

Gowlett Peaks

Sebastian Jefford Backteller

Friday 30 May
to Sunday 6 July

It is one of the first warm afternoons of the year. Seb and I are sitting outside the Orchard in Bristol. The pub is in the same block as Spike Island where he has his studio. We always end up here. It has low ceilings and dated decor. It is full of regulars. Barrels of real ale sit behind its slightly sticky bar. Outside four tables stand close together in a small paved area surrounded by a low brick wall that demarcates it from the street. The Orchard is on a quiet side road lined with parked cars. We are sharing a picnic bench with two young guys who have Welsh accents and tidy facial hair. I am drinking bright orange cider and Seb has lager, San Miguel. We are eating cheese salad cobs with too much onion. Over-onioned cobs.

Seb has become preoccupied by reconstruction.¹

He tells me about the botched restoration of Knossos, a huge Minoan palace on the Greek island of Crete. How a British archaeologist, Sir Arthur Evans, got hold of the site in 1900 and ran riot, reconstructing the palace, building and painting. This site, Seb tells me, housed one of the earliest uses of reinforced concrete. This conjures a strange meeting of early modernism and ancient history.

We discuss archaeology as an exercise in speculation. Seb thinks about the gap between what is known from looking at an object – in archaeology often only a fragment or sherd – and an interpretation of activity or process. Even from a relatively informed perspective, when filling in the gaps there is potential for misinterpretation. An image of ‘Lucy’, the innocuously named skeleton, appears in one of Seb’s works. Only 40% of Lucy’s 3.2 million year old bones have been discovered.²

Partial information necessitates conjecture. Speculation, though, is perhaps more common in left field non-academic forms of experimental

archaeology. By learning and utilising techniques of making and building thought to be employed by people of the Iron Age, for example, some experimental archaeologists attempt to re-enter the conditions of the era as an endeavour to understand more about its people and their lives.

Dr Peter J Reynolds, an experimental archaeologist of the academy argues for a distinction between experiment, experience and education in archaeology, emphatically stating that experimental archaeology has nothing to do with ‘living in the past’³ but is instead part of a more scientifically constructed field based on information and provable hypotheses. An advocate for academic, ‘professional’ approaches to experimentation, he dismisses reenactment as ‘at best theatre, at worst the satisfaction of character deficiencies’⁴.

An obsession with detailed process cannot lead to the development of a whole picture. It is impossible to inhabit a ‘whole’ version of a different time. Seb says that to reconstruct something is to experience it in a primary, active way, but when used to seek an understanding of something/someone the reconstruction ceases to be primary.

This calls to mind the hopeless protagonists of Flaubert’s novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. The two eponymous faddish men continuously inhabit roles (farmer, physician, clergyman), play-acting as wealthy intelligentsia of their time. And because they act out rather than live these positions they never get to grips with the knowledge that they attempt to pursue. Because they are constantly seeking, they never find.

Seb and I discuss the problem of attempting to inhabit a different time. Perception is shaped by knowledge and experience. It is possible to (re)create environments with certain conditions but not to escape one’s own consciousness, which is necessarily rooted in the contemporary. *Urne-Burial*, Sir Thomas Browne’s 1658 study of the archaeological remains of Bronze Age funerary sites in Norfolk brilliantly illustrates this.

Steeped in the knowledge systems and communicated in the language of its era this richly crafted text tells us as much about the knowledge and beliefs of Browne’s time as it does of the peoples whose artefacts he is studying. Reading about the activities of ‘Ægyptian Obelisks’, ‘British Coynes’, ‘Gothick’ structures, the Romans (‘Seventy Thousand with their associates slain by Boadicea’) and Saxon ‘Mappes’⁵ in a seventeenth century text reminds us of the complicated layers of perspective in all history, narrative and knowledge.

1 We have talked before at length about Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*, a novel that revolves around a character obsessed by reconstructing remembered and imagined scenarios. His reconstructions are produced in real-time and in such astonishing detail that through them he enters a realm that runs parallel to what might be termed reality. McCarthy’s writing renders the fabric of the scenes he creates in such detail that the text itself becomes sculpture.

2 *What Was “Lucy”? Fast Facts on an Early Human Ancestor*, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/09/060920-lucy.html>, accessed on 7 May 2014.

3 Dr. Peter J. Reynolds, *The Nature of Experiment in Archaeology*, http://www.butser.org.uk/iafexp_hcc.html, accessed on 10 May 2014.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Sir Thomas Browne (2005), *Urne-Burial*, Penguin Books, London.

