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Cover image: Unidentified photographer, possibly Elsie Knocker, "Self and Jean-Batiste", Mairi Chisholm with Jean Batiste, a Belgian Congolese soldier, undated. . Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

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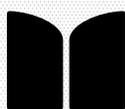
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Editorial

British Art Studies Editorial Group

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At the same time that we have been preparing Issue 8 of *BAS* for publication, many of us have also been working on a new peer-reviewed digital publication: *The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition: A Chronicle, 1769-2018*. The *RA Chronicle* is a completely free and open access resource, which explores the history of the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London – the world’s longest-running annual exhibition of contemporary art, founded in 1769.

Essays examining key artists, artworks, and events from each individual year’s Exhibition are paired with 250 digitised and searchable copies of the accompanying exhibition catalogues. The *Chronicle* also presents year-by-year data about audience attendance, the number of male and female exhibitors, number of works exhibited, genres on display, and ratio between academician and non-academician exhibitors. This repository of original research and primary source material is intended to shine new light on British art, its exhibition histories, and its publics, and to encourage further innovative study.

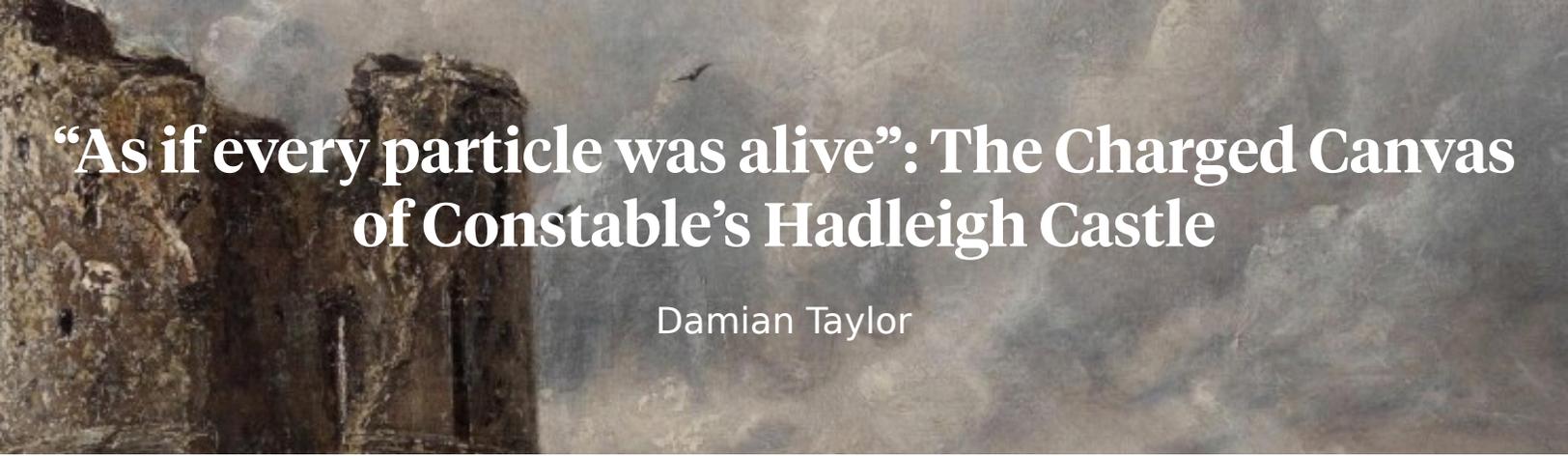
Over 90 scholars, curators, artists, and critics have contributed to the *Chronicle*. Even such a large and comprehensive project cannot capture a complete history, but through collaboration and the publication of this resource, we intend to enable researchers to find out new facts, to research previously hidden histories, and offer new art historical interpretations. We hope you will enjoy exploring this new publication at www.chronicle250.com.



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Figure 1.

Introductory film, The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition: A Chronicle, 1769-2018, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.



“As if every particle was alive”: The Charged Canvas of Constable’s Hadleigh Castle

Damian Taylor

Abstract

John Constable painted Hadleigh Castle in the months that followed the death of his wife, Maria, in late 1828. Whereas interpretations of this bleak masterpiece frequently stress its melancholic introspection, this article suggests that it can also be understood as fundamentally engaged with scientific ideas. Across the canvas, light and vapour interweave, drawing together globe and sky into a single system of interchanging states that corresponds with understandings of the world arising in contemporary geology and meteorology. This dynamism linking every aspect of the landscape is reinforced by Constable’s innovative paint handling, which can profitably be considered in relation to conceptions of electrical charge and polarity then stimulating British intellectual life. Viewed in the light of early nineteenth-century science, Hadleigh Castle emerges from the depths of Constable’s mourning as a profound pictorial engagement with newly-conceived qualities of nature, through which the artist traced the invisible but universal conditions of life.

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Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames—Morning after a Stormy Night (1829) is perhaps John Constable's greatest balancing act (Fig. 1). Dominated by a foreground tower that is both rooted in the earth and precariously poised on the receding headland, the castle overlooks the division of earth and water and the confluence of river and sea. This work's balancing of oppositions is most frequently discussed in relation to Constable's emotional state at the time of its painting, it being the work to which he turned in the weeks that followed the death of his wife, Maria, in November 1828. It has been suggested that Constable associated the "forlorn ruin at Hadleigh, in late 1828–9, with his own shattered home life and melancholy sense of irreplaceable loss", *Hadleigh Castle* being "charged with an obvious and foreboding intensity, onto which Constable projected the blackness of his own emotions".¹ The deeply personal connotations of the ruined castle are irresistible—as Chateaubriand put it early in the nineteenth century, one senses "a secret conformity between destroyed monuments and the brevity of our existence".² Indeed, it is tempting to project onto *Hadleigh Castle* the association between painter and ruin that Constable later made explicit when referring to the print of "Castle Acre Priory" for his mezzotint collection *English Landscape*: "I have added a 'Ruin', to the little Glebe Farm—for, not to have a symbol in the book of myself, and of the 'Work' which I have projected, would be missing the opportunity".³ This punning entwinement of his career, his life, and the *English Landscape* was wittily reaffirmed the following month when the artist requested that his mezzotinter, David Lucas, "bring some sort of proof of my Ruin that I may contemplate my fate."⁴ Yet, despite its association with pervasive woe, it is much remarked that this composition's "melancholic" foreground is tempered by its "luminous sky and its play of intense light on the distant waters", the mourning evoked by the title's "stormy night" being counterposed by its near homophone's promise of new life.⁵ Likewise, although it has been claimed that the lines from James Thomson's *Seasons* that accompanied *Hadleigh Castle's* first exhibition suggest that "Constable seemed intent on his audience finding in it a decidedly optimistic meaning",⁶ it has been persuasively argued that, when read in the context of Thomson's immediately preceding lines, Constable's choice of verse offers far darker associations.⁷

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

John Constable, *Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames--Morning after a Stormy Night*, 1829, oil on canvas, 121.9 x 164.5 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1977.14.42). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

The psychological perspective that frames interpretations of *Hadleigh Castle* sets it apart from Constable's works of the 1810s and early 1820s, the "decade of English naturalism" in which Constable was a key player.⁸ Constable's paintings of this period are characterised by topographical accuracy and an attention to the observed that could be understood as in some sense motivated by an idea of the "scientific"; as Ann Bermingham suggests of naturalism's ideological foundation, the "eighteenth-century view of nature as existing independently of social and cultural forms prepared the way for the empirical, scientific investigation of nature in the nineteenth century ..., this investigation provided the context in which Constable's naturalism developed."⁹ This article in no way suggests that the wealth of commentary on *Hadleigh Castle* is misguided in framing it in terms of profound introspection arising from personal loss, a reading that sets the work poles apart from Constable's earlier naturalism. It does however seek to balance these readings with the claim that of all Constable's works, *Hadleigh Castle* is perhaps the most deeply indebted to, and fundamentally engaged with, contemporary scientific ideas. When viewed in this light, Constable's bleak masterpiece can be appreciated as a complex embodiment of his later demand that painting be "*scientific as well as poetic ... a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but experiments*".¹⁰

This article reconsiders *Hadleigh Castle* in relation to Constable's likely engagement with various scientific disciplines prior to his explicitly recorded interest in the 1830s. It explores how the dynamic exchanges between the sea, the earth, and the sky that were established in *Hadleigh Castle's* composition correspond with contemporaneous geological and meteorological theories. The discussion then turns from the work's composition to Constable's handling of paint, which further binds the canvas into an intensely charged whole. When assessed in relation to early nineteenth-century theories of electrical charge and polarity, Constable's technique reinforces the suggestion that in the 1820s the artist developed an approach to painting that better expressed conceptions of the material world then emerging in British science. New conceptions of the material world shaped the development of a revised approach to depicting it: *Hadleigh Castle* emerges as a work that moved from the observation of particulars to the articulation of underlying forces, through which Constable gave pictorial form to the invisible conditions of life.

