

England's Favourite Landscape: the cautionary tales of Paul Collinson.

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The 'underlying horror of the English countryside'¹ is elegantly evoked in Paul Collinson's large-scale oil paintings. Usually discussed in terms of the idealizing practices of the picturesque, of traditional landscape and tourism, and of amateur model-making, Collinson's paintings offer a acute commentary on the post-2008 economic collapse.

The decayed marble columns and mythological references that usually lead us into conversation about the English landscape, suddenly seem to point east to the chaotic implosion of modern Greece, and to the politics of the European Economic Area. The constituency of 'England's Favourite Landscape' takes on a bleaker ring, as we survey the remnants of austerity politics and imperialism. Collinson's thoughts on aesthetics and politics with their debt to Smithson's arguments about democracy and entropy, are not hammered home, but wait patiently to be pieced together like the airfix kits whose memory haunts his model constructions.

The use of the model to generate the work liberates the artist from Ruskin's "heartless" hunt for the picturesque view. Each piece starts playfully, in a hands-on flurry of cutting and gluing, before the cooler distance of the camera requires a step back, to survey and to assess. An interesting interplay of digital print and digital data emerges as they are each compared for their fidelity to the diorama (here, we are clutching at the straws of what might constitute the Real). Finally, a position is taken, a point of view is assumed, and the technical problems of painting begin to be worked out. Collinson has immersed himself in the landscape tradition, addressing the questions around photo-realist painting by incorporating all the distortions and visual curiosities of lens-mediation into his works. His handling of paint is reserved, allowing his incisive critique to be quietly insistent, without melodrama, without making a *scene*.

Despite their overt scenic pleasurableness, Collinson's paintings are dense texts ripe for deciphering, opportunities rich with cool wit and occasions requiring careful consideration. Opportunity is a key word in Collinson's lexicon, but it's meaning is mutable: one man's opportunity being, after all, another man's disaster. His wit is not only verbal, but visual. "Ego" the graffiti tagger makes an appearance, and whilst we are assured that "Bobo lives" (and I too once lived...), we are also aware that he is a most unusual graffiteur. Whilst there are nods to contemporary graffiti practice in the use of stencilling, there are no strident cocks, no misspelt obscenities or invitations to 'fuk'. There's a praying hermit in *L'Hermitage*, overshadowed by a motley crew of Alabama Outlaws, and a distorted section of the foreground can fleetingly be read as a figure with a shoulder-held weapon, picking up on the implied threat of the horror-film billboard.

The Temple of Ancient Virtue (Pegasus Snack Bar) is an encounter under a different, starker sun. The rich green lawns of England have been usurped by the khaki, sandy soil of a warmer climate. The heavy grey skies of *Heritage Lottery* have been replaced by a harsher Mediterranean blue, and the trees partly obscured by the snack-bar itself could easily be mistaken for cypresses. Even the Pegasus sculpture seems to have a pale fire flickering beneath its skin. Here, we are clearly engaging with the ruins of economic policy.

Collinson rarely shies away from raising uncomfortable questions. The sardonic nomenclature of *Get Off My Land* – that cunning and accusing ‘orf, the voice of the landowner class encapsulated by the transposition of two consonants (do try it out – ‘get off my land’ is an entirely different command) – finds the order apparently directed at the dark-hooded figure leaning against a dark car, with just a hint of blacked-out window. We do not miss the signifiers of implied violence and vandalism, perhaps even drugs. But the country squire with his shotgun remains invisible, and so we begin to question just who is lord of this particular manor? The corrugated iron and blue tarpaulin – frequent motifs for Collinson – are more evocative of the ‘edgelands’, and the allotment areas, than of the great estates with their monumental ruins. Have we been deceived by the grassy sward, and a specific accent? Have we mistaken the interloper? Have we, oh horror, misjudged a class situation? *In Search of the Picturesque* uses the suburban tone of agent’s blurb and a partially-destroyed car to allude to the modern fairytale of the low-rent “King of Chavs” lottery winner and his latest acquisition – a different kind of estate for him to burn on the way to the bankruptcy court. The estate’s lurching progress from eloquent ruin (with a hat tip not only to Douglas Crimp but to Roberto Calasso) to abjection and defilement parodies the rollercoaster of capitalist economics, of how history is gobbled up, refashioned and re-launched: from to a once-prized estate, to a dystopian playground, to an opportunity for residential development.

In *Civic Trust*, a stain from outside the narrative space smears the pavement – an egg-shaped mystery (or a reference to photo-realism, depending upon your familiarity with the history of painting) alludes just enough to a human head to remind us of our own responsibilities in the civic sphere. There are dropped clues everywhere. A lurid green plastic cowboy figurine waves his pistols against a backdrop of a poster-scene reminiscent of *Ice Cold In Alex* or some other post-war fiction of early 1940s Egypt. Our American friend herds us towards the “EXCITING DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES” that are offered by an unknown benefactor, flanked by the reminder of the discontents of consumerism. It is difficult not to link the three: war in the middle east; shopping mania; exciting development opportunities. In this restrained way, Collinson unexpectedly evokes the military-industrial-entertainment complex on quiet pathways where we might really be looking for something else.

It is this ability to expose the critical questions of the day where we look to acknowledge historical tradition that is at the heart of Collinson’s achievement. The works destabilize, even ‘queer’ the narrative of history, sneaking in a cautionary tale of the present, in place of a comforting tale of the past.

ⁱ Ishiguro, Kazuo *The Remains of the Day* (1989)