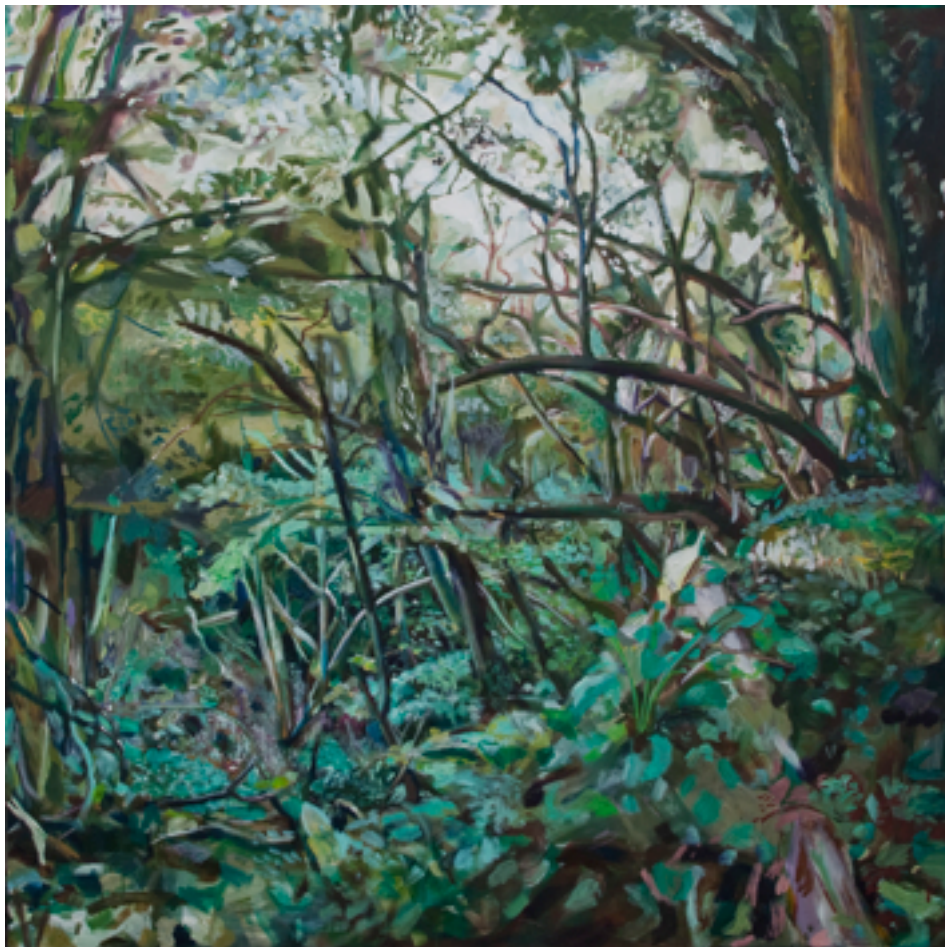


Landscape Perception and Inhabiting Vision:

Practising to See from the Inside



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Abstract

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In this dissertation I investigate vision and landscape through painting. I identify landscape as a diverse and lively critical field of study as I have come to understand it through my reading. I recognise that a problem occurs between my painting practice and my understanding of landscape as a lived practice. Vision has a deeply rooted epistemology of detached observation and an ecological practice requires engagement. To continue painting landscapes, I must find a way to inhabit vision.

I begin by comparing landscape as a way of seeing (Cosgrove 1998) with a phenomenologically placed account of dwelling-in-the world (Ingold 2000). I explore how vision in a landscape operates in both accounts. Of the two models, dwelling presents a more ecologically engaging account of living within the landscape, but it seems to advocate more immersive bodily experience (i.e. movement, touch, smell or hearing) and has no place for a detached vision. Must vision always be constituted by detached observation? I turn to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in order to come to an understanding of embodied vision. In doing so, my conceptualisation of practice and method has changed. I find a theoretical framework that will support future inquiries into living and painting as an inhabitant of my landscape.

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A properly ecological approach...is one that would take, as its point of departure, the whole-organism-in-its-environment.

(Ingold 2000 p 19)

Introduction

Landscape is an ambiguous term. A persistent understanding of the term is “a portion of the earth’s surface that can be comprehended at a glance” (Jackson 1984: 8). This emphasis on the visual is consistent with general idea of landscape as scenery or a painting of scenery. Recently, cultural geographers (see Wylie 2007, Ingold 2000, Mitchell 1994 and Cosgrove 1998 [1984]) have interrogated this concept of landscape, producing a wide variety of frameworks that attempt to clarify its role in the production of knowledge and the experience of being in the world. John Wylie (2007) provides a cogent overview of the term and its competing frames of reference, breaking it down into material entities for empirical studies, cultural images and gazes, as well as engaged practices of everyday experience.