Geology – "matter itself must be in motion"

The composition of *Hadleigh Castle* differs significantly from those of Constable's previous large exhibition pictures. The shimmering horizon is remarkable in its prominence and height within the composition, almost exactly bisecting the canvas. This emphatic central division forms the axis

for an extensive mirroring of compositional elements, which is most conspicuous on the canvas's right-hand side. In contrast with the teeming whorls that expand across the vast majority of the work, the luminous band of sea is by its nature characterised by its horizontality, which is augmented by a linear application of paint that extends into the estuary's mudflats. The approximate outline and linear quality of this area is mirrored in the sky directly above it. Furthermore, the line of trees and bushes that cut diagonally from the bottom right into the canvas is echoed by a line of cumulus, from the base of which issue the most prominent shafts of sunlight. Juxtaposed with this voluminous row of cumulus, the dark mass of cloud that spreads out against the sky to meet the canvas's top edge appears flat, reflecting the relationship between the foreground's grassy bank and more distant trees (Fig. 2). Although this mirrored relation between tree and cloud is remarkable, it is hardly unprecedented for a painting to suggest formal affinities between the clumped masses of deciduous trees and those of cumulus clouds; indeed it is perhaps more evident in a number of works by artists to whom Constable looked, such as Jacob van Ruisdael in, for instance, *Landscape* (Fig. 3) and in many Gainsboroughs, such as the early *Cornard Wood, near Sudbury, Suffolk* (1746-48, Fig. 4), owned by Constable's uncle David Pike Watts from 1814.¹¹ In Gainsborough's work the parallels between cloud and tree are extended into the foreground forms of grass and scrub, creating a fascinatingly unified rhythm across the entire work. Similarly, in *Hadleigh Castle* the formal correspondence between tree and cloud is extended into the foreground, yet here the parity is exhibited between cloud and rock. For example, on the painting's left-hand side the billowing banks of cloud are a close kin of the stony outcrop that impinges on the ruined tower at the composition's extreme left, from which a line of boulders leads to the foreground mass of rock, modelled by impasted highlights into forms almost as nephelological as geological.



Figure 2a.

John Constable, Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames--Morning after a Stormy Night, 1829, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 164.5 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1977.14.42). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

Figure 2b.

John Constable, Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames--Morning after a Stormy Night, annotated by the author, 1829, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 164.5 cm. Collection of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1977.14.42). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.



Figure 3.

Jacob van Ruisdael, Landscape, circa 1670, oil on canvas, 53.2 × 60 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC (1961.9.85) Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the National Gallery of Art.



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 4.

Thomas Gainsborough, *Cornard Wood*, near Sudbury, Suffolk, 1748, oil on canvas, 122 x 155 cm. Collection of the National Gallery, London (NG925). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the National Gallery.

Hadleigh Castle was painted in an age in which the connections between earth and cloud were being drawn increasingly close, both in meteorology and in geology. In 1835 Constable famously noted that “the sister arts have less hold on my mind in its occasional ramblings from my one pursuit than the sciences, especially the study of geology”.¹² An interest in geology in 1835 may suggest that the artist was stimulated by Charles Lyell’s three-volume *Principles of Geology*, which was published between 1830 and 1833 and “exercised a profound influence on the geology of his time”.¹³ Lyell’s magnum opus brought uniformitarian geology to international prominence. Rather than resulting from epochal catastrophe, divine creation, or, in Abraham Werner’s influential Neptunism, the progressive sedimentation of the evaporating oceans, uniformitarianism understood the earth to be in a continual state of change effected through landmasses rising due to subterranean forces and subsequently being eroded, a process in which rain—and thus also the clouds—plays a vital role. In asserting the gradual evolution of the earth over immeasurably vast periods, uniformitarianism radically challenged prevailing notions of the age and origin of the world. Timothy Mitchell has argued that the wide international acceptance of uniformitarianism that resulted from the publication of Lyell’s *Principles*, specifically in its superseding of Werner’s Neptunism, affected the course of

German landscape painting in the 1830s.¹⁴ However, Lyell's views were an extension of those already strongly advanced in Britain. Uniformitarian geology had its roots in James Hutton's *Theory of the Earth* of 1788, which argued that there is no "nature in a quiescent state; matter itself must be in motion" and famously concluded that there was no means of estimating the age of the earth, given that "we find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end."¹⁵ When the pre-eminent British chemist Humphry Davy delivered a course of lectures on geology in 1805, Werner's geognosy was quickly brushed aside and it was Hutton's theory that demanded most respect and required greatest attention.¹⁶ In 1813, Constable's friend and advisor Joseph Farington recorded that "the changes which have taken place in the formation of the earth of this our Globe", was a subject of conversation over dinner with Anthony Carlisle (Constable's and Davy's acquaintance), from which it has been inferred that contemporary geology was a "'subject of conversation' among English artists".¹⁷ In sum, it is more than plausible that Constable would have been aware of recent conceptions of the composition and evolution of the earth's surface prior to the final decade of his career.

Meteorology and "the man of the clouds"

Constable's engagement with the sky is most explicit in his numerous oil studies devoted to the clouds. The majority of these were undertaken on Hampstead Heath in the summers and autumns of 1821 and 1822, shortly after which he referred to himself as "the man of the clouds".¹⁸ Yet, as with his interest in geology, Constable's fascination with meteorology only finds documented expression in the 1830s.¹⁹ At the close of 1836, Constable recommended that his friend George Constable consult Thomas Forster's *Researches About Atmospheric Phaenomena*, first published in 1813, of which Constable owned a second-hand 1815 second edition. Forster's book was greatly indebted to the work of Luke Howard—the "Father of Meteorology and the Godfather of Clouds"—whose fame primarily rests on his classifications of the genera of clouds and the theorising of their evolution, introducing the terms that, in expanded form, still exist to this day; cirrus, stratus, cumulus, nimbus and their intermediary modifications.²⁰ Howard urged that clouds should be considered as not merely "the sport of winds, ... ever varying, and therefore not to be defined." Rather, "they are subject to certain distinct modifications, produced by the general causes which effect all the variations of the Atmosphere".²¹ The forms assumed by the clouds are "visible indications" of the operation of the atmosphere and thus determined by the topography of the earth beneath them.

Considering the prominence of clouds within Constable's oeuvre it is unsurprising that meteorology's potential influence on his earlier development continues to stimulate debate.²² Indeed, it is commonplace to find it claimed without qualification that Constable "achieved this perfection in his skies ... by studying what had been written by contemporary scientists and meteorologists".²³ Conversely, as there is no evidence of Constable's knowledge of meteorological theory before 1836, for Anne Lyles there is an "overwhelming likelihood" that Constable acquired Forster's book "towards the end of his life when—by his own admission—he was developing a particular interest in the 'sciences'".²⁴ Yet late in life Constable recalled that the "best lecture" he had ever received was from Benjamin West in the early years of the century, and this lecture was specifically about the underlying qualities of clouds.²⁵ If this stuck with him over the decades, it is hard to imagine that at any subsequent point he would not have been interested in Howard's and Forster's works.

Given both the importance of clouds within Constable's works and this article's focus on the potential scientific influences that are traceable in *Hadleigh Castle*, it is helpful to examine in greater depth the likely period in which Constable may have first encountered Howard's ideas. There are grounds to believe that if Constable had encountered Howard's work prior to his Hampstead sketching it is likely to have been around 1803. In this year Howard's theories and nomenclature were first published in a three-part serialisation in Alexander Tilloch's *Philosophical Magazine*, including three pages of engravings derived from Howard's watercolours, the final plate setting his observations of the clouds within a landscape that would be recalled in the composition of *Hadleigh Castle* (Fig. 5).²⁶ In its mission to "diffuse Philosophical Knowledge among every Class of Society", *Philosophical Magazine* reached a wide readership and covered a diverse range of subjects, which extended to the fine arts.²⁷ As such, it is not unreasonable to claim—as has Louis Hawes in what I believe remains the most balanced account of this topic—that "Constable might conceivably have delved into a few volumes of the journal and come upon the cloud essay."²⁸ One can go further: considering the explosive interest in natural philosophy at the turn of the century—which saw the founding of the widely-circulated *Nicholson's Journal* in 1797, *Philosophical Magazine* in 1798, the Royal Institution of Great Britain in 1799, its *Journal* in 1801, and so forth—it is likely that someone with even a passing interest in science and who, in 1801, professed to spend his evenings reading,²⁹ would frequently glance at a copy of *Philosophical Magazine*. Furthermore, between 1800 and 1803 the magazine published Edward Dayes's nine *Essays on Painting*. These opened with "An Essay to illustrate the Principles of Composition As Connected With Landscape Painting", a subject that could hardly fail to pique the young

artist's interest,³⁰ and Dayes's seventh essay warmly refers to the "masterly productions" of Constable's patron, Sir George Beaumont.³¹ The series concluded in 1803 in the volume immediately preceding that in which Howard's essay first appeared and—as his correspondence late in life makes clear—Constable was certainly aware of Dayes's writings.³² Added to this, the volume of *Philosophical Magazine* in which was published the third and final section of Howard's essay contained a frontispiece engraving after a drawing by Lady Beaumont (Sir George's wife), which makes it more than likely that the journal would have been present in the Beaumonts' town house.³³ We know that at this period Constable often visited the Beaumonts and later recorded that they enjoyed showing him examples of their works.³⁴ If he were shown the frontispiece engraving it would only require that he turn over two pages and view the top item in the contents to note Howard's essay. This would be shortly after Benjamin West is presumed to have offered Constable memorable advice about clouds; it would be surprising if the young artist had not turned over a few more pages and encountered Howard's essay.



