

## Out of the Woods: The Human Landscape

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‘I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events, as the snail leaves its slime.’ This bold artistic statement made, by Francis Bacon in 1955, seems just as relevant today to the art of Clare Woods, an artist whose reputation was founded on the beauty and drama of her powerful, evocative landscapes paintings. These monumental works were based on close-up, detailed photographs that Woods had taken herself, often at night, transforming the traditional image of the British countryside from the idyllic and pastoral into the haunting and spiritual. Rhythmic trails of gloss enamel paint weave intricately through overlooked details of the micro-landscape, such as the roots of a felled tree or the puddles of a muddy track. These evocative forms became Woods’ mark and signature, just like the slime of Bacon’s snail.

She found, however, that using her own photography as a preliminary aid in this way made it difficult to distance herself from the imagery. It was only once she had made a drawing from the photographs and had enlarged it by projecting it onto the panel that she felt any sense of objective distance. This dissatisfaction corresponded with a similar questioning of her choice of materials. After the success of her exhibition ‘The Unquiet Head’ at the Hepworth Wakefield in 2011–12, which featured breathtaking landscapes more than ten metres in length, she came to the conclusion that she had taken her use of enamels as far as she could. After pushing herself to her own physical limits in creating the works for that show, she felt she had conquered the medium and could now predict the outcome of a painting before she had even started it. The idea of going through the motions is an anathema to a painter as restless and energetic as Woods. Indeed, she has commented that if she had continued with enamels she may as well as taken any tedious or repetitive job for it would have been just as stimulating for her.

So, in order to avoid such tedium, she decided, mid-career, to make two radical and daring changes. First, she would stop taking photographs herself and would instead

explore subject matter taken from found source material: books, the internet, documentary and press photographs, especially those shot in black and white. Second, she would adopt oil paint as her primary medium. This new approach enabled her to free herself from the subject and to focus on the materiality of the paint itself. Oil paint is more unpredictable and difficult to control than enamel, which forced her to engage more with the medium, both intellectually and physically. In particular, the luminosity and subtle textures that oil paint can achieve opened a new chapter in her practice. And by working from black-and-white images, she has been able to detach herself and her palette from the colours of the real landscape as they had appeared in her photographs. She relishes this new-found freedom, often dropping into conversations that, 'It's all about the paint.'

Using found source material places Woods within another British tradition, although one that is not so readily identified as such. While some art historians have credited this practice as having emerged from the American Pop Art scene of the 1960s, in fact Walter Sickert had pioneered the technique in Britain at least four decades earlier. He had also been engaged in a campaign to 'out' the use of photography by other artists, which he had declared, as early as 1891, to be the open secret of the studios.<sup>1</sup> Rather than dwell on the merits of whether or not photography was a legitimate aid for an artist (a debate that has subsided only in the past twenty years), Sickert argued it was more relevant to ensure that artists did not slavishly copy photographs, but used them to elevate painting beyond straightforward mimesis. In other words, photography should be employed only by artists creative enough to be highly selective and critical of them. When interviewed by a young art student who questioned Sickert's own use of photography, he cheekily replied: 'Ah yes, people think I paint from photographs ... yes, so I do when I've teased what I want out of them.'<sup>2</sup> Woods utilizes photographs with the same sense of control and manipulation, toying with the material to ensure it is kept subservient to her main artistic goals. Sickert's choice of the word 'teasing' suggests a cat playing with a mouse before the kill, and one does get that sense when one compares the complexity of Woods' finished paintings with their original sources.

