Dalziel + Scullion
Home

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'We use nature as allegories for things that are human. It is about the complexity and duality of being physical and cerebral, and the responsibility that goes with that.'MATTHEW DALZIEL

Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion have collaborated since 1993, working with photography, video, sculpture, sound, and installations to create a body of work that has been recognised for its distinctive vision. Home is a significant solo exhibition of newly commissioned pieces, based on a period of research in Norway.

Their work presents a rediscovery of landscape as a means of reflecting on fundamental ideas about the world we live in today. In it landscape becomes an animated force: literally animated by dynamic, geological forces, and metaphorically animated by human perceptions, needs and beliefs. Previously their work was centred on the area of north east Scotland where they lived, and their fascination was with the strange hybrid of wilderness and high-tech, man-made industrial, military, power and communications installations. In the past year, however, their focus has shifted to new landscapes, in particular the epic, glacial mountainscapes of Norway, on which much of their new work is based.

Entering Gallery One downstairs, you walk into an installation called *Voyager*: a group of three cast tents, sitting in a lunar landscape of ash which crunches disconcertingly underfoot, like snow. The installation is dimly lit with blue light, an approximation of moonlight. The catalogue for the tents from which these casts were taken advertises their high-tech, ultra-light fabrics and construction – ironically, the perfect technology to allow the buyer to get back to nature, to pitch the tent in almost any terrain, to cope with hostile environments, opening up possibilities for exploration and adventure. In other words, in order to experience a wilderness, we need all our human ingenuity and technology to support our survival.

The installation plays on a deliberate ambiguity about indoor and outdoor spaces – the modern, industrial space of the gallery is converted into an approximation of a landscape, and there is enough sensory information (the uneven, crunchy 'ground' and nocturnal lighting) to allow us to forget where we are for a moment. But the scene is entirely artificial and constructed, the 'moonlight' created with spotlights and gels to create that abnormal, metallic glow, and the odd perfection of the cast tents, right down to details like the stitching of the zips, belies the fact that they are unusable.

The tents are cast in aluminium, the preferred material for high-tech vehicles and aircraft for its lightness combined with strength. The cast forms of the tents, while particular in their details, also seem to echo some type of space pod – the idea that human wanderings and exploration are not just limited to our own planet. The title of the piece is taken from the brand name of the original tent: Voyager, by definition, is someone who travels great distances.

Another installation, Habitat, is shown in the small gallery. The room is set out in a formal arrangement, with a circular carpet in the centre and four chairs arranged to view the work. Footage showing a group of penguins is projected twice, one image reversed to mirror the other. Two loudspeakers play sounds composed by the artists in collaboration with Gerald Mair – a dense, layered aural texture of sampled sounds, some of which clarify the context of the filmed images, while others confuse or add alternative contexts.

The film is shot in real time with a static camera, creating a tableau in which the only movement comes from the penguins themselves. The shot is framed deliberately to create ambiguity about the setting – the scenery is obviously man-made, but there are few clues about the location. The soundtrack adds to this ambiguity – a mobile phone rings at one point, and there are the sounds of traffic and gulls, as well as the noises of the penguins themselves.

As the video plays a small drama unfolds, the central pair of penguins defending their territory – a carved, stone nesting ring – from another pair. The narrative, if it can be called that, develops slowly, in a timescale unfamiliar, and slightly uncomfortable for an impatient human viewer. Much of the film simply records the subtle interactions of the penguins: their tendency to pair up; their almost ritual movements, bobbing, bowing, and spreading their wings; the odd formality of the ways in which they arrange themselves and the positions that they take. Penguins are the most anthropomorphic of birds, standing on hind legs, with their black and white livery, and it is easy to read their interactions in human terms, projecting a human narrative onto their behaviour.

Penguins have had an odd connection with Modernism since Lubetkin's famous penguin pool for London Zoo, with its exposed concrete geometry and sculpted forms. The formalism of the symmetrical projections relates to the formal arrangement of carpet and chairs, creating a parallel with the space in which the viewer stands or sits. We complete the mirroring images, with a circular territory marked in the centre of the room (it's important that the circle is not a domestic rug, but a circle of carpet), and the possibility of social interchanges as people move in and out of the seats.
As you exit this room another tiny screen is lit up to the left. Postcard is just that: a picture postcard scene, videoed rather than photographed. The occasional movement of cars disrupts the stillness of the scene, but otherwise the landscape remains unchanged. Slowly we start to sense the landscape as a living force, the pace of its creation co-existing with human ideas of progress and change.