Figure 5.

Luke Howard, Untitled, from *Philosophical Magazine* 16 (June–September 1803), n.p., pl. 8. Digital image courtesy of Biodiversity Heritage Library.

The points raised by Hawes and augmented above offer probable, if still circumstantial, reason to assume Constable's early knowledge of Howard's work. Yet Hawes is scrupulous in not ascribing an awareness of meteorology undue significance, arguing that whilst Constable may have had an interest in contemporary meteorology it has no great claim to be considered a causal factor in the artist's turn to the clouds, nor is there reason to believe that knowledge of Howard's or Forster's work conspicuously affected his actual

paintings.³⁵ Relegating the significance of meteorology makes sense if it is to be considered an isolated case of Constable's engagement with a contemporary scientific discipline, or if one believes the frequently implied claim that Constable's "interest in the natural sciences remained tied to his practice and aims as a landscape painter".³⁶ Indeed—as has been suggested with palpable frustration—when viewed within the narrow framework of the cloud studies and meteorology, perhaps "the argument over meteorology in Constable is a dead letter."³⁷ However, to approach meteorology in isolation from a wider framework of scientific thought is hardly tenable, either in relation to Constable or to the intellectual culture of London more broadly in the early nineteenth-century. For instance, Constable's correspondence from his earliest years as a painter indicates a wider interest in scientific pursuits, such as astronomy and chemistry.³⁸ Furthermore, for Constable to be profoundly interested in natural science would have been wholly in accord with his generation.³⁹ Without looking beyond Constable's acquaintances, although William Wordsworth may more often be remembered as the paradigm of one who "despised scientific method",⁴⁰ when asking Davy's advice on establishing a laboratory in the Lake District in 1801 Samuel Taylor Coleridge not only remarked "how long, how ardently I have wished to initiate myself in chemical science", he also noted that Wordsworth was "desirous, too, not to be so wholly ignorant of knowledge so exceedingly important".⁴¹ As Constable's close friend and biographer the painter C.R. Leslie later suggested, during this era "every artist who deserves the title" had good reason to be "interested in *all* natural science".⁴² A final objection is intrinsic to early nineteenth-century meteorology: as Howard noted, if the forms of clouds were "produced by the movements of the atmosphere alone, then indeed might the study of them be deemed an useless pursuit of shadows", yet—as the following section will explore in depth—for Howard, the modification of clouds are "produced by the general causes" that permeate all nature; indeed, the study of clouds is important because they are "visible indications of the operation of these causes".⁴³ As such, an interest in meteorology suggests a heightened awareness of the interconnections between the elements of a landscape, rather than an exclusive focus on one.

Hadleigh Castle articulates these interactions of sky, sea, and earth. Established through a mirroring that speaks of an interchangeability between aspects of the landscape, the relationship between the two halves of Constable's canvas is strengthened by the latticed interplay of sunlight and rain at the extreme right, the rain equally appearing to ascend from the sea into the atmosphere as to descend from the clouds; as Howard notes, of the "origin of clouds there can be but one opinion—that the water of which they consist has been carried into the atmosphere by evaporation. ... During the

heat of the day a great quantity of vapour is thrown into the atmosphere from the surface of the earth and waters.”⁴⁴ As light and vapour suture globe and sky into one system of interchanging states, on the canvas the castle punctures both, wedding them in a potent symbol of how the continual flux of the elements will return unto the ever-changing earth not only the humanly-given form of the building but also the very rocks.

“heat. wind electricity moisture” – Constable's Charged Canvases

The dynamic interplay between sea, earth, and sky that Constable established in *Hadleigh Castle's* composition was augmented by his painterly technique. When compared with the artist's major exhibition canvases of the intervening years—*The Cornfield* (1826, Fig. 6), *The Chain Pier, Brighton* (1827, Fig. 7), *Vale of Dedham* (1828, Fig. 8)—*Hadleigh Castle* marks a return to the widely-recognised all-over animation of his final Stour Valley canvas, *The Leaping Horse* (1825 Fig. 9). In this work, although “it is the horse that leaps, the whole picture is about movement, about the animation of nature.”⁴⁵ *The Leaping Horse* can be understood as the first fully-fledged example of Constable having attained a painterly style undergirt by his scientific commitments. It is the first exhibition canvas in which is evident an approach to painting that asserts the changeability of every compositional element and, perhaps, an interchangeability across these. It was a technique developed in the paintings that followed the summer of 1821 and was worked out through the interaction between full-size sketch and exhibition picture; the dynamism achieved in the sketch migrating to the exhibition picture not directly but through an evolving use of the palette knife that traced over sparse underpainting the sparkle of forms. This technique emerged alongside compositions that increasingly foregrounded the charged moment rather than the languid cyclicism of the first three Stour six-footers. In the earlier landscapes an elevated viewpoint emphasised the extensive temporality of the canalised Stour, around which the activity was played out. Whether in the slow progress of the stationary horse, ferried from bank to bank in *The White Horse*, the foreground fishing of *Stratford Mill*, or the mid-stream, midday passage of a wain to be loaded by distant reapers, to return full in *The Hay Wain*, the flow of the Stour dictated the flow of life and of time, dictating also the speed of the painting. From *View on the Stour* onwards, Constable's viewpoint is lowered, focusing attention on increasingly dynamic and definitive human actions, which culminate in *The Leaping Horse*.⁴⁶



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 6.

John Constable, *The Cornfield*, 1826, oil on canvas, 143 x 122 cm. Collection of the National Gallery, London (NG130). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the National Gallery.



Figure 7.

John Constable, Chain Pier, Brighton, 1826-7, oil on canvas, 127 × 182.9 cm. Collection of Tate (N05957). Digital image courtesy of Tate (Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported))



Figure 8. John Constable, *The Vale of Dedham*, 1828, oil on canvas, 144.5 × 122 cm. Collection of Scottish National Gallery (NG 2016). Digital image courtesy of National Galleries Scotland | Photo: Antonia Reeve.



Figure 9.

John Constable, *The Leaping Horse*, 1825, oil on canvas, 142 × 187.3 cm. Collection of the Royal Academy of Arts, London (03/1391). Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts, London.

The same sense of a pervasive energy that animates *The Leaping Horse* is equally compelling in *Hadleigh Castle*, in which objects are defined in terms not of substance or weight but of charge and potential. Rather than evoking form through the articulation of solid objects, under the palette knife's touch form emerges through the light that gives life to a surface, or perhaps through the energy flowing within and across objects, which finds kinship in the light of the sky and the charged intensity of the clouds. In this regard the frustratingly few legible words of Constable's marginal annotations to Forster's *Researches About Atmospheric Phaenomena* are relevant. Responding to Forster's "no cloud effuses rain until it has previously undergone a change sufficiently remarkable to constitute a distinct modification," the artist writes, "this is not correct electrical fluid will convert an [...] without an [...]". To Forster's comments regarding the movement of cirrus "as if every particle was alive", Constable adds that "this also happens in cumulus thunder clouds", and notes: "heat. wind electricity moisture".⁴⁷ Constable's mentions of electricity are unsurprising; as the "universal power" to which all "physical enquirers" then turned to understand nature's "most important and secret operations", the phenomenon played an understandably key role throughout Forster's book.⁴⁸ In this Forster is consistent with Luke Howard who, at the start of the century, stressed the role played in the modification of clouds by "the constant operation of electricity, which is sometimes so manifestly accumulated in clouds, upon

their forms and arrangement,” arguing that in asserting the universal influence of electricity “we shall not much overstep the limits of experimental inquiry”.⁴⁹ Forster suggests that the “discoveries made by Sir H. Davy seem calculated to throw light on this interesting subject” and that Davy’s “experiments incline one to regard it as the universal agent in all the changes of form which matter undergoes.”⁵⁰ For instance, in 1807 Davy delivered at the distinguished Bakerian lectures a course titled “On Some Chemical Agencies of Electricity” and “detailed the general methods of decomposition by electricity” through which Davy had isolated several newly-discovered elements, highlighting the divisibility of the stuff of earth and electricity’s part within this.⁵¹ Uniformitarian geology had wed rain and earth as partners within an ongoing global process; new conceptions of electricity were likewise uniting the clouds and the earth.