Seb talks about the pots, metals, bones and artefacts that make up the archaeological record as 'raw fact'. These dumb things – morsels of material – spark narratives. People create scenarios and inhabit characters based on the information they contain. Fragments and detritus become vehicles for developing and creating new environments. Old objects produce new meanings.

In his work, Seb perverts materials. He has referred to this as 'cartoonifying'. He is drawn to experimental archaeology partly because of its potential amateurish quality and the ad hoc approach employed by many of its practitioners. As an activity that began on the periphery of a more established discipline, with an emphasis on materials and making, it appeals to him. Seb delights in the homespun.

The reconstruction in experimental archaeological is an imaginative process that requires a physical engagement with materials of the past. His own objects appear to be the detritus or aftermath of some unknowable activity. In his work he co-opts objects, makes slight alterations, layers things up and slips things under the radar. He makes the familiar unknown.

The objects in Seb's stories always grow and expand, governed by internal, unidentified forces of energy. Human exploration activates them. In his most recent story the explorative process is erotic, almost carnal. The narrative is propelled by touch. Its character engages with materials in a base way; he lubricates and kneads equipment and objects. Seb describes the gloop, the stickiness, of surfaces, the parched land and bony digits in detail. The piece is full of sensation and texture.

Sporting equipment features in Seb's work, generally not in fully recognisable form but subverted slightly. These components suggest a bodily, physical engagement. The grip handles, for example, have a vehicular quality, suggesting touch; inviting use. We talk about the role of sports equipment and sportswear in post-apocalyptic fiction. Often in this genre it takes on new role as armour or weaponry. He remembers the uniform of American Football shoulder pads and ice hockey masks adopted by Road Warrior in *Mad Max II*. Post-apocalyptic fiction is also speculative; it projects a future realm rather than a past.

Some of Seb's installations suggest a repetitive process. They might be sites for crafting or shaping, or places to practice some useless activity. His work is often made with a function in mind. He enacts

speculation through objects and invites viewers to imagine their own scenarios through his work. While we talk I imagine the present as a veneer, a thin layer. There is an edge or surface just underneath – or perhaps parallel – this is the space that Seb wants to inhabit. His narratives and objects make thin planes of time and place that you could slide into.

Joris-Karl Huysmans' misanthropic novel, *Against Nature*, has been a reference for Seb for a while. In this narrative Des Esseintes, a single, plotless character navigates constructed systems of knowledge and environments within which he controls every detail. He becomes the author of his own environment and his own novel, fabricating funerary dinners, chambers bathed in the perfect light in which to experience his women's flesh, and ship-like quarters from which he can explore the world.

The detail in the material make-up of this novel (like McCarthy's *Remainder*) almost cripples its character; the construction of physical and mental environments becomes obsessive. In a sense Bouvard and Pécuchet are the antithesis of Des Esseintes; while they attempt to don roles like costumes Huysmans' character remains himself as he journeys through internally conjured representations of distant places.

I wonder if Seb makes work as a way of conjuring landscapes, scenarios and relationships with artefacts. Things can easily spiral, he says. There is a tinge of poignancy in the way he says this, and I recognise that he feels a connection to certain experimental archaeologists, McCarthy's nameless protagonist, Des Esseintes and the man in his own recent narrative. Each of them is sucked into a compulsive engagement with stuff, materials and processes.

We finish our drinks and I realise that the Welsh boys are perplexed by our conversation. The sun has begun to disappear; the cars still smell of warm metal. Over the road a black cat stalks across the pavement. I need to get back.

Gowlett Peaks is delighted to present our second exhibition, *Backteller* by Sebastian Jefford. For his first solo show in London Jefford has developed a new sculptural installation.

Sebastian Jefford (B. 1990) lives & works in Bristol. Selected recent exhibitions include: *This Inferior Mirage* (2014), Cactus, Liverpool, (solo), *Records of Garden Keeping*, Works|Projects, Bristol, (solo), *Surface Area*, curated by Lauren Christiansen, Favourite Goods, Los Angeles, USA, *Performance Fetish*, curated by Its Our Playground, SWG3, Glasgow, UK, *Dumb Shadow*, with James Parkinson and Menna Cominetti, Supercollider, Blackpool, UK, *Flatfile: A Demonstration of Possibilities*, Eastside Projects, Birmingham (all 2013).
www.sebastianjefford.co.uk

This exhibition is supported by the Elephant Trust.

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