

## East Anglian Landscape and Memory

### CLAIRE WALSH VISITS THE 'WATERLOG' EXHIBITION

Last April I watched as the last of the Easter holiday visitors considered the different attractions on offer at Norwich Castle Museum: they included a tour of the dungeons, a wobbly chariot ride in the Boudica gallery, an Easter bunny trail – and 'Waterlog', an ambitious exhibition specially commissioned for the site, bringing together film, video, photographs, paintings and objects. The artists were Tacita Dean, Alexander and Susan Maris, Alec Finlay and Guy Moreton, Simon Pope, and Magnus Coates. (The show, slightly modified, was shown later in the year at The Collection, Lincoln's museum of art and archaeology.)

The theme of 'Waterlog' was the distinctive landscape and historical memory of East Anglia, as mediated through the work of the writer W G Sebald. In August 1992, Sebald set out to walk the coastline of Suffolk, his adopted home; his haunting, beautiful and ultimately melancholy account ended three years later. His book, *The Rings of Saturn*, is a meditation on what was seen and remembered: past and present, friends and ghosts. 'Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondence connect?' he asks. The answer is that Sebald finds connectivity in the random everywhere he looks: the history of the land under his feet evokes Sir Thomas Browne, the seventeenth-century physician and writer; his German childhood in the aftermath of war; Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*; the Norwich silk industry; the Dowager Empress of China; carpet bombing . . .

The idea of a landscape exhibition using Sebald as a guide came originally from Stephen Bode, the director of Film and Video Umbrella. The organisation curates and produces projects by artists in collaboration with partner venues: this one was funded as an Arts Council touring project. Norwich Castle Museum, with its important collection of East Anglian (Norwich School) landscape paintings by Cotman, Crome and their followers, was the natural first partner. And there was a link between the exhibition and the museum's remarkable natural history galleries, which include a British bird collection assembled by local ornitholo-

gists between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are also dioramas of Norfolk habitats that were innovative when they were created in 1932. These are now as resolutely unfashionable as they are still popular; it is a wonder and a blessing that they have remained untouched.

Jeremy Millar, the artist and curator, wanted 'Waterlog' to take on the way Sebald himself looked at things, to make it open to different trajectories. The new work by Tacita Dean, her first British commission since 1999, is at the heart of the show. *Michael Hamburger* is a portrait of the nature poet, translator and friend of Sebald [see Claire Walsh's interview with Dean in *The Art Book* vol 15 issue 1]. Dean's beautiful film is poignant and quietly compelling and, as ever, full of subtle, nuanced allusions. To give one example, a significant passage in Sebald's book describes an uncanny experience he had during a visit to his friend. He had the strange feeling that he had lived in the old Suffolk house before Hamburger (who came to England as a refugee from Nazi Germany in 1933); that everything, from the poet's writing materials to the collection of seashells on his chest of drawers, were actually his. The identities of both writers thus briefly merged. Dean suggests the encounter through passing shots that seem to recreate photographs Sebald took. The camera's steady gaze takes in the overflowing desk and hallway: the extra clutter Hamburger had accumulated since the photographs appeared in the book tells of the passage of time since Sebald's visit (and since his tragic death in a car crash). Hamburger himself died in the house in 2006, at the age of 83.

Hamburger grew apples and had a gift for cultivating rare specimens from pips, away from their native soil – like the small apple from Devon given to him by his friend, the poet Ted Hughes, that was the deepest red he ever saw. This film is suffused with the glowing reds and golds of the fruit in the orchard and the apples in Hamburger's elderly hands as he prepares them for storage, intoning their names and characteristics. Sebald had written: 'I looked on these . . . much as the golden apples likened in Proverbs to a word

fitly spoken'. Dean's film works with ideas around apples and words, while Hamburger's orchard is a metaphor for his journey, for translation and transformation.