As Coleridge remarked in the mid-1810s, “the discovery of electricity ... may be affirmed to have electrified the whole frame of natural philosophy”; it should not be surprising that a radical transformation in how the material world was perceived would affect developments in how it was represented.⁵² In 1807 the close union of cloud and land effected by electricity was expressed by Constable’s contemporary in London, Cornelius Varley, who was in equal measure a painter and natural philosopher and to whose art—it has been speculated—Constable’s early naturalism owed a possible debt.⁵³ Published in Tilloch’s *Philosophical Magazine*, Varley’s “On Atmospheric Phaenomena” is a study of clouds “founded upon actual observations ... and on the known and admitted laws of electricity.” Varley drew seven conclusions from his observation of the weather, the first three of which are enough to convey a sense of his position:

1st, That no cloud can be formed, or exist, without electricity. 2d, That no cloud can rain till it parts with some of its electricity. 3d, That in fine weather the earth must be giving electricity to the atmosphere by means of vapour, and in stormy weather the atmosphere must be giving electricity to the earth by means of vapour, rain, or lightning.⁵⁴

Perhaps something of Varley’s third law could be seen to relate to the dynamic interplay between sea and sky in the right-hand horizon of *Hadleigh Castle*. However, I include Varley’s theories because they bring to my mind Constable’s great contemporary, J.M.W. Turner. Given that Turner was acquainted with numerous distinguished natural philosophers—notably Michael Faraday and Mary Somerville—and throughout his career, both in friendships and subject matter, showed a keen interest in scientific and technological advances, it is understandable that his work has recently been

explored in relation to contemporary science.⁵⁵ I shall not examine Turner's work in relationship to electricity in any great detail, yet it is instructive to reflect briefly on how certain iconic works roughly contemporary with *Hadleigh Castle* differ from Constable's canvas (and from Constable's major works of this period, for example *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, in which electricity is writ large across the sky in its most spectacular form: electricity, "this wonderful agent, which we see in intense activity in lightning", as John Herschel put it in 1830 in his hugely influential summary of contemporary scientific thought).⁵⁶ Prefigured in some respects by paintings such as *Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps* (1812), in later canvases such as *Stormy Sea* (1840-45), *The Morning after the Deluge* (1843), *Snow Storm* (1842), and—overlooked by *Hadleigh Castle*—*Off the Nore* (1840-45 Fig. 10), light becomes a shrouding membrane through which the world as matter is revealed, or within which it dissolves.



Figure 10.

Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Off the Nore*, circa 1840-45, oil on paper laid on canvas, 30.5 × 45.7 cm. Collection of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1978.43.16). Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

Turner's luminous atmospheres carry a charge that recalls Varley's suggestion, cited above, that "in fine weather the earth must be giving electricity to the atmosphere by means of vapour, and in stormy weather the atmosphere must be giving electricity to the earth by means of vapour, rain, or lightning". In contrast, in *Hadleigh Castle* charge is immanent to matter, rather than a vapour. As the earth and sea approach the horizon they do not dissolve into the sky; sea and sky meet in pulsating, shimmering bands. They discharge between one another, but remain distinct. More generally, in this painting it is as though all things—the earth, the water, the trees, the

clouds—are animated with a kindred energy. In this regard one can perhaps return to Constable’s annotation, to “electrical fluid”, the concept that had dominated the field of research throughout the eighteenth-century into the 1830s, whether the “two-fluid” theories prominent in French thought (in which different negatively- and positively-charged liquids flowed through bodies), or more probably the “single-fluid” theory first popularised by Benjamin Franklin (in which negativity and positivity resulted from paucity or excess of the same fluid).⁵⁷ This fluid was posited as the “universal agent in all the changes of form which matter undergoes”, a medium (or mediums) of opposition that animated neutral matter. The more time that I spent with *Hadleigh Castle*, the more I was struck by how little paint the artist had used; rather than render continuous tone, in many areas of the canvas the forms of objects emerged from a neutral brown ground, a “scattering” of “spots over the surface”, as a contemporary reviewer complained. These spots—“Constable’s snow”—no longer embellished painted form, as in my opinion they had until *The Leaping Horse*: they constituted form by tracing passages of heightened intensity over an undifferentiated ground.

“Adding to the Art, qualities of Nature unknown to it before”

In the weeks that followed *Hadleigh Castle*’s exhibition, Constable embarked upon the collection of mezzotints that formed his *English Landscape*. The project would variously engage, harass, and enrage him for the next four years. Implicit in the prints themselves and explicit in Constable’s letterpress introduction, the collection foregrounded chiaroscuro as his central concern; the vitality of the landscape derived from the opposition of dark and light, of positive and negative—as it had in *Hadleigh Castle* and in contemporary scientific discourse.⁵⁸ His introduction also urged that, rather than limiting one’s study to past art, the artist should draw from “a far more expansive field,” finding “innumerable sources of study, hitherto unexplored, fertile in beauty” in order to form “a style which is original; thus adding to the Art, qualities of Nature unknown to it before.”⁵⁹ This essay has argued that for Constable one such source of study was science. Constable’s movement away from a naturalistic idiom grounded in a notion of the scientific can be understood to coincide with the development of a painterly style that was more appropriate for expressing actual conceptions of the material world that were then finding acceptance in scientific discourse. As such, rather than being a bold statement, Constable’s famous suggestion from 1836 that landscape painting “be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but experiments” hardly does justice to the painter’s engagement with science: as William Herschel put it, “what would all experiments avail if we should stop there, and not argue upon them Half a dozen experiments made with judgment by a person who reasons well, are worth a thousand random observations”.⁶⁰ Rather than a retreat from the

presumed scientific aspiration of naturalism's "thirst for objectivity, for the innocent eye", *Hadleigh Castle* can be understood as a maturation of scientific influence that offered a formally convincing engagement with newly conceived qualities of nature; looking beneath local appearance it traced the invisible but universal physical conditions of life. ⁶¹

Hadleigh Castle, The Mouth of the Thames—Morning after a Stormy Night is a great balancing act, one of dynamism rather than stasis. Set at the mouth of the Thames, the confinement of the river broadens into the sea's expanse, limitless to the eye and radiant at the very centre of the canvas. The storm departs, its clouds parted by a brilliance interpenetrated with rain. Light leads to the distant ships, from which vantage a rainbow would be visible—the sign of God's covenant with "every living creature of all flesh", not present to *Hadleigh Castle's* viewer yet so conspicuous in the painting that Constable began in the months following its first exhibition, *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*. ⁶² My main concern has been to rethink *Hadleigh Castle's* relationship to one aspect of Constable's rich intellectual life: with how revised conceptions of materiality challenged modes of representation inherited from a prior age or, as it were, with how Constable balanced Genesis with contemporary geology—a common enough endeavour in his century. ⁶³ Yet, as it evokes transitions of states—between freshwater and salt sea; between storm and sunlight, together effecting the movement from sea, through air, to land and river in an ongoing process implicating the local with the global—*Hadleigh Castle* also marks a transition in Constable's oeuvre. Although attending with any rigour to Constable's subsequent works is beyond the scope of this article, it is motivated by a desire that its in-depth attention to *Hadleigh Castle's* complexities may cast new light on aspects of the artist's final years. To touch upon just one example, *Hadleigh Castle's* tension between the confined and the limitless becomes an increasing paradox in Constable's last decade. Following Leslie's suggestion that "the confinement of his studies within the narrowest bounds in which, perhaps, the studies of any artist were confined, was in the highest degree favourable", for nearly two centuries discussions of the artist have been framed in terms of the local and familiar. ⁶⁴ This is undoubtedly germane. Yet Constable's explicit interest in science in these years points outwards, away from the specific and singular to the universal; thus he aligned Richard Wilson with Linnaeus, Wilson being "one of the great appointments to shew to the *world* the hidden stores and beauties of Nature ... who shew to the world what exists in nature but which was not known till his time." ⁶⁵ Furthermore, although omitted from Leslie's account, when publicly discussing art in these years Constable's perspective was remarkably broad; in his lecture notes he makes important reference to the "descriptions of external nature" made by Bishop Reginald Heber in his *Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India* and places William Hodges—most

famous for his large oils of Tahiti derived from his experiences on James Cook's second expedition into the Pacific Ocean, and his later scenes from India—among the handful of artists he believed constituted the foundation of an English school of landscape.⁶⁶ Perhaps then it is not surprising that the global voyage of exploration should assume a spectral presence in the book that most influenced hermetic interpretations of the artist: although claiming that Constable's merits derived from his "confinement" within the "narrowest bounds", when Leslie first drafted a preface to the *Memoirs* the image of his friend that came to mind related Constable to a "voyage of discovery"; an "adventure" that was explicitly contrasted with those who limited themselves to "passage through well-known seas".⁶⁷ Despite the wealth of existing scholarship on Constable, this "voyage of discovery" and the role of science within it remains remarkably enigmatic.

