

A Novel Graphic

“Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience”

Robert Morris [1]

Personal, Practical

I have often wondered how a person such as Ian who is can be found Yurt-bound or experiencing muddily mind-bending music festivals, who is in tune with his rural environment and presents a most unassuming, modest, gentle façade, somehow produces artworks that are the very epitome of ideological control and dominion over quivering landscapes. But as he told me once: “life is messy,” and I learned that even as a youngster he was naturally regimented and tidy, with a wish to bring order to his everyday existence.

Ian’s artistic output is prolific, experimental and progressive, where logical next steps are taken from the conclusion of each previous project. He has his finger on the pulse of the regional arts and is unwavering in his support of them and in his contributory energy.

The ‘M’ Question

This exhibition is the result of a ‘What if...?’ It is an intuitive exploration into an *almost* unthinkable scenario, promulgating the idea of a transgressive North Yorkshire Moors motorway, announced via planning notices within the potentially affected communities possibly sending through them a shudder of premonition. If realised, it could lead to an upturn in the regional tourism economy, jobs, accessibility, the concept may give cause for unbiased reflection, however it is more likely to provoke outrage and disbelief.

What is it though that we are outraged about? Is it the construction of a transport super-system on an area already networked with roads and rail? Or is it the imposition of manufactured architecture on what is one of the most intensely managed post-industrial landscapes in Britain? Whatever devils advocating I may do, I merely think that for the duration of the exhibition we should suspend our initial reactions and reflect upon this proposition in an unbiased manner – for here you will create arguments, counter arguments, concepts of alternative beauty and also be humoured.

Concepts of Beauty

This artificiality of our contemporary countryside is a theme upon which Ian builds, explores and metaphorically constructs, driving further the notion of the impermanence of these moorlands and the possibility again of social pressure inciting change. This is more than just an artist’s proposition; it is a universal question of priorities mirroring the tenuous balance between ecologies and economic progression. It addresses the dilemmas of aesthetics and the paradigms of beauty – it instils within us questions about the nature of progression and regression, does ‘moving forward’ mean additional infrastructural and societal development

or is it now a question of our accepted recognition that the protection of pre-existing ecosystems are primary?

The construction of the Pennine section of the M62 in the late 60's and early 70's, was a remarkable feat of engineering completed by contractors McAlpine. A stretch of motorway that is a mere 7 miles long and hence can be travelled in less than 7 minutes cost nearly £7 million pounds to build and was built upon the boggy peat moorland during some of the worst winter weather conditions imaginable. In fact, it presented a similar engineering challenge that the *Eastern Gateway* Thirsk to Whitby motorway potentially could.

A feature of this stretch of the M62 is the Scammonden Bridge which carries the B6114 Saddleworth Road across a vast cutting to the west of Huddersfield. Over 70 miles of scaffolding and 9000 tonnes of concrete were required to build this open spandrel, fixed arch bridge which has a single span of 125m and a total length of around 200m making the span the largest of its kind in the UK. It is estimated that during the first winter of construction the ice build-up burdened the scaffold with an extra 1,100 tonnes in weight.

Despite its monumental scale and recent calls for the restoration of the bridge's rusty railings, the structure remains as aesthetically elegant as the day it was opened by the Queen in 1971. The surrounding moorlands dwarf Scammonden's immensity with their own incomparable stretches, whilst it traverses seamlessly between escarpments shouldering its vehicular burden with refined poise.

It is such engineering majesty that inspires Ian to produce his motorway pieces. He cites Foster's glorious Millau viaduct in France as being synonymous with its surrounding area of outstanding natural beauty and the example of the controversial Twyford Down motorway section as eventually assisting the environs by significantly reducing heavy traffic volume locally and redressing losses by nearly quadrupling the area of land dedicated as chalk grassland SSSI.

Perhaps the speeded flow of traffic may benefit the Moors? Maybe the *Eastern Gateway* infrastructure could become a lauded icon of modern aesthetic? The invisible motorway masses who 'interact' with the fleeting moorland through their glass car windows without sulling the empty man-made horizons could even buy a 6x4" Mitchell landscape postcard to remind them of the rural experience and iconic spandrels they almost visited?

Virtual Contexts

Ian believes it is important that he is known as a digital artist. It seems a long way since the early forms of ASCII binary arts of the 1960's and Apple delivering artistic flexibility with the introduction of its Mk II in 1977, the first personal computer with colour graphic capabilities. The *Dot.com* era in the 90's heralded the proliferation of the internet highway, leading to a burst of virtual communication and relay of information fuelling the global economy. This transference made the world suddenly small and is described fittingly as a highway; it was an age of new interconnectivities and progressive partnership-working from which the new wave of digital artists benefitted.

Immaterial?

There is something slightly surreal in the fact that prior to pressing '*Print*', Ian's artworks exist as mathematically defined sets of points, journey-lines and shapes, divorced entirely from the subject matter and lie within the realms of the non-visual. It is also productively impressive that the vector equation has an unlimited scale, unhampered by the vagaries of pixel density, so there is no loss of definition even when enlarged to the actual dimensions of a motorway. In that lies power and it is with slight irony that the invention of such complicated systems has allowed Ian to execute highly simplified works, his idyllic sterility of reductive symbolism.

Unlike many digital artists' work, Ian's remains inextricably linked to the tangible rather than the abstract, surreal or experiential. It is faithful to its inspiration – a simplification of natural complex systems, exhibiting the essence of contour or form suspended in timeless digital aspic and reduced to the logo-scape of place. The elegance of manufactured arabesque curves interact with geometric lineages in the subjugation of the chaotic organic.

No Sweat?