I am a landscape painter, and I recognise within myself a deeply embedded understanding of a painting or landscape as something I look at with detached observation and not participatory engagement. As an American outsider studying in Devon, England, I was susceptible to seeing landscape as a veil (Wylie 2007: 69), where landscape is a symbolic image overlaying and obfuscating reality. As the year progressed and I learned more about the Devon culture, I found I could increasingly read elements of the landscape as a text from which I could extract meaning (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988). With careful observation and appropriate context, a landscape can reveal a significant amount about the cultural values that shape it. But, these methods did not satisfy a desire to place myself *in* the landscape with a sensitivity toward the other non-human inhabitants and material processes, or as I see it, an ecological perspective.

Over the course of my reading, I came to understand landscape as a mutually unfolding relationship where inhabitants and the inhabited are intertwined in a constant

process of becoming. I was influenced by Jackson's *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984) where landscape is an insider's perspective of the everyday. I read about Phenomenology (Merleau Ponty 2002 [1962], 1964), where the body is embedded in the world as perceiving subject. Meaning is generated by moving through the world. A dwelling perspective (Ingold 2000) has helped me understand that engaged practices, collaborating with the world that we live in, generate forms that people subsequently live in and practice. In other words, the world transforms itself. Dwelling helped me to abandon thinking of nature and culture as separate from one another. Instead, I focus on the ongoing relationships we craft as beings-in-the-world.

In this paper, I compare two conceptual frameworks for approaching the concept of vision and the landscape. The first framework is developed by Daniel Cosgrove in *Social Formation in Symbolic Landscapes* (1998 [1984]), where landscape is a "way of seeing" developed through techniques of linear perspective and landscape painting. This way of seeing is mobilised as an ideological concept by those in power to perpetuate and normalise their position in the world. Landscape exists first and foremost as a symbolic representation in a disembodied mind. In this approach the subject is separate from the object and the landscape is separated from the painting. These distances are necessary to maintain relationships of domination and exploitation with the non-human world. Therefore, thinking of landscape only as a way of seeing seems incompatible with an ecological perspective.

The second framework is a "dwelling perspective", developed by Tim Ingold in an essay *The Temporality of the Landscape* (2000: 189) in his collection of essays *The Perception of the Environment*. In this approach, landscape is better framed as a way of being, where the sensory perception of the body is foreground. Dwelling draws upon the philosophy of Phenomenology, specifically the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Mind,

senses, self and body are not separate entities; they are all unified: a sensing bodily organism. The body in a process of becoming is the subject, not the detached mind. Because of the emphasis on the senses, the body-subject is in a constant engagement or participation with its surrounding environment. Dwelling proposes that, before we become capable of creating meaning in the world, we exist or dwell within it. In other words, “it is through being inhabited... that the world becomes a meaningful environment for people” (Ingold 2000 p.173). The dwelling perspective is much more suitable for an ecological approach to landscape.

As I analyse these two models, questions emerge from this duality. I will consider how they relate to my current body of work and how they could inform my future painting practice. Can vision be intimate and engaged rather than detached and analytical? If painting landscapes is largely thought of as a visual practice that produces visual objects, what happens when landscape is not thought of as a symbolic image but more as an embodied cultural practice? Can detached and analytical vision be sensitive enough to address our relationship with the world? Is intimate and engaged vision critical enough to confront our current environmental complexities? Through this dissertation, I hope to come to a greater understanding of an essential aspect of my artistic practice that I may have overlooked—*what does it mean to see?*

Landscape as a way of seeing

Landscape is not merely the world we see, it is a construction, a composition of that world. Landscape is a way of seeing the world.

(Cosgrove 1998 [1984]: 13)

I look out the window and see what I think of as an archetype of an English country landscape. My gaze drifts to the distant horizon. The landscape is somehow 'over there', past the rooftops of the town. I am drawn to the patchwork greens of the aesthetically pleasing hillsides. The landscape looks like a painting or the backdrop to a stage production. I do not participate or move with this landscape; in fact, it requires that I view it from a relatively fixed external position. I am inside a building and the landscape is outside. My view is quite literally framed by a window, which shapes how I see the land. This 'way of seeing' the landscape has roots in the rules of linear perspective as well as the the mind/body and subject/object divides of the Cartesian paradigm. I sit inside the building as a rational detached observer creating my own mental representation of the the external landscape I am looking at. I perceive the landscape as a static image, ordered by a long history of an aesthetic and perspectival visual tradition. It is from this representation that I create meaning about the world. It is from this image that I would make a painting.