Footnotes

- 1 Louis Hawes, "Constable's *Hadleigh Castle* and British Romantic Ruin Painting", *Art Bulletin* 65, no. 3 (1983): 456-57; Michael Rosenthal, *Constable. The Painter and His Landscape* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1983), 214.
- 2 Quoted in Hawes, "Constable's *Hadleigh Castle*", 466-67. For a broader account of the ruin within British Romantic painting and poetry, see Hawes's *Presences of Nature: British Landscape 1780-1830* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1982).
- 3 Letter to David Lucas, 2 October 1832, in R.B. Beckett (ed.), *John Constable's Correspondence*, 6 vols. (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1962-78), 4:382 (hereafter cited as JCC I, JCC II, ...). On Constable's prints, see Andrew Shirley, *The Published Mezzotints of David Lucas after John Constable* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930); David Hill, *Constable's English Landscape Scenery* (London: J Murray, 1985); Andrew Wilton, *Constable's English Landscape Scenery* (London: British Museum, 1979).
- 4 Letter to David Lucas, 20 November 1832 (JCC IV, 388).
- 5 Hawes, "Constable's *Hadleigh Castle*", 465.
- 6 Anne Lyles (ed.), *Constable: The Great Landscapes* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 175.
- 7 Rosenthal, *Constable. The Painter*, 215.
- 8 The term is John Gage's, *A Decade of English Naturalism, 1810-1820* (Norwich; London: Norwich Castle Museum; Victoria and Albert Museum, 1969). On the division between Constable's earlier "naturalistic" and "dramatic" late paintings, see William Vaughan, "Constable's Englishness", *Oxford Art Journal* 19, no. 2 (1996): 17-27.
- 9 Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition 1740-1860* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 152-53. Discussing the historically labile term "science" begs for the term's clarification, yet no definition would do justice to its productively conflicting employment at this period. See Sydney Ross, *Nineteenth-Century Attitudes: Men of Science* (Dordrecht; London: Kluwer Academic, 1991), ch. 1; David Knight, "Romanticism and the Sciences", in *Romanticism and the Sciences*, ed. Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 10 C.R. Leslie's record of Constable's Royal Institution lectures 1 and 4, 1836, in R.B. Beckett ed., *John Constable's Discourses* (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1970), 39, 69 (henceforth JCD). It should be noted that even when directly transcribing Constable's letters Leslie was fond of embellishment and the lectures found their enduring form long after Constable's death—a caution which has not hindered their unqualified and influential use.
- 11 John Hayes, *The Landscape Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough*, 2 vols. (London: Sotheby Publications, 1982), 2:343.
- 12 Note of 10 November 1835 (JCC V, 194).
- 13 Archibald Geikie, *The Founders of Geology* (London: MacMillan, 1905), 403.
- 14 Timothy Mitchell, *Art and Science in German Landscape Painting 1770-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6-8, 181. On the relationship between British landscape painting and geology in the early nineteenth-century, see Charlotte Klonk, *Science and the Perception of Nature: British Landscape Art in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
- 15 James Hutton, "Theory of the Earth", *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* 1 (1788-89): 209, 304. Although Hutton's essay was not widely read, it reached a wide readership when reformulated in John Playfair's influential *Illustrations of the Huttonian Theory of the Earth* (1802).
- 16 Robert Siegfried and R.H. Dott, Jr., "Humphry Davy as Geologist, 1805-29", *The British Journal for the History of Science* 9, no. 2 (1976): 219-227.

- 17 Joseph Farington, *The Farington Diary*, ed. James Greig, 7 vols. (London: Hutchinson, 1922–28), 7:151; Charlotte Klunk, *Science*, 99.
- 18 Letter to Fisher, 2 November 1823 (JCC VI, 142).
- 19 Letter to George Constable, 12 December 1836 (JCC V, 36). This is with the possible exception of the questionable inscription of “cirrus” on the reverse of a study typically dated to 1822, the original word being obscured by writing in another’s hand. Despite the frequent (yet wholly erroneous) claim that Constable inscribed *all* of the 1822 sketches with time, date, and weather details, he was methodical enough that it is improbable that he would offer technical terms on only one of dozens of instances.
- 20 John A. Day and Frank H. Ludlam, “Luke Howard and His Clouds”, *Weather* 27, no. 11 (1972): 448.
- 21 Luke Howard, *On the Modification of Clouds* (London: J. Taylor, 1803), 3.
- 22 For what seems the earliest suggested link, see E.L. Hawke, “Constable’s Clouds”, *Times*, 8 April 1937: 12. Relatively recent additions include John Thornes’s interdisciplinary monograph, *John Constable’s Skies: A Fusion of Art and Science* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999); *Constable’s Clouds*, ed. Edward Morris (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland; Liverpool: National Museums & Galleries, 2000); and *Constable’s Skies*, ed. Frederic Bancroft (New York: Salander-O’Reilly Galleries, 2004).
- 23 John Thornes, “Constable’s Meteorological Understanding and his Painting of Skies”, in *Constable’s Clouds*, ed. Morris, 159. For further claims of meteorology’s influence on Constable’s art around or before 1820, see Richard Hamblyn, *The Invention of Clouds: How an Amateur Meteorologist forged the Language of the Skies* (London: Picador, 2001), 228; Martin Kemp, *Seen Unseen: Art, Science, and Intuition from Leonardo to the Hubble Telescope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 152.
- 24 Anne Lyles, “This Glorious Pageantry of Heaven”, in *Constable’s Skies*, ed. Bancroft, 43.
- 25 C.R. Leslie, *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable* (London: Phaidon, 1995), 11–12.
- 26 “On the Modification of Clouds, and on the Principles of their Production, Suspension, and Destruction”, *Philosophical Magazine* 16 (1803): 97–107; 344–357; vol. 17 (1803): 5–11. In the same year Howard’s essay was brought together in the above-cited *On the Modification of Clouds*, to which subsequent citations will be made.
- 27 *Philosophical Magazine* 1 (1798), unpaginated preface.
- 28 Louis Hawes, “Constable’s Sky Sketches”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969): 345–46.
- 29 Undated letter to John Dunthorne, ca. 1801 (JCC II, 26).
- 30 *Philosophical Magazine* 8 (1800–1): 293–305. This became the first essay in the series with the publication, starting from 1802, of the remaining essays.
- 31 *Philosophical Magazine* 14, 226.
- 32 Undated letter to William Carpenter (JCC IV, 147). The success of his Dayes’s essays in *Philosophical Magazine* is suggested by the advertisement to *The Works of the Late Edward Dayes*, published in 1805 shortly after the artist’s death, which noted that Dayes’s writing were “already know to the Public ... through the Medium of that esteemed Journal, the *Philosophical Magazine*”. *The Works of the Late Edward Dayes*, ed. E.W. Brayley (London: T. Malden, 1805), unpaginated advertisement.
- 33 *Philosophical Magazine* 17. Hawes states that the engraving after a sketch by Lady Beaumont was in volume 16, in which appeared the first two parts of Howard’s essay (“Constable’s Sky Sketches”, 346, n. 7).
- 34 Letter to Maria Constable, 27 October 1823 (JCC II, 292).
- 35 Hawes, “Constable’s Sky Sketches”, 363.
- 36 Louis Hawes, “John Constable’s Writings on Art” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1963), 60. Ray Lambert has more recently made a similar claim, *John Constable and the Theory of Landscape Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.
- 37 Gillen D’Arcy Wood, “Constable, Clouds, Climate Change”, *Wordsworth Circle* 38, no. 1–2 (2007): 33.
- 38 Reference to astronomy, letter to John Dunthorne, 8 January 1802 (JCC II, 27). On the wild public popularity of astronomy around 1800, see Jan Golinski, “Sublime Astronomy: The Eidouranian of Adam Walker and His Sons”, *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2017): 135–57. In 1797 Constable was involved with the basic chemistry required for etching, the artist choosing to make his own nitric acid. See undated letter to John Thomas Smith, in Leslie Parris, Conal Shields, Ian Fleming-Williams (eds.), *John Constable, Further Documents and Correspondence* (Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1975), 292 (hereafter cited as FDC). Constable’s library contained an annotated 1797 edition of Thomas Garnett’s *Outlines of a Course of Lectures on Chemistry*, which briefly explains the production of nitric acid while ranging across developments in the field of chemistry. Thomas Garnett, *Outlines of a Course of Lectures on Chemistry* (Liverpool: J. M’Creery, 1797), 82.
- 39 See Cunningham and Jardine, ed., *Romanticism and the Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Fred Blick, “Wordsworth’s Dark Joke in ‘The Barberry-Tree’: The Influence of Humphry Davy, Coleridge and the ‘Gang’”, *Romanticism* 20, no. 3 (2014): 246–260.
- 40 Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1991), 98.
- 41 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 2 vols. (Boston, MA; New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1895), 1:346.

