

Wilderness

2 February – 6 May 2018

What pushes me to explore remote places is my nostalgia for regions that are still completely natural. Places that are untouched, where humans have hardly intervened. I'm fascinated by how people manage to endure and survive in spite of circumstances that are often rough and rigorous.

-Scarlett Hooft Graafland

The New Art Gallery Walsall is delighted to present painting, drawings, photography and film works by contemporary artists whose practices engage with the natural world and the psychology of uninhabited places. From barren high-altitude salt deserts and snow-blanketed mountain peaks to environments in transition such as coastlines and volcanoes, the artists bring into view some of the most hostile and unforgiving landscapes on our planet.

Scarlett Hooft Graafland's practice has led her to journey to some of the most far-flung corners of the earth, including the remote shores of Vanuatu in the South Pacific Ocean and the desolate Canadian Arctic. Her photographs document her site-specific sculptural interventions and performances and reflect on histories, legends and traditions relating to the landscape. *Discovery* is taken from Graafland's Bolivia series. The artist began making work there in 2004 and it is a place to which she has consistently returned.

South Korean photographer, Boomoon, engages with natural landscapes as a means of self-reflection. Devoid of human existence, the central emphasis of his work is the experience of the infinity of nature and the representation of its presence. *Naksan #8407* was conceived during the heavy snow storms that hit the east coast of the Korean peninsula in 2010. It shows details of crashing waves on the snow-covered seashore of Naksan. The white plane in the lower half of the image, where snow has accumulated on the beach, becomes a meditative space – an area of psychological blankness. Elsewhere, Boomoon focuses on Skógarfoss, an immense and breathtaking waterfall situated on the Skógá River in the south of Iceland. Once a truly wild place, the waterfall is now populated daily with tourists travelling along Iceland's Golden Circle.

Boyd & Evans depict strange and other-worldly environments in the western United States. In *Bombay Beach (Dry)*, 2003 and *Road to Mussentuchitt*, 2004 nature has proved an unforgiving host. Traces of human interventions into the landscape remain: a bus, rusty machinery, abandoned settlements, a truck. Here, nature has not been conquered; attempts to inhabit and shape the land have failed.

Film works by Ben Rivers and Esther Johnson focus on marginal individuals living in wild places where nature rules. Rivers's work is a portrait of Astika, a man who lives on an island in Denmark where nature grows around him unchecked. Johnson's 2002 film, *Hinterland*, explores the stories of an East Yorkshire community who live a precarious existence on the fastest eroding coastline in Europe.

Emma Stibbon also explores environments in transition. Her large-scale drawings focus on remote and dynamic landscapes undergoing formation or transformation. The drawings *Broken Tumulus*, 2016 and *Ka 'ū Desert*, 2017 developed out of a residency on the Island of Hawai'i, an experience that saw the artist living on the rim of one of the world's most active volcanoes.

Remote and isolated places such as islands, caves, deserted barns and expanses of sea have provided a focus for French artist, Noémie Goudal, who is known for her ambiguous photographs, which combine reality and artifice. Her specially commissioned wallpaper uses an image from *Les Mecaniques*, 2016. In this series, Goudal uses a large mirror construction to explore the movement or transition of the landscape. *Mecaniques I-III* offers the possibility of escape from the gallery into the depths of the jungle.

The Alps have been a long-standing source of inspiration for Ralph Fleck, who has been painting distant views of the mountain range surrounding his studio in Freiburg, Germany, since the late 1980s. His latest monochromatic and heavily impastoed painting, *Alpenstück 13 VIII*, exudes an almost Zen sense of stillness. We are drawn into the scene, as if stepping out into a snowy wilderness. As art critic and writer, Sue Hubbard, has observed, what Fleck is interested in capturing in paint is ‘the idea a mountain; something of their essence, rather than their particularity.’

Since the late 1960s, Richard Long has consistently engaged with wild and remote landscapes. His journeys are documented with photographs, maps, wall works and printed statements. *NO FOOTPRINTS*, 2013 relates to a walk in the Antarctica in December 2012 when, for the first and only time, Long encountered conditions that did not allow him to leave behind any trace in the landscape.

In Hiraki Sawa’s strangely hypnotic and compelling animation, *Dwelling*, aeroplanes take off, land, and travel through the interior space of a flat. The tiny aircraft might represent the state of psychological wilderness; the drift of thoughts and memories in and out of the mind. Sawa completed the work in 2002 while studying at the Slade School of Art. As a way of dealing with the sense of homesickness he felt at that time, the artist would regularly visit Heathrow Airport to watch the planes landing and taking off, just to feel some kind of connection to his native Japan. The work arose from this mental wilderness.

Alongside *Wilderness* we are delighted to present two rooms of works by acclaimed Latvian-American artist, Vija Celmins, drawn from the collections of ARTIST ROOMS and Tate. Celmins’s densely layered drawings and prints are based on photographs of natural phenomena, notably the surface of the ocean, the desert floor, a spider’s web and the night sky. Her intense images focus on something small and individual in the context of vastness, presenting a glimpse into empty spaces that are seemingly complex and beyond human comprehension.

Artist publications and a filmed interview with artist Esther Johnson can be viewed in the Resource Area, outside the Art Library, on the Mezzanine Floor.

In Conversation – Esther Johnson

Thursday 15 March, 6.30-8pm, £5

Artist Esther Johnson will discuss her film, *Hinterland*, 2002 with *Wilderness* curator, Zoë Lippett and Steven Bode, Director of Film and Video Umbrella.

A programme of family workshops accompanies this season of wilderness themed exhibitions. For details, pick up a Families Brochure from the Gallery reception desk.



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