In Gallery 3 upstairs Drift is a series of billboard-sized, digital photographs, freestanding, like large partitions or pieces of furniture. Their presentation is important as the image wraps around its three-dimensional support, giving the expected 'window on the world' view, but also narrower vistas running down the sides. Low, horizontal, irregularly shaped 'tables' mounted on castors complement the vertical 'walls'. The photographs all come from one series, taken on a journey up a glacial valley in Norway to the glacier itself, which appears in the largest and most stunning of the images. The landscapes are presented without commentary, and it is largely through the formal compositions that we begin to sense the specific fascination that each scene had for the artists, beyond their awesome beauty.

On turning into the gallery, the first image shows a lone pine tree standing at the edge of a deciduous forest, perched improbably on a rocky outcrop. It is perfectly centred in the frame of the composition, and the dark green of its needles just registers against the lighter green foliage behind it. The immense scale of the scene takes time to sink in, and slowly one realises that this tree must be very old, and very tall, its lower branches dying back to allow new growth higher up. Yet part of its root system is clearly visible, and there can be very little soil cover on the rock from which it grows. As Louise points out, this valley is sheltered from the wind, allowing trees to grow in precarious positions that would be impossible elsewhere; nevertheless, there is something mystical about an ancient tree springing from rock, with the milky flow of glacial water running beneath it.

This sense of mystery grows in the other photographs: from the giant stones torn and scattered along the sides of the valley as the glacier moved down the valley, to a lone boulder left isolated and out of place as the glacial ices retreated. The glacier itself is the strangest of all the images, difficult to conceive of as a 'flow' of material. It is only when you move around to the left side and note the straggle of people making their way up its side that you take in its true scale. The aim is to recall the unimaginable drama of the forces that shaped these landscapes: mountains erupting and minerals being formed; valleys being hewn and rock eroded; streams of ice and water flowing to create the world's oceans.

It is the enormity of scale – physical size, but also timescale – that is difficult to comprehend. This is a 'young' landscape, still in the process of being created, and yet ancient in comparison to a human lifespan; but as Matthew points out, 'We use nature as allegories for things that are human.' The images evoke the traditions of sublime landscape, suggesting a human symbolism that goes beyond the raw facts of the landscape itself. It is quite possible to explain these features in geological terms, but that is not the point: instead, they seem to stand as metaphors for survival, the remnants of a process of creation that continues around them, yet distinctive and worthy of attention.

This connection between the natural and the human is clearest in the video installation upstairs, Water Falls Down. In this work two natural scenes parallel an

ancient human drama – a baptism. Shot at St Combs, the village in the north east of Scotland where Dalziel + Scullion lived for 11 years, the film records the villagers coming together to witness three adult baptisms in the North Sea.

This is the only video in the exhibition in which the camera moves, and the film is slightly slowed down, registering subtle movements and expressions: the tension in the bodies just before each person is plunged underwater; the play of emotions on the faces; the sense of the weight and force of the sea. At the end the camera zooms back, showing the gathering of villagers on the shore, and isolating the figure of the minister against the enormity of the grey sea.

Even in a secular context this is a very moving work, and the intensity of human emotion reflected in the environment echoes historical examples of sublime landscape, such as Caspar David Friedrich's Monk by the Sea, where the weight of the water seems to bear down directly on the head of the lone figure standing on the shore.

The memory of Friedrich continues in the next image, a tableau of a tree, shot against a snow-laden sky, and burdened with a heavy fall of snow. The footage is shot in real time, and yet nothing eventful happens for three or four minutes, save for a tiny fall of snow as one of the branches becomes overloaded. Similarly the following scene of a boulder sitting mid-stream has no narrative or structure to direct us, and yet all three images are clearly related by their connection with water, and more pointedly with the symbolism which water holds for humans.

The works in this exhibition have a subtlety and richness that speaks of a lengthy period of development, and some works had existed as ideas and models for some time. Pieces like Voyager have evolved from their initial conception (the idea was first proposed as a public arts project) changing, and growing, according to the context in which it is seen. Sensitivity to context, to environment, is key to the work of Dalziel+Scullion. Their practice encompasses exhibitions, but also the production of small scale multiples and major public art commissions, most famously The Horn, a landmark on the M8, now familiar to thousands of commuters.

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The Fruitmarket Gallery

45 Market Street
Edinburgh, EH1 1DF, Scotland

P +44 (0)131 225 2383
F +44 (0)131 220 3130

info@fruitmarket.co.uk
www.fruitmarket.co.uk

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