- 42 Charles Robert Leslie, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Tom Taylor (Boston, MA: Ticknor and Field, 1860), 51, my emphasis.
- 43 Howard, *Modification of Clouds*, 3.
- 44 Howard, *Modification of Clouds*, 14, 20.
- 45 Leslie Parris, *Constable: Pictures from the Exhibition* (London: Tate Gallery, 1991), 57. For similar sentiments, see Lyles, *Constable: The Great Landscapes*, 130; James Heffernan, *The Re-creation of Landscape: A Study of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Constable, and Turner* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College by University Press of New England, 1984), 75.
- 46 Anne Lyles suggests that from *View on the Stour* of 1822 onwards, in the Stour six-footers Constable “strove to give the figures a more emphatic role, and also to create landscapes with more strenuous and dynamic action”. Lyles, *Constable: The Great Landscapes*, 129. For fuller and excellent analyses of the evolving sense of time in these paintings, see Rosenthal, *Constable. The Painter*.
- 47 FDC, 44–45, ellipses as transcribed.
- 48 John Herschel, *A Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (London: Longman, etc., 1830), 329.
- 49 Howard, *Modification of Clouds*, 24.
- 50 Forster, *Researches in Atmospheric Phaenomena*, 188–89.
- 51 Humphry Davy, “The Bakerian Lecture: On Some Chemical Agencies of Electricity”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 98 (1807–8): 1–56; Humphry Davy, “Electro-Chemical Researches, on the Decomposition of the Earths ...”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 98 (1807–8): 333.
- 52 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Hints Towards the Formation of a more Comprehensive Theory of Life*, ed. Seth Watson (London: Churchill, 1848), 31.
- 53 Gage, *Decade of English Naturalism*, 12. On Varley’s scientific interests, Klonk, *Science*, 126–30.
- 54 Cornelius Varley, “On Atmospheric Phaenomena”, *Philosophical Magazine* 27 (1807): 117.
- 55 On Turner’s relationship with contemporary science, see John Gage, *J.M.W. Turner: “A Wonderful Range of Mind”* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987), 206–33; James Hamilton offers an interesting marriage of Turner’s imagery and contemporary research on electricity and magnetism in *Turner and the Scientists* (London: Tate, 1998), 128.
- 56 Herschel, *Preliminary Discourse*, 239.
- 57 For a contemporary summary of the two theories, see Robert Hare, “An Essay on the Question, Whether there be two Electrical Fluids according to Du Faye, or one according to Franklin”, *Philosophical Magazine* 62, no. 303 (July 1823), 3–7. For a retrospective survey, Roderick W. Home, “Franklin’s Electrical Atmospheres”, *The British Journal for the History of Science* 6 (1972), 131–151.
- 58 The full title of the edition containing the letterpress introduction was *Various Subjects of Landscape, Characteristic of English Scenery, Principally Intended to Display the Phenomena of the Chiar’oscuro of Nature: from Pictures Painted by John Constable, R.A.*
- 59 Introduction to *English Landscape*, 1833 (JCD, 10).
- 60 William Herschel, “On the Utility of Speculative Inquiries”, in *The Scientific Papers of Sir William Herschel*, vol. 1, ed. John Louis Emil Dreyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), lxxxii.
- 61 Gage, *Decade of English Naturalism*, 16.
- 62 “And it shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud: And I will remember my covenant, which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh”, KJV, Gn. 9:14–15. Amy Concannon has noted that the work’s first exhibition generated considerable commentary on the sky but none on a rainbow, from which she infers (surely more than plausibly) that it was added by the artist later, probably in the mid-1830s. See “The Painting”, in Amy Concannon (ed.), *In Focus: Salisbury Cathedral From the Meadows Exhibited 1831 by John Constable*, Tate Research Publication, 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/salisbury-cathedral-constable/the-painting>, accessed 28 August 2017. On Constable and rainbows, see also Paul Schweizer, “John Constable, Rainbow Science, and English Color Theory”, *Art Bulletin* 64, no. 3 (1982): 426.
- 63 On landscape painting as a meeting of theology and geology (within the United States), see Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- 64 Leslie, *Memoirs*, 245.
- 65 Letter to Fisher, 9 May, 1823, my emphasis. Constable’s spelling—although Beckett renders Constable’s writing as “Linnacus” rather than “Linnaeus” (JCC VI, 117).
- 66 Hampstead lecture manuscripts of 1833 and 1836 (FDC, 24, 12, 16). On the relationship between Hodges and HMS *Resolution*’s scientific community, see Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific, 1768–1850: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); see also the essays in Geoff Quilley and John Bonehill (eds.), *William Hodges, 1744–1797: the Art of Exploration* (London; New Haven: National Maritime Museum; Yale University Press, 2004).
- 67 1842 draft preface to *Memoirs* (FDC, 250).

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Aubrey Williams: Abstraction in Diaspora

Kobena Mercer

Abstract

Moving to London in 1952, Aubrey Williams gained valuable distance on the Amerindian petroglyphs that inspired his abstract painting. But as he deepened his engagement with the indigenous cultures of the precolonial Caribbean during the 1970s—working in studios in Jamaica and in Florida—Williams was edged out of late modernism’s narrative of abstraction. While retrospective exhibitions highlight the Olmec-Maya and Now series and the Shostakovich series produced during William’s circumatlantic journeys, both of which heighten abstraction as a medium of cross-cultural translation, the scholarship has left Williams isolated. Approaching Williams’s abstraction in the interpretive context of diasporic “ancestralism,” a distinctive framework addressing the diaspora’s unrecoverable past, I suggest his Amerindian focus is best understood in terms of a “hauntological” mode of abstraction critically responsive to the moment of decolonisation in which boundaries that once defined the national, the international, and the transnational were being thrown into crisis.

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The word “diaspora” comes to us from the Greek verb “to sow” and by extension “to disperse” combined with the preposition for “over” which gives us the “dia” in diameter.¹ The term fits well for an artist born in British Guiana in 1926; who moved to Britain in 1952 and started exhibiting after studying at St Martin’s School of Art in London; an artist who returned to visit Guyana at independence in 1966 and who established a presence in the Caribbean that led to a studio in Jamaica from 1973 to 1975, then a studio in Florida from 1977 to 1986, all the while maintaining his family in London, where he died in 1990. A diasporic artist such as this enjoyed attachments to multiple places of belonging, but were such attachments ultimately incompatible with modernist internationalism, the worldview in which post-war abstraction was most widely interpreted?

I frame my inquiry in this way because, although there is a valuable body of art criticism and art historical scholarship on Williams as my bibliography shows, the absence on the part of British institutions of a retrospective exhibition and monograph that would encompass his entire career reveals a degree of neglect completely at odds with the aesthetic innovations Aubrey Williams brought to twentieth century modernism through his practice of diasporic abstraction. Writing in 1988, critic Guy Brett indicted the “glaring injustice that Williams’s work was ignored and invisible in the country, Britain, where he has lived for nearly 40 years, as if it could not be compared with the work of his English contemporaries,” adding “There has ... never been the opportunity to compare his handling of abstraction directly with his contemporaries like Alan Davie, Peter Lanyon, John Hoyland and Howard Hodgkin.”²

While I agree with Brett wholeheartedly, my critical concern is that if we focus only on the neglect, and attention toward the paintings themselves is thereby postponed, the danger is that we may end up reinforcing the oversight that isolated Williams from the narrative of post-war abstraction in the first place. This is the dilemma that snags Eddie Chambers’s account in his survey of black artists in British art.³ Tate Britain’s posthumous acquisition, in 1993, of *Shostakovich Symphony No 3 Opus 20* (1981) and *Olmec-Maya, Now and Coming Time* (1985), along with the 2007 study day held when Tate Britain acquired letters and drawings from Williams’s archive, are indeed belated steps when, as Chambers points out, the institution had the opportunity to purchase one of Williams’s paintings in 1961, yet chose to decline (Fig. 1). But once institutional decisions are set within their historical context—and we thus grasp blindspots in the discourse of modernism as limitations built into the formalist interpretation of abstract art that held sway during Williams’s lifetime—the question is not one of patching in the gaps, but of rewriting narratives of post-war abstraction as a whole. I suggest the task is best tackled by drawing on the diaspora concept to reframe the aesthetic originality and intellectual vitality of Williams’s oeuvre. Belated it

may be, but the acclaim won by exhibitions in 2010—*Aubrey Williams: Atlantic Fire* at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, and *Aubrey Williams: Now and Coming Time* at the October Gallery, London—attests to the deep interest Williams’s work commands among contemporary audiences eager to engage with insights generated from a diasporic practice of abstraction whose globe-spanning viewpoint has grown ever more relevant since the artist’s death nearly thirty years ago.



Figure 1.

Aubrey Williams, *Olmec Maya - Now and Coming Time*, 1985, oil on canvas, 119 × 178 cm. Collection of Tate (T06675). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

New Commonwealth Moments and the 1960s Crisis of Institutional Modernism

When Stuart Hall characterised Aubrey Williams and other abstract painters such as Anwar Shemza (1928–1985), from Pakistan, and Frank Bowling (b. 1934), from Guyana, as members of a generation who were among “the last colonials” to arrive into the post-1945 London artworld, he underlined their “universalist and cosmopolitan outlook,” emphasising that they felt “they belonged to the modern art movement and, in a way, it belonged to them.”⁴ In the sense that the “ism” in internationalism distilled a worldview in which national differences counted for nothing in the eyes of a liberal humanist conception of art in which only the individuality of the artist was paramount, artists from the colonies were welcomed into London’s mid- to late-1950s cultural scene. Just as Caribbean novelists such as George Lamming, from Barbados, and V.S. Naipaul, from Trinidad, were taken up by the literary establishment, and plays by Jamaican-born Barry Reckord were well received

at the Royal Court Theatre, so Commonwealth artists exhibiting, for instance, at the New Vision Centre Gallery run by painter Denis Bowen (1926–2006), were taken up into an understanding that abstract art formed a *lingua franca*, a common modernist language transcending differences that, in the art historical past, distinguished artistic styles on the basis of national schools and movements.