Vision has played a central role in the concept of landscape since its inception. The origins of the concept are tied to a history and practice of landscape painting. Landscape painting emerged in concert with the invention of linear perspective, approximately in the middle of the fifteenth century (Wylie 2007: 57). Linear perspective is a geometric technique for depicting three dimensions on a two dimensional surface. It is a tool for convincingly capturing and ordering the natural world into the realm of images. It is also commonly regarded as an objective quality of the world, a descriptive aspect of *truth*. These pictorial conventions had profound impact on how we perceive the surrounding

environment. Landscape painting presented the world according to aesthetic and cultural ideals; and humans began to see the land according to these ideals. Eventually landscape did not just refer to the picture, but to a *visible* realm; “first it meant a picture of a view; then the view itself” (Jackson 1984: 3). In *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Denis Cosgrove traces the development of this visual history, stating that “...the separation of subject and object, insider and outsider, the personal and the social are already apparent at the birth of the landscape idea” (Cosgrove 1998 [1984]: 26). The invention of perspective as a tool for depicting three dimensional space has significantly shaped how we see the world around us and how we think of ourselves in our relationship to it.

Perspective was the first system that could approximate in two dimensions what the eye sees in three dimensions. It was thought to represent an objective quality of the material world, a realistic and truthful rendering of the environment. The viewing subject is stationary and observes a landscape frozen in a moment in time. This ordering of space acknowledges an individual detached observer and removes notions of movement as well as time. Historically, these effects were consolidated into a ‘way of seeing’ that portrayed this specific view of landscape as a universal truth. But it is not a universal truth. Perspective works best in portraying a world of straight and stable parallel lines. Most landscapes are quite the opposite.

The system of perspective values the individual over any sense of collective experience by creating a single viewpoint for a spectator to perceive the image. The calculated ‘vanishing point’ requires the spectator to view the image from an exact spot, preferably with only one eye; any other position would distort the illusion of reality. Through the “appreciation” and “appropriation” of the image, Cosgrove proposes that the “spectator *owns* the view because all of its components are structured and directed towards his eyes only” (1998 [1984]: 26). John Berger takes a stronger tone: “The visible

world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God” (1977: 16). Through the application of linear perspective, space and the objects/ things within are ordered and controlled through an individualist Cartesian ontology. This control over space through realism has receded from landscape painting with the popularisation of the photograph. Photographic cameras adhere to the same principles of perspective and are much more adept at portraying a sense of realism. With these changes, the artist has lost an authoritative control of space through any claims to realism, but the spectator is more trained than ever by linear perspective and therefore retains a sense of ownership.

Landscape, seen in this fashion, is observed and not participated in. It inserts a distance between the subjective ‘seer’ and the objective ‘seen’. This distance between the observer and the observed situates the subject outside of their environment. For Cosgrove, the ability for the individual spectator to turn away from a landscape, painted or natural, is crucial. Inhabitants of a landscape do “not enjoy the privilege of being able to walk away from the scene” and, additionally, to “apply the term *landscape* to their surroundings seems inappropriate to those who occupy and work in a place as insiders” (Cosgrove 1998 [1984]: 19). The landscape idea is therefore severed from any everyday practice or mode of being in life. Perspective establishes the artist or viewer of the landscape as the external controller and creator while the “experience of the insider, the landscape as subject, and the collective life within it are all implicitly denied” (Cosgrove 1998 [1984]: 26). This poses a problem for me: I paint the landscapes that I live in.

Landscape as an ideology

Cosgrove furthers this detached image-based conception by declaring the landscape idea “an ideological concept” that “represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature” (1998 [1984]: 15). This privileged class communicates social roles through images of landscape and conventions of ordering space (Wylie 2007: 60). The imagined relationship with nature is presented as harmonious ‘realism’ which actually serves to conceal the social struggles and class conflict within the landscape (Cosgrove 1998 [1984]). An ideological interpretation of the landscape values the symbolic representation over the materiality and inhabitants of the land. The representation acts as a set of instructions, teaching us *how* to see. And what we see is a particular form of landscape that is presented as a universal, not an unfolding process of multiple truths. The very act of seeing itself becomes analogous with symbolic representation. We only see what we want or have been taught to see.