While she claims that her adoption of found imagery has freed her from subject matter, there is a definite theme to the images she selects and pins to her studio wall. **A bleak**

photograph shows tree stumps standing starkly in a seeming bog, obliterated and devoid of life, on the battlefield at Passchendaele, the ultimate man-made landscape. This image has been on Woods' wall since early in her career, long before she began to use source material, and it remains there to this day. She still has not settled on how to use the photograph directly in a work, but it has informed a number of her paintings, and must have been pivotal in moving her practice to found imagery. It struck me when looking at her sources how many of the pictures feature people snapped in an unguarded moment, often in a situation of extreme duress, such as a **First World War officer wading** through the waterlogged trenches at Bois-Grenier in northern France in January 1915, the inspiration for *Little Contented Lane*. While superficially the painted composition mirrors the photographic source, Woods takes it to a different level through subtle distortions and variations. The trees in the photograph, barren of any obvious life, frame the background. One – the roots of which hang over the trench, thus seeming to foreshadow death – leans across the others. By taking the viewpoint slightly higher and by using colour to subtly merge the bank of the trench and the background trees, Woods makes what looks like a Gothic arch emerge, conjuring up thoughts perhaps of the God the soldiers may have thought had abandoned them. The officer's right arm is also painted in the same hue as the background, thereby making it invisible and emphasizing how unsteady he was as he tried to make 'progress' through the trench. Woods also transforms his balaclava into a mask, causing him to look like a ghostly apparition, the skin tone blending into the background landscape, just like the decaying heads of corpses that no doubt surrounded him. This haunting painting is the first in which she combined the human form with the landscape. One wonders if she was attracted to the image because of the soldier's shadow, dramatically elongated in the flooded trench, which is reminiscent of the looming figure of Nosferatu. But Colonel Philip R. Robertson, whose image it is, was in fact sourced by Woods from the internet, and she intended it to be a work commemorating the centenary of the First World War.

The rise of press photography in the early twentieth century brought with it 'the commercialization of anxiety', as photographers could capture horrific events as they unfolded and distribute them to the public via the newspapers.<sup>3</sup> This created a powerful emotional undercurrent for the reader that was, and still is, a crucial component of print media. Today, this effect has been taken to a new and more intense level through social

media and the internet. In January 1952, when it still would have been considered daring, Bacon allowed the American critic Sam Hunter to photograph selected examples of his source material and to publish them in the *Magazine of Art*. Bacon's imagery was typical of the content of the press at the time: the Pope on his throne next to two Nazi leaders, a cutting of a murdered victim of gangster crime, and movie stars share space with high-brow images of art and photography. It comes as no surprise that Hunter's caption reads 'Violence is the common denominator', for Lord Northcliffe, the proprietor of the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*, famously demanded of his staff, 'Get me a murder a day.'<sup>4</sup> In fact, while this kind of material features heavily in Bacon's sources, the amount of violence in his paintings is often overstated. One of his few overtly violent images, and one that has fascinated Woods, is *Blood on Pavement* (1984), the subject of which is simply a wound. The blood-stained floor is strangely mesmerizing in that it has such a powerful human presence, despite being extremely rare in Bacon's oeuvre for not featuring the human form at all.

The subject of the wound has preoccupied Woods recently and coincides with her new focus on the human figure. Much of her source material for this theme, not surprisingly, includes pictures relating to trauma, war and violence. Often these images feature injuries and the use of bandages to wrap an injured body. Woods is fascinated by questions of weight, hanging and suspension and how to transpose these sculptural preoccupations into paint. A group of works that immediately precede her 'wound' pictures, and which were some of her first experiments in oil, were based on sculptures by Phyllida Barlow, Eduardo Paolozzi and Louise Bourgeois. Her practical interest became how to 'wrap the paint around' these three-dimensional sources and to make the weight feel solid and real on a two-dimensional panel. The introduction of a focus on the bandaged body seems a natural progression in her exploration of this technique. In fact, there are allusions to medical practices in the method that she uses to apply paint: she applies white masking tape to cover completely the white primer layer of her panel; she then uses a scalpel to remove sections of this tape, before adding coloured paint over the sections she has removed. Woods' interest in the corporal and the visceral also stems from personal experience, for in 2013 she had major surgery, during which her colon was removed. Subsequent complications saw her become concerned with wounds and

mortality; she certainly had copious amounts of her own blood to contend with in everyday life. Similarly, the subjects of her source material often depict the patient having had some degree of medical intervention; frequently, an injury is covered up and bandaged, rendering the person beneath anonymous. In some cases, their identity and facial features are obliterated altogether. Woods' fascination with this dichotomy between the body and identity extended to her attending an autopsy in order to make drawings and to study the lifeless human form (the deceased subject was an old man about whom she knew nothing). She found the experience surprisingly difficult from an artistic perspective: she had not realized how challenging it would be to depict the rigid, colour-drained flesh of a corpse.