While *The Rings of Saturn* lay at the heart of *Waterlog*, the artists drew on it at different points – some at a tangent, as real and imaginary journeys through a landscape. The journey in the Maris video, *Silentium*, is a slow boat-ride along the silted Suffolk coastline to Aldeburgh, up the brackish river Alde and to the house that was Benjamin Britten's sanctuary from noise. This is a homage to Benjamin Britten, set to music by Arvo Part, who was a great admirer of Britten. This work has been designed for a gallery space, whereas Simon Pope's *The Memorial Walks* also exists online. Pope's recent work has been interactive and centred on the notion of walking; here both are incorporated into memory and the changing landscape. Pope asked ten writers to carry out a ritual: choose a painting from the museum's Norfolk School collection, commit it to memory, then walk to a location in the countryside where they try to recollect it. The writers' reconstructions are recaptured in audio files on the 'Waterlog' website. The ten paintings are in the gallery, all but one at a time covered in black mourning cloth: a nod to Sebald. This is a seventeenth-century Dutch custom, mentioned on the last page of the *Rings of Saturn*, whose purpose was to make sure that the soul would not be distracted on its final journey.

Marcus Coates' work is about the bittern, the elusive bird thought to be a harbinger of doom, with its eerie, foghorn-like boom. The bittern almost disappeared from East Anglia and in his shamanic, slightly macabre installation, Coates has laid 11 limp, unstuffed bittern specimens side by side, the number of males recorded in 1997, close to a recording of his own plangent 'Britain's bitterns' dialect song. (As a child, Coates used to go birdwatching in Norfolk but never spotted the strange bird with its call that, Sebald wrote, fired Thomas Browne's curiosity.) When he started researching this project, Coates discovered that there was a large scientific specimen collection of bitterns



Guy Moreton, *Dingle Marsh Dunwich*. © The artist 2007. Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella.

(301) at the museum, some – including a few of those on display – dating back to the early nineteenth century. Finally, Guy Moreton has also engaged with ideas around the cultural construction of nature and the place of contemporary landscape. His contribution is a small series of photographs of marshes and river, accompanying circle poems painted on lifebuoys by Alec Finlay. (A bigger selection of their work was shown at the Sainsbury Centre.)

Where many exhibitions of new work are ‘needy’ and bombard visitors with messages, ‘Waterlog’ – its mood cool, curious, melancholy – did not try to ingratiate itself. A knowledge of Sebald’s work gave an edge to the experience of viewing – but it was certainly not a prerequisite for enjoying it. In Norwich, ‘Waterlog’ benefited from a physical link with the museum’s collection of paintings: the two big rooms that house temporary exhibitions (one named, disconcertingly for such an organic show, the

Bernard Matthews Gallery) are between the permanent galleries, with connecting doors so that visitors can drift in and out between the two. ‘Waterlog’ later transferred to a new space in Lincoln, which imposed its own demands. Since it was

important that a show about journeys and migration could itself change and be transformed, some new works were added there.

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#### Editor’s note

After Claire Walsh wrote this article an accompanying book was published to coincide with the Lincoln staging of the project. *Waterlog: Journeys Around an Exhibition* charted the course of the project so far and set out to pursue parallel paths and open up further lines of enquiry.

A visual record of the various artists’ works, documented also through installation photographs of its previous incarnation in Norwich, this limited edition 128-page book features a number of specially commissioned texts, including typically inventive contributions from ‘Waterlog’ artist Alec Finlay, a new poem, ‘East’, by Matthew Hollis, and essays by writers Robert Macfarlane and Brian Dillon. In acknowledgement of W G Sebald, whose writings were such a source of inspiration for the project, the book reprints two texts dedicated to his memory: ‘Backwaters: Norfolk Fields’ by George Szirtes, and Tacita Dean’s eponymous visual essay on the author. *Waterlog: Journeys Around an Exhibition* by Steven Bode, Brian Dillon, Matthew Hollis, Robert Macfarlane, Jeremy Millar, and George Szirtes. Published by Film and Video Umbrella, London ([www.fvu.co.uk](http://www.fvu.co.uk)) £12.00. ISBN 978-1-904270-24-9.