Cosgrove directly states that this ideology of sight influences how we interact with the natural world; it is “a restrictive way of seeing that diminishes alternative modes of experiencing our relations with nature” (Cosgrove 1998 [1984]: 269). He argues that landscape as a way of seeing is a social and cultural product composed by projecting meaning onto the land. But, if we are to acknowledge that the environment is comprised and shaped by life forms and energy flows, it follows that landscape is not merely a raw material that bears the imprint of human activity. Humans do transform nature, but their “actions in the environment are better seen as incorporative than inscriptive” (Ingold 2000: 87). In other words, the form of the landscape is generated by a mutually unfolding relationship between humans and non-humans; it is a collaborative process of beings and being-in-the-world.

However, perspective gives the eye mastery over space as an authoritative epistemology that leaves the non-human world out of the equation. The gaze, removed from the landscape, exhibits dominion over the natural world,

As a way of seeing, therefore, landscape is the accomplice and expression of a classical subject-object epistemological model, one whose central supposition posits a pre-given reality which an independent subject contemplates, represents and masters from a position of coerced detachment.

(Wylie 2007: 59)

I believe that our current problems in how we relate to our environment stems from this classical subject-object epistemological model. The mind is detached and valued over the bodily experience; the senses are unreliable and rational thought is the only thing that can be trusted. The body is regulated to a sensing instrument which sends signals of perception to the mind. The mind then fashions ideas and representations of that information, a symbolic interpretation of the world. A symbolic representation can be influenced by those who manipulate perception, or the classes that do. This is different than our innate experience of sensing. After all, the bodily senses always send information to the brain, but how the information is interpreted might be perverted by outside influence. This position of separation enables that.

This representation is inserted between the seeing subject and the seen object, creating a distanced view of the world and with a lack of genuine engagement. The world itself becomes an ideological image that is manipulated and controlled by the powerful. Cosgrove argues that this removal the inhabitant from the land was a necessary condition and result of transitioning to an industrial society (1998 [1984]). And it is an industrialised way of life and mentality that results in many of our environmental problems.

Reading a landscape as an ideological image can be a critical tool that allows for the discovery of cultural values that shape how the landscape was formed and how it is perceived. However, the ever changing agency of the other-than-human world is denied and treated as an inert material. Terry Eagleton writes, “Ideology freezes history into a ‘second nature’, presenting it as spontaneous, inevitable and so unalterable. It is essentially a *reification* of social life” (Eagleton 1991: 59). We can investigate our social and culture beliefs through this approach, but other-than-human participants in the landscape are delegated to the distant background. In fact, we are removed from the physical landscape completely and the landscape idea becomes a sort of narcissistic mirror in which to see ourselves. This way of seeing “assumes and reproduces a fundamental distinction between ideas of culture and the matter of nature” (Wylie 2008: 154) that “mystifies, renders opaque, distorts, hides, occludes reality” (*ibid.*, 69). If my painting work is to retain some considerable relationship to the ecology as an interconnecting networked organism, then it is increasingly clear to me that landscape as a ‘way of seeing’ will not provide a sufficient approach. It distances, separates and conceals agency, actions and relationships that would be essential to any ecological experience.

Do I have to remove myself from the landscape in order to see it? Are my paintings merely representations that stand in between the viewer and the view? As visual objects, are they subject to ideological manipulation by powerful elite? If I were to answer a definitive “yes” to these questions, I would probably stop painting. So, in an effort to answer “no”, I turn to a model of landscape and vision that values the inhabitants engaged perspective with the world around them.

Landscape as a **way of being**

Knowledge of the world is gained by moving about in it, exploring it, attending to it, ever alert to the signs by which it is revealed. Learning to see, then, is a matter not of acquiring schemata for mentally *constructing* the environment but of acquiring the skills for direct perceptual *engagement* with its constituents, human and non-human, animate and inanimate.

(Ingold 2000: 55)

J.B. Jackson provides a more spatial approach for landscape as “a concrete, three-dimensional shared reality” (Jackson 1984: 5). This introduces the idea that we are inhabitants in a shared landscape, a distinction closer to an ecological perspective. It is with this distinction that I look to understand landscape through ideas of embodied movement and practice. Over the course of my studies, I found myself progressively inhabiting my landscape, yet I also felt I was removing myself to observe that landscape. Is there a way to conceive of a visual practice within a ‘being-in-the-world’ ontology? Or does vision always create distance and objectification? What does it mean to be *in* and *of* the world that you observe?

I return to that view out my window of the English landscape. I see a patch of clouds perched just above the horizon line. The patch is moving, ever so slowly, reminding me that what I am looking at is not static. The light quality of the entire view changes steadily as the sun sets, both outside of the window and inside the room. I see *this* landscape at *this* point in time because I am in this English environment that has its own particular history. I see because of *this* building that elevates my gaze, because of *this* window that frames my view, and most importantly, because I am reflecting upon these landscape ideas. In other words, my view is influenced by life experience, environmental contexts, ideological beliefs as well as the current books I am reading. I am embedded in my bodily experience as I watch birds and airplanes fly through the sky, cars drive on the street and trees blow in the

wind. Countless other pulses of movement and trajectories of life also unfold in front of me. The landscape is moving, changing and evolving at various rates. There is a multiplicity of perceiving organisms in the landscape, all with different understandings of and paths through the surrounding environment. The very form of the landscape is comprised of these interwoven movements, practices, perceptions and lives-lived. As Lucy Lippard puts it, “the intersections of nature, culture, history, and ideology form the ground on which we stand” (Lippard 1997: 7). This ground is an emerging world, constantly unfolding over time and, “since the person is a being-in-the-world, the coming-into-being of the person is part and parcel of the process of coming-into-being of the world” (Ingold 2000: 168). We are always embedded *within* a landscape in progress. This evolving relational context would seem to complicate the distancing and solidifying effects implicit in landscape painting. How do we know and perceive that world?

Phenomenology is philosophical tradition that postulates a unified bodily sense perception as the fundamental way with which we create meaning in the world; before any epistemological structures are built *we know* by existing in, and moving through the world. Cartesian philosophies, on the other hand, have an inherent distrust of the senses, placing the authority in the thinking mind and detached objective seeing. Drawing from phenomenology, a dwelling perspective treats the immersion of the organism in an environment as an inescapable condition of existence. The world continually comes into being around the inhabitant and “to *inhabit* the world... is to join in the process of formation. The world that thus opens up to inhabitants is fundamentally an *environment without objects*” (Ingold 2010: 8). Meaning is not created by a distantly objectifying or analytic vision, but generated within the contexts of people’s pragmatic engagements with those in the world. Perceiving is moving, how we move through the world affects what we perceive as well as the knowledge the world provides back. The knowledge provided by perceiving through action is directly related to what we are doing; it is a body knowledge

learned through practice. Gibson (1986) would call this relationship “affordance”, where all possible actions are embedded in an object or environment prior to the perceptual experience. The body chooses a path of engagement by its movement through its environment, becoming the centre of direct experience and knowing, active and open to the world.

Dwelling as an embodied experience in the world

The notion of the dwelling perspective originates from Heidegger’s essay, *Building Dwelling Thinking*. In discussing the relationship between dwelling and building, he establishes dwelling as the basic mode of engagement, “the manner in which mortals are on the earth” (Heidegger 1975: 148). Dwelling comes first, for “only if we are capable of dwelling, only then we can build” (*ibid.*, 160). Tim Ingold finds the dwelling perspective on precisely this point; it is a procedural inhabiting of the world where “the forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings” (2000: 186). Landscape in this way is thought of as a lived perspective and not a cultural image. It focuses on practice and participation with the environment first and foremost as a way to create meaning. The dwelling perspective is broadly phenomenological in the way that it foregrounds the senses as the point of engagement. In *The Temporality of the Landscape*, (2000: 189) Ingold widens the analysis to include the actions and movements of everyday life: What we do as we move temporally through the landscape.

According to Cloke and Jones, a dwelling perspective “offers conceptual characteristics which blur the nature/ culture divide,” promoting a rich participation and proximity with landscape that “leads to appropriate stewardship” (Cloke and Jones 2001:

651, 653). Dwelling is that moment where perceptions are shaped through an accumulated and active process of engagement with the environment. Unlike Cosgrove's description of landscape as an ideology where meaning is attached symbolically to the world, a dwelling perspective postulates that "meaning is there to be discovered in the landscape, if only we know how to attend to it" (Ingold 2000: 208). With phenomenology, the world speaks back to us through the senses, thus "the matter of perception be 'pregnant' with its form" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 15). (This thread is a key concept in developing an model of engaged or embodied vision that I will elaborate on in the next section.)

A dwelling perspective highlights active engagement with the world and sensing through embodied practice, yet it seems to exclude vision from being such a practice. The dwelling world is described as a woven pattern of rhythms, which is "not anything we can look at but a process we are part of" (Ingold 2000: 201). Others state the contrast explicitly; "dwelling cannot be happily represented or understood in terms of a fixed gaze upon a framed landscape" (Clope and Jones 2001: 654). This particular method of relating to the landscape is directly opposed to landscape as a 'way of seeing'; it seems to describe the actual experience of inhabiting a landscape in a more accurate way. Where does this leave vision and landscape painting?

It is worth recalling the influence of perspectival techniques on how we think of ourselves, our place in the world, and how we perceive it. Vision is still very much shaped by a subject / object epistemology where it is thought of as a detached observational tool of the mind. This philosophy is deeply embedded in western culture and permeates many aspects of our thinking and being in the world. Phenomenology attempts to disprove this method's claims to truth, and therefore is an appropriate area to turn to search for alternative models of vision.

Merleau-Ponty (1964), a phenomenologist, writes extensively and sometimes bewilderingly about vision as an embodied sense that is no different from the other senses. We are seeing perceivers caught up in a world perpetually unfolding; “we do not act *upon* it, or do things *to* it; rather we move along *with* it” (Ingold 2000: 200). We bring our vision along in our process of becoming, which in turn is part “of the world’s transforming itself” (*ibid.*, 200).

Seeing while Being in the Landscape

Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world.

(Merleau-Ponty 1964: 162)

In this section, I provide a careful literature review of thinking on seeing while being. My intention is to clarify the scope of theory on this topic, so that I can work toward my own synthesis and conclusions in the sections that follow.

Switching from the Cartesian separation of mind and body to the integrative dwelling perspective, the view upon the world has become a position within it. Vision is no longer a gaze from an external position, but a particular point of view within the world. Phenomenologists, specifically Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964), put a primary weight on the body as *unified sensing* subject, thus providing a way of framing an embodied vision. In this section, I try to understand the embodied vision presented in Merleau-Ponty's essay *Eye and Mind* (1964: 159) as a practice of dwelling.

Phenomenology “seeks to show above all that the Cartesian perspective does not in fact truthfully describe lived, human experience” (Wylie 2007: 147). Merleau-Ponty would say that the data gained from the senses is not composed by the mind into a coherent mental representation, in fact, it is not ‘data’ at all. The sense perceiving is directly a condition of the body being-in-the-world. The synthesis of sensory inputs happens through the body at the moment of involvement in the environment. Merleau-Ponty does not separate the senses into different registers, but rather notes that they all act in accordance with one another. Perception itself is exceedingly intimate; “to perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body” (2002 [1962]: 42). This is almost an inversion of a

Cartesian visual perspective, where it would be assumed that perceiving is something rendering in the mind as a detached representation.

Merleau-Ponty establishes the body as “an intertwining of vision and movement” (1964: 162). We move our bodies in order to see and, conversely, we see in order to move our bodies. We learn the spatial dimension of the world we see precisely because our bodies have moved through it and the body position and movement in that world determines what we see. In this way, we literally “only see what we look at” (*ibid.*, 162), because our vision is directed by body movements in the eyes, neck, torso and so on. The body is moving and seeing while inextricably embedded in the continuously unfolding world.

Merleau-Ponty argues that detached vision in the mind is not possible because we cannot remove our bodies from the world (*ibid.*, 162). Vision cannot be something that is created by separate mental representations, for the external world directly enables our perception. To put it another way, our perception is a distinct and inescapable condition of being-in-the-world. It is a permeability between the self and the environment; as Gregory Bateson puts it, “the mind...is not limited by the skin” (2000: 460). We come to know the world not by constructing representations of it, but by living in collaboration with it, and in quite a literal sense, living *in it*. David Abram speaks of this collaboration as “an attunement or synchronization between my own rhythms and the rhythms of the things themselves” (1996: 54). But Merleau-Ponty collapses this sensory interface between human and environment into a singular being-in-the-world. The perceiving subject and the world engage in a mutually informing dialogue of sorts. To visualise this, I think of a footprint in the sand, where the physical characteristics of both the person and the sand contribute to the contour of the footprint. The surface of that contour *at the moment it is sensed* is the sensation itself. As Deleuze succinctly states, “at one and the same time I

become in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other” (2005: 25). With a close inspection, Merleau-Ponty develops a line of questioning that asks whether this sensation between the sensing subject and the world exists as a boundary at all. Merleau-Ponty follows this notion of a permeable self to develop a radically unified approach to vision in the world.

Recall that the senses are all a part of a singularly sensing body. “The enigma that is my body simultaneously sees and is seen” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 162). The human body, the subject of perception is also an object in the world; it is a “thing among things” (*ibid.*, 163). It can see itself *as itself*, and at the same time, as a part of the world of things that are not itself. It is a perceived and it lives in the world of the perceived. In contrast, the Cartesian mind can never see itself; it only creates representations of the external world.

When I touch my hand, I am both touching and being touched, which only possible because my hand is “itself a touchable thing...entirely a part of the tactile world it explores” (Abrams 1996: 68). This reciprocity is rather crucial to a sensing experience itself, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, also applies to seeing. Tim Ingold quotes writer John Hull’s account of going blind; “Because I cannot see, I cannot be seen... It would make no difference if my whole face disappeared. Being invisible to others, I become invisible to myself” (Hull in Ingold 2000: 272). In this way, we very much feel ourselves being seen when we see. Berger echoes a similar sentiment, “The visible consists for him of the seen which... confirms his existence” (1984: 50). It is as if the visible world provides an affirmation of our existence as perceivers, we see because we are inhabitants within a visible world.

For Merleau-Ponty, the sensible environments around the body “are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body” (1964: 163). If the body and vision are inseparable as indicated earlier, it follows that vision, body and world are

intimately intertwined. Merleau-Ponty encapsulates his view of embodiment by explaining that a human body is present,

when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place—when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible, lighting the fire that will not stop burning until some accident of the body will undo what no accident would have sufficed to do...

(*ibid.*, 163)

If the things of the world and our bodies are "made of the same stuff" (*ibid.*, 163), our bodies are things, and therefore vision occurs *within* and *among* the things of the world. Our vision is "continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are" (*ibid.*, p9). The appearances of things, an essential element of any seeing experience, are already embedded in the environment that we move through. When we see, we do not look *at* a thing, but rather see it from within the context of a specific bodily relationship (Berger 1977: 9). In other words, when we see we are simply positioning our bodies in different relational contexts to these appearances. This is perhaps what Merleau-Ponty meant when he said that "the matter of perception be 'pregnant with its form' "(1964: 15). This approach to vision begins to dissolve distinct differences between the seeing subject and the seen object as well as the sensed and the sensible.

In order to see, therefore, this "manifest visibility [of things] must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility"(Merleau-Ponty 1964: 164). Intangible visual elements such as, "light, colour, depth," do exist, but only because they "awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them" (*ibid.*, 164). For Merleau-Ponty, it is light itself that "is the *experience* of inhabiting the world of the visible" (Ingold 2000: 264). We do not see things because of light, but it is *through light* that things have an equivalence in our body. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 164). Berger again provides an alternative wording:

... when appearance and meaning become identical, the space of physics and the seer's inner space coincide: momentarily and exceptionally the seer achieves an equality with the visible. To lose all sense of exclusion; to be at the centre.

(1984: 52)

This equivalence is not a detached mental representation that stands in for an observed object. Vision, in this way, does not produce or depend upon something other than the seeing and the seen. When we see, we feel the presence of the thing we are looking at viscerally. Merleau-Ponty calls this a "carnal formula" (1964: 164). With a phenomenological approach to vision, there is no distinction between the thing and our perception of it. In fact, we are "the same stuff", connected through light with no absolute distinction between the subject who sees and the object that is seen.

We live in visual space from the inside, we inhabit it, yet that space is already outside, open to the horizon. Thus the boundary between inside and outside, or between self and world, is dissolved.

(Ingold 2000 p264)

Vision, Painting, Landscape and Practice

What does this all mean for a painting practice? I struggled with my understanding of painting—why I do it and how it could fit in an Arts and Ecology frame of creating work. I wanted my paintings to question, stimulate or reveal the engaged relationship between the inhabitant (myself, the viewer) and the inhabited (the landscape). My readings in landscape studies helped me come to more ecological understandings of the world around me. I learned ways of sensually inhabiting and participating with the landscape. But, I still felt the distance between the observer and the observed when I tried to look and paint. I had to interrogate how deeply Cartesian epistemology had influenced my understanding of vision. This distance was compounded by my outsider status as a foreigner in England. I recall my impressions of the Devon vistas when I first arrived; I thought they looked like painted stage backdrops. Over time I saw these scenes every day, clearly becoming an insider through living in Totnes, but these scenes still felt distant. This created a struggle for me and it became clear that I needed to push further towards a type of inhabiting with the paintings themselves, as well as my approach to vision.

According to Cosgrove, painting is ideological: “one of the consistent purposes of landscape painting has been to present an image of order and proportioned control” (1985: 58). Painting thought of as an ideological *way of seeing* is a detached analytical vision shaped by a Cartesian tradition of representation; meaning is created as a representation, internally, as a thought, or externally, as a painting. This meaning is a symbolic representation of the world that stands in place of the real thing. It stands in-between the seer and the seen as a formulaic imitation of the seen object.

A painting as a symbolic object represents a vision that is snatched out of the flow of time and can be owned or otherwise manipulated. This is enabled through the impact of

linear perspective on our perceptions of ourselves and the environment. Landscape paintings do not have the same ideological power they did before the photograph was popularised. They can no longer claim access to an objective view of truth, but they can fake it by utilising these pictorial conventions in constructing a painting.

Two landscapes that I painted this year that would seem to be in line with Cosgrove's approach would be *Totnes, East Gate* and *Dart River* (see page 30). Both of these landscapes were realistically depicted, eliciting a certain type of response from the viewer that seemed to be more symbolic than directly engaged. I have no interest in strictly painting in this way, for if painting is simply reduced to creating objective representations of the world, I would much rather take a photograph.

Inhabiting Vision

Merleau-Ponty's theory of vision allows for a much more enchanting and fully engaged understanding of a painting practice. For him, painting does not "signify prosaic things which are absent" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 164). The painting is not an object, nor is it a representation of what is depicted. The painting stems from the "internal equivalent in me" of visual sensations which, through the body, "give rise to some [external] visible shape" (ibid., 164). This external visible shape is newly *within the world of the visible*. Others can perceive it, subsequently allowing it to have an internal equivalent in them. It is almost as if a visual world manifests itself *through* the body of the painter into a painting:

The painter's vision is not a view upon the *outside*, a merely "physical-optical" relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible.

(Merleau-Ponty 1964: 181)

To view a painting, the body senses what is depicted through the painting as a “‘visible’ of the second power”, once removed but not a “faded copy” (ibid., 164). To see a painting as an object or even a thing is not accurate, “it is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I see it” (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 164). A painting offers a set of instructions for seeing in a particular way. This is not ideologically based; Merleau-Ponty locates the painter outside of influence and “incontestably sovereign in his own rumination of the world” (1964: 161). The painting is merely an offering of a potential visual experience. When we see it, we position our bodies in a relational context to it through a process of dwelling in the visible world. The vision between the viewer and the painting is dialogical and so is the vision between the painter and the landscape. As stated earlier, the things of the world and the body are the “same stuff.” This is a profoundly mysterious idea that dissolves vision into a unified sensing of an unfolding world.

I feel like I have only begun to understand Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of vision, but it has energised me nonetheless. With the painting *Lime Kiln Copse* (see cover image) I finally figured a significant way *into* the landscape. I achieved this by entering a copse I had seen for six months, only to find out that it hides a large disused quarry. This is reflected in the sense of envelopment depicted in the painting—the wayward geometry and lack of horizon line provoke a type of abstraction that is, at the same time, welcoming. I feel as if I have dislodged an unchallenged Cartesian vision within myself that I did not even know I so heavily relied upon. I have found a theoretical framework that can incorporate, not oppose, painting within an ecological context. I feel liberated from representation, but that does not mean I will abandon it completely. I have uncovered new ways that I can push and pull at that representation. Perhaps most importantly, I have learned to *trust my body*. This motivates me to keep working. It also provides a fresh way of interpreting my experiments with immersive sound in my MA show. Having established a working understanding of a phenomenological vision, my future studies will focus on the

act of painting and the painting itself in further detail. (It should be noted that phenomenology is not without criticism. Many authors, including Deleuze (2005), deftly point out that it normalises perception itself and perhaps places too much importance on human sense perception as the centre of meaning. I will pick up on these threads in the future as well.)

For Merleau-Ponty, a “painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility” (1964: 66). This visibility or vision seems to thread through the world. Merleau-Ponty suggests that we think of painting with the terms *inspiration* and *expiration* as they relate to breathing. As a painter, I bring the visible world into my body by looking. I then bring the visible world out of my body through painting. Vision ricochets through the world of things as others bring the visible world into and out of their bodies. Painting is therefore fully immersed and engaged with the world. It does not create representations of the world, but “join(s) with and follow(s) the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being” (Ingold 2010: 10). It is a procedural practice of inhabiting vision *while* weaving it through an unfolding world of things.

through [vision] we come in contact with the sun and the stars, [and] we are everywhere all at once.

(Merleau-Ponty 1964: 187)



Totnes, East Gate



Dart River

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