But as the modernism institutionalised in the 1950s was thrown into crisis during the mid- to late-1960s, mounting pressures forced cracks in such “colour-blind” internationalism. Where the crisis of modernism erupted most vividly in the United States, with protests against the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, led by African American organisations such as the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Susan Cahán’s detailed account reveals that institutional decision makers rarely gave much thought to the foundational assumptions on which their collections and exhibitions were built. Only as a result of external pressure did an institution such as MoMA reflect on its acquisitions criteria. When the Art Workers Coalition called for a public debate on MoMA’s policies in 1969, executive director Bates Lowry declined. On the day of the boycott, the museum issued a press release in a Q&A format:

In selecting works works of art ... does the museum consider the sex, nationality, religion, politics or race of an artist? NO. What criteria does the museum apply? Quality, historical significance, significance of the moment. ⁵

In the monologue whereby we witness an institution talking to itself so as *not* to have to talk with its public interlocutors, we hear the premise on which modernism upheld the autonomy of the artwork as an absolute, as something wholly independent of the artist’s social background, with “quality” evoked as a stand-alone criterion transcending the social context in which artworks are created. The defensive reaction indicates an institution that felt under attack, yet the 1960s’ crisis productively brought to light assumptions that had hitherto gone unquestioned. Modernist internationalism held to a “colour-blind” approach in which “the sex, nationality, religion, politics or race of an artist” supposedly had no relevance to decisions about aesthetic value, yet such an object-directed outlook did not just eliminate consideration of the artist’s social identity, but it also subjected all socio-historical aspects of artistic production to a logic of disavowal.

Disavowal is when everyone agrees not to see what everyone knows is there. Whether it is the elephant in the room or the emperor’s new clothes, what is left out of the discourse, and goes unspoken, is not the result of accidental

oversight but, in psychoanalytic terms, is the outcome of a process of repression.⁶ Hence, coming back to Britain, Commonwealth artists were genuinely welcomed in their individuality, but the post-war reception was short lived. This was not primarily because, by the mid-1960s, abstraction was displaced by pop, minimalism, and performance, but because object-directed formalist criticism rendered all aspects of social context and social identity into a *constitutive absence*, something that had to be left out if formalism was to provide the epistemic authority on which institutional decision making relied.

The language of internationalism in twentieth century politics gives us another example of disavowal in practice. The League of Nations was established in 1920 in reaction to the catastrophic consequences of the nationalist rivalries that resulted in World War I. No African or Caribbean countries were invited into the League of Nations for the simple reason that they were not nations but colonies: their absence was constitutive of the discourse of sovereignty in political decision making.⁷ Where constitutive absences are the product not of deliberate intentions but of the “political unconscious,” as Fredric Jameson calls it—a product of defences and repressions arising from “narrative as a socially symbolic act”—then the rewriting of art histories that strives to do justice to the cosmopolitan and worldly differentiations introduced by diasporic artists such as Aubrey Williams cannot be inclusive if the goal is merely to patch in overlooked and neglected artists into the formalist narrative that was responsible for their exclusion in the first place.⁸ Rather, the aim of revising previous narratives in light of what we now know about their exclusionary structures is to recast our understanding of the structural interaction among artists, artworks, and artworlds so as to better see the contingent conditions under which their conjunctures can be opened to reinterpretation. The diaspora concept, I argue, helps us to do just that.

Border-Crossing Migrations

“By coming to London,” wrote playwright Jan Carew on the occasion of Williams’s second solo exhibition at the New Vision Centre Gallery in August 1959, “Williams was able to disentangle himself from material as lush and confusing as a stretch of tropical rain forest.” Stressing the back-and-forth movement of a migrant’s journey, Carew’s emphasis on the diasporic experience of acquiring critical distance from one’s sources opens up a hitherto unexplored understanding of Williams’s relationship to the Amerindian cultures that inspired his abstract painting from the start. “Separation from the sources of his inspiration made him see everything more clearly, more objectively,” Carew continues, adding a somewhat existentialist interpretation on the question of belonging, yet nonetheless

underscoring the “back and forth” pattern of Williams’s border-crossing mobility: “... but his is a dilemma: if he stays away from these sources too long there is the danger of drying up. He is one of the artists in the mid-twentieth century who belongs nowhere, who must keep moving back and forth searching for new gods to put on pedestals and then to destroy.”⁹

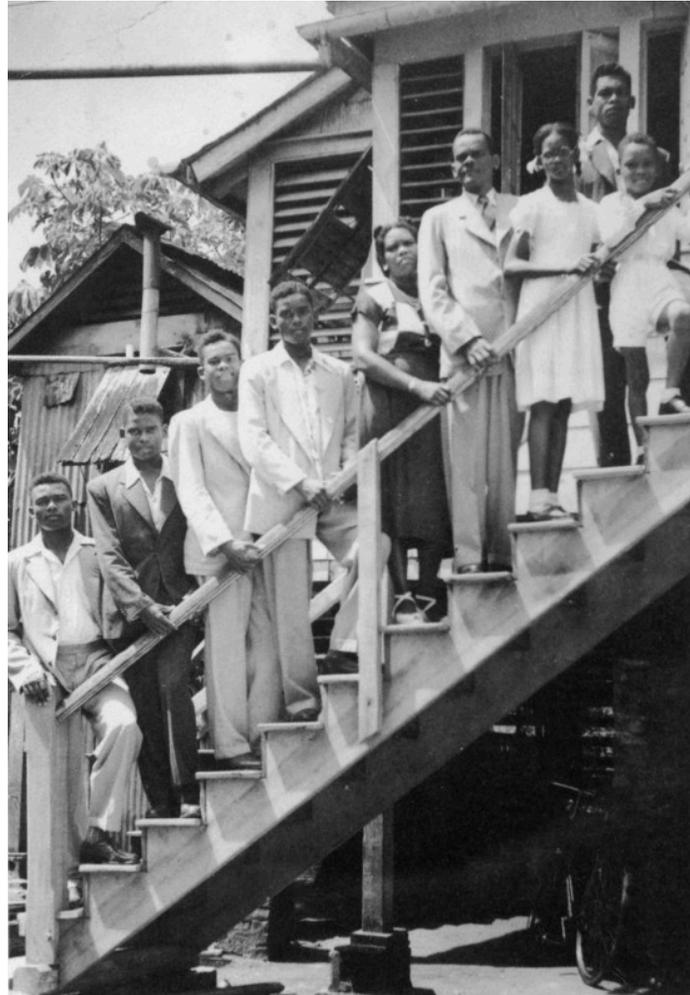


Figure 2.

The Williams Family on the Steps of Their Home, Bourda Street, Georgetown, Guyana (Aubrey Williams, second from right), circa 1951, photograph in Aubrey Williams, curated by Andrew Dempsey, Gilane Tawadros, Maridowa Williams (London: Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), 1998). Digital image courtesy of The Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA)/the Estate of Aubrey Williams.

As a youngster, Williams studied in the Working People’s Art Class set up in Georgetown by painter E.R. Burrowes, while training as a civil servant as his parents wished (Fig. 2). In 1944, at the age of 18, he completed a four-year apprenticeship scheme in sugar production. He then took up a post as

Agricultural Field Officer. Williams was first posted among cane field workers on the Guiana coast and then to the remote northwestern rainforest settlement of Hosororo. It was during his time at Hosororo that he first met indigenous Warrau Amerindians. After two years in post, Williams left British Guiana in 1952, and enrolled on an Agricultural Engineering course at the University of Leicester. He dropped out. Moving from Guiana not only crystallised Williams's decision to become an artist, but it also sharpened his developing interest in Amerindian cultures that was to become a primary source for the paintings he produced from the mid-1950s onward.



Figure 3.

Anne Bolt, Aubrey Williams and Denis Bowen Discuss the Hanging of His First Show, *New Vision Centre Gallery, London, With His painting "El Dorado", 1958*, photograph reproduced in *Aubrey Williams* by Andrew Dempsey, Gilane Tawadros, Maridowa Williams (London: Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA), 1998). Digital image courtesy of Anne Bolt/Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) / the Estate of Aubrey Williams.

After touring Europe for a year—Albert Camus introduced him to Pablo Picasso in Paris—Williams enrolled at St Martin’s in 1954, but decided not to pursue the diploma: in his second year he chose merely to use the art school’s facilities instead.¹⁰ His first solo exhibition, in 1954, at the Archer Gallery in Westbourne Grove, was followed by two in 1959, and in 1960, at the New Vision Centre Gallery, a venue in Marble Arch set up by Denis Bowen. Born in South Africa to British parents, Bowen was a painter, art critic, and curator who ran the New Vision Centre Gallery from 1955 to 1966 with Polish painter, Halima Nalecz, and British artist, Frank Avray Wilson (Fig. 3). In 1963, in the same year Williams enjoyed a further solo exhibition at the Grabowski Gallery (which had previously exhibited Bowling), Bowen played a leading role in selecting entries to the first Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art, held at the Commonwealth Institute in London, at which Williams was awarded a prize for *Roraima* (1963).¹¹

Bowen and his New Vision Centre administrator, the British artist and critic Kenneth Coutts-Smith, featured Williams’s paintings in the Second Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art in 1965, also held at the newly-built Commonwealth Institute. This mid-1960s exhibition marked the end of the “New Commonwealth moment” that had started with the mid-1950s uptake of Williams’s work. The ascendancy of abstract expressionism from the United States was certainly a factor, as the epic scale favoured by American artists, along with the psychological interpretation of action painting, overshadowed other strands of abstraction, especially European tendencies such as *informel* and *tachisme*. Williams readily acknowledged the inspiration he took from the Tate exhibitions, *Modern Art in the United States*, in 1956, and *New American Painting* in 1959—“Pollock was our god!” he said in a 1987 interview, “Kline, Newman, Rothko, de Kooning ... they were all great”¹²—but did that necessarily mean he sought to emulate the abstract expressionist paradigm?