In a post-physical cut n' paste world, digital work is still commonly perceived amongst the populous as a less desirable art form than the 'handmade', lacking in the personal and the skills of the artisan trade. Why does it seem so important that the artists get 'down and dirty' with materials? Is it the perception of 'non-contact' with the piece, or the ease of reproductive duplicity that psychologically leads many to devalue the work?

Within digital arts the element of chance is removed, the compositional, colour and formal control is near total. There are no vagaries of medium that cannot be repaired with *Ctrl-Z*, always a way back, a way out in the pursuit towards the perceived ideal. It is a dictatorialism of creation that abhors the material individuality of mark, the messiness of imperfection, the unpredictability of form. Landscapes are de-natured, deconstructed and reconstructed within Ian's personal utopia.

Where is the 'craft' or the artist's skills in this? It is imbedded in the learning of working with the computer programme as a creative partner, it is inherent in his compositional choices, his investigative colour selections, and the same choices of pictorial inclusion and exclusion that a 'hands on' artist faces but without their constraints of limited physical technique.

The artist, as with manual printmaking, imposes limited editions on his prints; his works produced on the more structural materials, due again to the decision-making process of the artist, are one-off originals and are as individualistic as any oil painting.

There is the added incongruity of the works being potentially time-limited by the continual programme updating we all have to bear as virtual crosses in our computorial relations. As specifications progress, so the lifespan of the work without positive interference from the artist will also necessarily be limited. Many institutions, arts organisations and artists now archive out-dated hardware and software in order to access earlier digital and net-art projects. This enforced exclusivity does not occur within the hand-generated screen-printing world.

Graphic Boundaries

The ideological divisions between fine art and design, between rural and urban are but smokescreens to the grey areas in between. Ian dwells within these transition zones flitting between the realms of fine art, digital graphics and improbable architectures, sampling all, but settling nowhere. The multidisciplinary approach is echoed in his contemporary inspirations, such as the spikily explosive work of the Venezuelan artist Jaime Gili and the digital/constructional geometric interfaces of Justin Andrews' pieces.

Ian's landscape palette is often muted, knowingly dated; in the main chosen intensities are toned down by an English reserve. Colours from the actual are ironed out into block hues and vagaries of colour dimension have no place within these fields. There is a gentle nod to the rail posters of yesteryear, the idyllic 'places to be' of Tom Purvis and Norman Wilkinson and a feeling of serenity pervades his visions. The colours of the traversed moorland landscape are invoked for the *East Coast Gateway* through the selection of a heather-purple and acid grass-green for the road signage and toll receipts. Distinctly modernistic deviations from his usual palette occur within his engineering, planning and cartographic experiments – here the synthetic colours of dynamism and change give movement and priority to his linear contour work and abstracted graphic pathways.

Text can be present in all art forms, but it is through the structured typographic pieces that Ian reveals his graphic background. His love of names, etymology, localisms and the contrast of often amusing rural appellations are overridden by the sinuous, untitled paths of transportational progress. As with many graphic artists, temporally speaking, he is unfazed by speed of turnaround or imminent deadlines. I have had the pleasure of working with him in the past, where his productive capabilities can seem as efficiency personified.

Reductively redolent, there is no place for humans within Ian's utopian linescapes. Their presence would reintroduce that avoidable messiness in life. These are scenes and scenarios to behold from a distance as a solitary non-participatory viewer, not to interfere or interact beyond a visual appreciation of their natural orderliness. Ian believes that people are irrelevant to his landscapes, that they have already left enough of a mark from industrial scarring, agriculture and other land management schemes. These are empty landscapes, but they are not bleak.

Reduced

In our busy age we want instantaneous recognition. Our visual lives are replete with logos, the graphic shorthand to distinctive, portentous branding. Ian's works function as identifiers of the concept, hinting at the underlying intellectual debate. Through his reductive approach to shape and form, the images venture into the realm of gestalt philosophy. The keys to visual acuity lie in his descriptive edges, left areas with implied volume, suggestive lines that seem to extend beyond the confines of their printed form. The *Law of Good Gestalt* identifies, colloquially, that aspects of objects tend to be perceptually grouped together when

they form regular, simple patterns. This visual perception is further enhanced by our natural tendency for the elimination of complexity and unfamiliarity, with the implication of a conscious orderly regularity, or *prägnanz*.

Ian introduces formal shorthand into his silhouetted work that encourages a visual reification by the viewer. The flattened shapes are perceptually continued in layers under and over other structures and create illusions of volumetric activity within our perceptive brains. We add information to the initial visual stimulus and create structures where they do not exist, but instead where they make constructive three-dimensional sense to us.

In a Flash

The pace of life continues to accelerate for most. We spend our precious time distilling the literary and visually verbose – in text-speak, abbreviations, acronyms, and branding; we communicate the basics required for comprehension, the rest being superfluous to need. We write read executive summaries to never-read documents, value the concise, the straight to the point, the 'it'll only take a minute' and the things in nutshells: minimum information for maximum gain.

Through his use of reflective, hard-edged materials, Ian evokes the angular communications on the highways, incessant conveyer belts of rectangles, circles and double-orientated triangles emblazoned with fleeting graphics that regulate responses by our learned gut reactions to their shorthand geometries and essential colours. We do not even comprehend our comprehension of them anymore and are merely reactive beings.

At certain times we may choose to stand back and assess this torrent of abbreviated information and notice the undercurrents, the unsaid, the implied or the repercussions and reflect upon the overall perspective, the bigger picture. This body of work and Ian's strategically sited planning notices ask us to do just that. Perhaps we need to get out of our cars and consider signage, sit by an underpass, experience the sensual dichotomy of rural motorway landscapes. In fact it maybe about time, in many senses, that we all eased off the accelerator a little and took time to appreciate the simplified things in life.

References:

1. Robert Morris Notes on Sculpture Part 1, Artforum, February 1966.

IMAGES OF THE BOOK:

