. Here, his head full of sentimental fables about fauns and dryads, and his eyes filled with the all-too-secular charms of Miss Agnes Pembroke, a young would-be writer called Rickie Elliot also falls foul of a fracture in the cosmic order. For Forster, the dreaded momentum of tragic destiny is triggered by anything domestic and mundane – a lost umbrella, a spoiled game of tennis, an afternoon walk through matted briars and undergrowth towards some fir trees: ‘Accordingly the dell became for him a kind of church – a church where indeed you could do anything you liked, but where anything you did would be transfigured.’ And hence: ‘You see, a year or two ago I had a great idea of getting into touch with Nature, just as the Greeks were in touch, and seeing England so beautiful, I used to pretend that her trees and coppices and summer fields of parsley were alive. It’s funny enough now, but it wasn’t funny then…’

Some years later, Rickie, emotionally barren and spiritually alienated, will suffer the consequences of what Dr David Mellor has described in reference to British Neo-Romantic art of the mid-twentieth century; those places ‘where the curses of history and hysteria spoke together.’ Thus, writes Forster, ‘It was hard on Rickie to meet the Devil, thus.’ And despite his owlish, admiring the Jacobean brick of a public school chapel: ‘Thank God I’m English…’

The surviving members of English folk rock group Fairport Convention, recording their album Lief & Liege in the summer subsequent to a car accident that had killed two members of the band, adjourned to a sprawling English country house. Their music making took place within a circle: ‘old music on new instruments’ one said – musicological research in the archives of English Folk at Cecil Sharpe House,
Painted in late 1939 and early 1940, Graham Sutherland’s Black Landscape is inevitably read in relation to its historical moment at the beginning of the Second World War. A dark, pregnant mountain, its more phallic cousin, and the skeletal hemlock plants set against a louring, pink-red sky come to stand for a pervasive anxiety at the outbreak of war. But the painting would hardly matter if its intention was as trite as to make comment simply on the state of world politics and their impact on individual psychologies. The power of Sutherland’s art comes from its range, ambiguity and mystery. Embodying Auden’s Age of Anxiety, it speaks of states of unease deeper and broader than those relating to the world today – and of a deeper, ancestral time than just the immediate moment. It is of its time but also aspires to make a statement that is universal. The turning point for Sutherland’s art was said to be his discovery of the Pembrokeshire estuary landscape where he found the twisted roots and plants that would people his paintings of the late 1930s. The artist himself, however, very quickly noted that in his paraphrasing of those found organic forms there was something akin to the paintings of Picasso and the Surrealists. As with the work of contemporaries such as Paul Nash and Henry Moore, his seemed to open up ideas of the unconscious, of deeper impulses, of the erotic and the uncanny. Like all great art, Black Landscape both belongs to its time and seeks, at least, to speak of something more universal, deeper and longer.

Recently, Clare Woods wrote an appreciation of Black Landscape. In it she wrote of anxiety – of how, having moved from Bethnal Green in East London to Kington in the Welsh borders, her fear of the human threat apprehended in the city had been displaced by a fear of something larger and less tangible. She found a parallel for this new-found anxiety in Black Landscape. Coincidences abound, Woods' urban fear was not simply that of the unseen person, of anticipated individual attack; it was less abstract and founded on experience. Woods had been in the area when, on 7th July 2005, a terrorist detonated a bomb on the Number 30 bus travelling through London’s Tavistock Square. The event made actual the common anxiety that attends the city, the crowd, the metropolitan mass. Fear to walk about the city at night is not just the recognition, based on rational evaluation, of the possibility of attack by muggers but also the deeper, unconscious fear of the dark, of the unseen and unknown. Part of the horror of the July bombs was that in their randomness they made real what ought to be irrational fears. The image of the
Neo-Romanticism was of its time. It was a response to the progress of modernity, not only to the threat that was seen to be posed to the countryside and to rural life, but also to the supposed rationality of the city. In its imagery, Neo-Romanticism combined the rise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe and was seen by some as a retreat into nationalistic nostalgia in the run-up to and during the Second World War. It was, however, crucially, forged as a template for Sutherland and his contemporaries; the shepherds and William Blake’s ‘ancient times’ provided a model and as solace. Samuel Palmer’s timeless landscape paintings of mid-twentieth-century Britain and its fascination with nature, its forms and drives fusing with those of the genius loci to speak perhaps of the War’s persistent presence long after the Armistice. In the 1920s and 1930s, its long shadow fell across England’s landscape. The Sphinx, The Watchdog and The Camel. They were also depicted by Sutherland and Nash made a number of paintings of landscapes that encompassed the Neo-Romantic culture of mid-twentieth-century Britain and its fascination with the British landscape, its ancient and rural past and threatened, ruined architectural heritage. From the 1930s through to the 1950s, the opportunities and threats of modernity opened up a seam of thought that looked to an ancient, mystical, pastoral Britain both for a model for the new Neo-Romantic culture and for Palmer’s timeless landscapes and for William Blake’s ‘ancient times’ provided a template for Sutherland and his contemporaries; the landscape became not a picturesque object of vision but a palimpsest inscribed with the histories of human life and occupation. Standing stones, ancient burial sites, legend and mythology embodied a perceived relationship between mankind and the land, reanimating ideas of genius loci, the spirit of a place, of the abstract and unknown. Ancient cultures and beliefs were now understood afresh in light of theories of the unconscious and, unsurprisingly, there formed a natural abstract and unknown. Ancient cultures and beliefs...
rising from its undulating bed of bright green moss and blackened heather, yellow, pink and vermillion. The coloured patches which streak the surfaces give emphasis to the form and variety to the eye. These patches are warm, even in a cold light. But now they assume tones of blood… Here it is as if, by a kind of prodigality of nature, the natural processes must add further the object of depiction as they build up and intensify the sense of aminous threat and eerie strangeness that pervades the work. With the realisation of the subject is diluted or disguised by the confusion of details, of form or patterning, so that the main shape forms in the photograph, Woods will not necessarily set out only be painted lines but points of disjuncture where colours are interrupted by straight lines. These are not painted lines but points of disjuncture where colours are deliberately made in paint. They derive from the flat photographic image is translated into a linear pattern of fluid-looking shapes – irregular blocks or long, sinuous, feathery forms. As the paint – until recently enamel or household paint but more recently oil – is then applied within the intricately delineated areas. The rich, dark, rather acidic colours of other things. A sequence of long, thin, irregular forms might be random but also suggest stratification, of other things. A sequence of long, thin, irregular forms might be random but also suggest stratification, may or may not derive from a cascading stream but also suggest stratification, the energy of convergent colours and brush marks forms might be random but also suggest stratification, the energy of convergent colours and brush marks...to the patterns inherent in matter. '2

The process of Woods' image making is gradual and unexpected. Getting to know the landscape by moving over, in and through it, she takes photographs of different views, aspects, details and vistas. In the studio these digital images are selected and stitched together to produce a panoramic image that is both subjective and descriptive, realistic though contrived. Over the collaged photographs is laid clear acetate into which Woods traces certain aspects of the image. The incised record of a past human presence also opens up the question of time, that these forms and this landscape are witness to, as well as a stage for, the passage of history. For the Neo-Romantic, the landscape was less the unchanging idyll of the classical image, the matrix from which the modernist in its entity under constant change and revision. Interestingly, Woods notes that the rocks of Brimham are thought to have been carved not only by rivers, winds and rain but also by human hand. Whether this is accurate or not, her interest in this further human trace and the disconnection of the paint from the motif and pattern from form enhance the potential for suggestive ambiguity; the rocks become heads, breasts, phalli, parted thighs. Complex mottled surfaces, curvaceous bodies with a scale and presence in space that require the viewer to move around them. Like sculpture, they are objects with a scale and presence in space that require the viewer to move around them. Like sculpture, they are also concerned with their own materials and, as these dissimilar lines reveal, with the process of their making. To be a landscape painter, especially one clearly aligned with the Neo-Romantic culture around the Second World War, is a risky strategy for an artist in the early twenty-first century. The artists and culture she chooses to study and emulate were deeply unfashionable and derided for at least a generation. In the modernist histories that dominated from the 1960s, British art was seen as Brimham is thought to have been carved not only by rivers, winds and rain but also by human hand. Whether this is accurate or not, her interest in this further human trace and the tension between authentic nature and the man-made is telling. All landscapes have been shaped and reshaped by humankind and culture. The scale and fluidity of Woods’ painted forms somehow capture this sense of contingency that is in contrast with the idea of permanent and dark palette with which they are described. A human presence is not only represented through these anthropomorphic suggestions; in one work, one of the details conserved in the artist’s selection is a name carved into the surface of a rock. In this case, and translated into art, a piece of graffiti becomes a marker of a past human occupation akin to a Celtic cross or the paintings at Lascaux. This trace fits into a romantic type, then, but also introduces the feeling of dread that derives from a sense of unseen presence, a common theme in gothic literature and films. This is the crucial moment of editorial selection as one of the details conserved in the artist’s selection is a name carved into the surface of a rock. In this case, and translated into art, a piece of graffiti becomes a marker of a past human occupation akin to a Celtic cross or the paintings at Lascaux. This trace fits into a romantic type, then, but also introduces the disconnection of the paint from the motif and pattern from form enhance the potential for suggestive ambiguity; the rocks become heads, breasts, phalli, parted thighs. Complex mottled surfaces, curvaceous bodies with a scale and presence in space that require the viewer to move around them. Like sculpture, they are also concerned with their own materials and, as these dissimilar lines reveal, with the process of their making. To be a landscape painter, especially one clearly aligned with the Neo-Romantic culture around the Second World War, is a risky strategy for an artist in the early twenty-first century. The artists and culture she chooses to study and emulate were deeply unfashionable and derided for at least a generation. In the modernist histories that dominated from the 1960s, British art was seen as Brimham Rocks.
art culture now similarly attaches greater value to the metropolis than to the rural: an artist will be seen as having a greater intensity or integrity if working in the urban grit of Bethnal Green than amidst the owl-hoots of the Welsh borders. Woods, perhaps, offsets this simplistic assumption with the knowingness of her art: she is not simply influenced by Neo-Romantic art of the mid-twentieth century, but plays with it as her subject, as reflected in her choice of Brimham Rocks that was a key site for Sutherland and Moore. The disruption of any cohesive image by the referencing of process and artificiality similarly makes this work as much about art and representation as about the body-landscape duality.