*Silent Suzan* from 2014 (p.xxx) is a powerful image of a head, with red paint applied with a lot of pressure to create a transparent effect reminiscent of a stained-glass memorial window. The multiple sources that Woods used for this work show the diversity of her found imagery. The first is the famous image of Davinia Turrell that appeared on the cover of many newspapers after the 7 July 2005 London bombings. Turrell was travelling on the train that had just left Edgware Road station when a bomb went off. She was photographed being led to safety, her face covered with a mask to protect her burns. By contrast, the other principal visual source for *Silent Suzan* is a painting by Sickert, *Juliet and Her Nurse (1935–6)*, which depicts the famous scene from Shakespeare's play when Juliet's nurse procrastinates over telling the young girl news of Romeo. Woods was attracted to the painting because the nurse's scarf has a similar feel to a bandage and dominates the composition. Her disturbing face, with her bulging eyes and intense expression of foreboding, also resembles a mask. One can easily see how this could merge in Woods' imagination with the primitively cut-out eye, nose and mouth holes of Turrell's bandages. The dramatic hand gestures in both images also have parallels, and the manner in which Turrell holds the bandage onto her face as a practical necessity unconsciously mimics the theatrical gesture for shock or surprise. In the painter's hands, the bomb victim's bandaging also takes on a similar shape to the nurse's scarf. *Silent Suzan* is also a rare occasion where Woods was influenced by the colour of another artist's palette: here she has taken the white, red and plum of Sickert's painting as the dominant colours of her own. But there is another connection: Sickert,

too, was working from found imagery, in his case a publicity photograph by Yvonne Gregory of the Oxford University Dramatic Society's 1935 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, starring Edith Evans as the Nurse and Peggy Ashcroft as Juliet. Having just recently **discovered this photographic source**, I gave a copy to Woods and she is now using it to create a new painting.

Another source that was pinned to her studio wall was a photograph of soldiers during the First World War. **This image is unnerving as the men sit in relaxed poses as if on a break in the back of an army truck.** One of them is even smoking. However, two of the soldiers are heavily bandaged, one with his face and arms totally covered. The relaxed pose of his legs belie the shocking pain we can imagine he was in. Woods has taken this image and created a small panel that transposes the bandaged heads but omits the bodies, with the result that the faces seem to float in air. A fine, almost unnoticeable piece of metal on the truck is made more prominent in the painting, linking the most heavily bandaged man's head to his dislocated, bandaged arms, and functions in a similar way to the trails of enamel in her earlier landscapes. This painting, *The Bunion Specialist* of 2014 (p.xxx) is ghostly and haunting, but is also 'all about the paint', specifically the wrapped brushstrokes that form the structure of the heads. The composition reminds me of a relatively unknown Bacon painting, *Three Studies from the Human Body* (1967), which Woods had not seen before she painted her picture, but which shows three figures floating in air, the three ages of man, one of whom is wearing a cast on his bandaged leg. Coincidentally, Bacon's work also features one of the figures on a thin line.

Works like *Little Contented Lane*, *Silent Suzan* and *The Bunion Specialist* show that, despite the recent changes to her practice, there is one aspect of her earlier work that Woods clearly wants to retain: a sense of angst and unease. Her uncompromising use of the figure and choice of subject have been recognized by the Royal Marines, with whom she is currently working. It will be fascinating to see the results of this exciting new project.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Sickert, 'The Haig Statue', *The Times*, 27 February 1930.

<sup>2</sup> Basil Jonzen, 'A visit to Mr Sickert at Broadstairs', *Horizon*, 45, September 1943, p. 202.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Lampard, 'The Urbanizing World', in H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (eds), *The Victorian City, Images and Realities*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Williams, *Get Me a Murder a Day! A History of Mass Communication in Britain* (London: Hodder, 1997).