This seems even truer of the latest works in which Woods has eschewed the landscape for sculptures. Tellingly, these sculptures are all from the period during and after the Second World War and are all works associated with the culture of miserable dread that followed in the wake of the war and the Holocaust. By Jean Faubrrier, Moore and Sutherland, the works that Woods addresses in these paintings are icons of the visual culture of that historical moment, representations of human frailty and human cruelty. All use a degree of natural form, of organic abstraction, to conjure their sense of threat. Faubrrier’s Large Tragic Head was made in 1942 during the brutal Nazi occupation of France. A decade later, Moore’s Warrior with Shield was an evocation of human vulnerability and suffering as relevant to the Cold War during which it was made as it was to the memory of the Second World War.

Like these sculptures, Woods’ paintings are curious and unsettling. They are, perhaps, celebrations of the power of the earlier works of art. One might presume they are driven by a desire to recapture and recapitulate the bronzes’ messages of fear and dread. They might also, however, be reflections on the ways in which imagery operates. Perhaps there is a dialogue between these new paintings and her others, the latter being of landscape features that suggest the human form, the former being of representations of the human form that recall the landscape. All have a tension between their circumscribed wholeness and a contingent instability. Woods revisits the art of the past: the romantic vision of the landscape as an eroticised body and the use of the human head as a vehicle for the tragedy of their time. In 1944 Cyril Connolly wrote that ‘the masterpieces appropriate to our time are… sombre, magnificent yet personal statements of our tragedy.’ Woods revisits the works of that time, or their central motifs and characteristics. In looking to the past, she uses ideas of landscape and nature to reflect feelings of anxiety and threat. At the same time, she reflects upon the ways in which such ideas are represented. It is an art that is intense, sincere and yet also reflexive, about the natural realm, the human psyche – and about art itself. It is, as Connolly prescribed, an art that is sombre and magnificent.

Chris Stephens
Head of Displays and Curator (Modern British Art) Tate Britain
LIST OF WORKS

The Intended, 2011
Enamel and oil on aluminium
250 x 1050 cm

Mistaken Point, 2011
Enamel and oil on aluminium
250 x 1050 cm

Hollow Face, 2011
Oil on aluminium
70 x 55 cm

Funnelled Hole, 2011
Oil on aluminium
100 x 150 cm

Dead Spring, 2011
Oil on aluminium
110 x 75 cm

Idle Idol 1, 3 & 2, 2011
Oil on aluminium
70 x 55 cm each

The Balance, 2011
Oil on aluminium
150 x 100 cm each

Mistaken Point
Enamel and oil on aluminium
250 x 1050 cm

Hollow Face
Oil on aluminium
70 x 55 cm

Funnelled Hole
Oil on aluminium
100 x 150 cm

Dead Spring
Oil on aluminium
110 x 75 cm

Idle Idol 1, 3 & 2, 2011
Oil on aluminium
70 x 55 cm each

The Balance, 2011
Oil on aluminium
150 x 100 cm each
Hopes Noes, 2011
Enamel and oil on aluminium
400 x 300 cm

The Bloody Kernel, 2011
Enamel and oil on aluminium
400 x 300 cm

Tragic Head, 2011
Enamel and oil on aluminium
600 x 500 cm
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THE UNQUIET HEAD
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