Figural Mark Making: Displacing Primitivist Paradigms

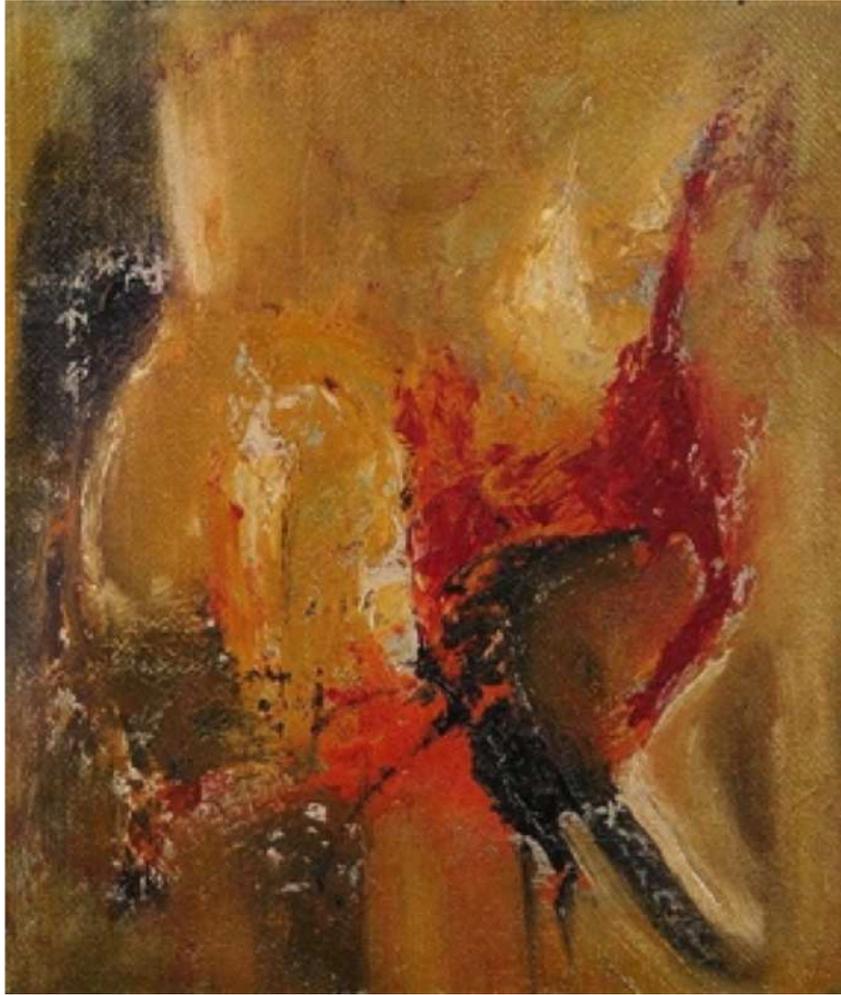


Figure 4.

Aubrey Williams, *Earth and Fire*, 1959, oils on canvas laid on board, 30 x 28 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

“Despite Williams’s attempt to work in the manner of his American heroes,” writes Gavin Butt in *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, “his paintings were repeatedly viewed in primitivising terms by British critics.”¹³ To the extent that Williams opted for fairly small-scale canvases, employing a variety of brushwork rather than one committed exclusively to gesturalism, it is misleading to align him directly with American abstractionists he admired. Moreover, rather than “primitivising,” would it not be more precise to say the source of the problem in the British reception was that primitivism was the *only* interpretive paradigm through which institutional modernism attempted to address questions of cultural difference? With coarse crimson, gold, and black impasto markings atop an ochre ground, early paintings such as *Earth and Fire* (1959) address elemental or even cosmological themes rather than primitive ones as such (Fig. 4). Indeed, the question to put to Butt’s characterisation of the reasons why Williams came to be marginalised by the

mid-1960s is whether “primitivism” is the best fit for describing Williams’s relationship to the Amerindian petroglyphs that was a distinctive feature of his abstraction?

In the earth-toned palette and dry impasto of *Bone Heap* (1959), the shapes made by whitened figures laid out on a dark ground are suggestive not only of archaic petroglyphs inscribed in the soil, but also skeletal remains, although the work’s title does not indicate whether the bones are human or animal (Fig. 5). Similarly, one might say of *Sleeping Rocks* (1959), from the same year, that even as marks suggesting rocks seem to resemble human limbs, to describe rocks as “sleeping” is to encourage a quasi-anthropomorphic interpretation such that the painting hovers and prevaricates on the borderline between the abstract and the figurative, which are not regarded as mutually exclusive categories. Their interaction results in what we could call the “figural.” This dynamic sense of hovering over categorical boundaries seemed to be a quality Williams had in common with Bowen. The jagged horizontal in Bowen’s *Crystallised Landscape* (1959) bears a title that solicits a figurative reading at the same time as the Tachist element of pigment forcefully thrown against the canvas acts as a counterpoint to the more undulating tones and gauzy colours we find in Williams’s paintings (Fig. 6).



Figure 5.

Aubrey Williams, *Bone Heap*, 1959, oil on canvas. 50.5 × 60 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 6.

Denis Bowen, *Crystallised Landscape*, 1958, alkyd paint on canvas, 63.2 x 97cm Collection of Tate (T07840). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Denis A. Bowen.

Whether evoking a gravesite in *Bone Heap*, or a dormant state prior to awakening in *Sleeping Rocks*, Williams was carving out an abstract painterly practice at once highly suggestive of an immersive relationship to land, soil, and a place of belonging, while also evoking the traces or remains left behind by the aftermath of a cataclysmic event. As Williams came to identify his primary sources of inspiration in the petroglyphs created in Guyana's landscape by indigenous peoples such as the Warrau—early inhabitants who migrated up the Amazon to the coast long before the arrival of the Europeans in the modern age—it seems to me that far from putting Amerindian art on a primitivist pedestal, as if to romanticise the noble savage, and far from exalting all that is indigenous to the land in nativist or nationalist terms, the relationship Williams established between his abstract painting and the Caribbean landscape was an *ecological* relationship far more so than a “primitivizing” relationship.

“Figural” is a term I’ve drawn from philosopher Jean-François Lyotard who uses it in contrast to both “figurative” and “discursive.”¹⁴ Unlike picture making that requires clear-cut figure/ground distinctions, the “figural” concerns less readily legible mark making practices that are profoundly ambiguous but without being completely abstract. Where the term has a good fit for the spatial ambiguities Williams created by combining a range of brushwork techniques—from impasto and highly worked-up facture to staining the canvas with liquid pools of aqueous colour—the “figural” is a helpful designation for the interstitial ambience created by an artist who did

not perceive abstract and figurative as either/or options. “Figural” also serves as a term referring to inchoate material that carries potential for signification *prior to* the moment when bounded shape and identifiable form are imposed by cultural codes and social conventions. With rocks resembling limbs, and bones laid out as if in a funeral rite, the category-crossing dynamism of one ontological order metamorphosing into another suggests a mode of abstraction in which Williams was meddling with the boundaries that ordinarily separate human, animal, vegetal, and mineral as a crucial concern of his abstraction that was operative from the start.

Bones and petroglyphs alike have earth-bound relationships in which landscape and a sense of place is all important, yet this is also the point at which we begin to see that the remedy Guy Brett proposed might not actually provide the best interpretive fit. Scottish painter Alan Davie (1920–2014) took Celtic glyphs, Hopi sand painting, and Zen Buddhism as sources in his commitment to an earthy mode of abstraction thoroughly rooted in the West Country where he lived. Following on from the biomorphic motifs Davie explored in the late 1950s, his monotype, *Two Insects, Yellow* (1950–55), playfully introduced an element of colour (Fig. 7). Devon and Cornwall’s megaliths dating to the Neolithic Age were important for abstract sculptors such as William Turnbull (1912–2012) as well. Similarly grounded in a sense of place were abstract paintings by the Cornish artist Peter Lanyon (1918–1964), with a work as lush and lyrical as *Lost Mine* (1961), speaking eloquently to the sense of belonging Lanyon found in Cornwall as the place where he was born, where he lived and worked, and where he died (Fig. 8).



Figure 7.

Alan Davie, *Two Insects, Yellow*, 1950-55, monotype on paper, 30.8 × 17.6 cm. Collection of Tate (P11352). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Alan Davie (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

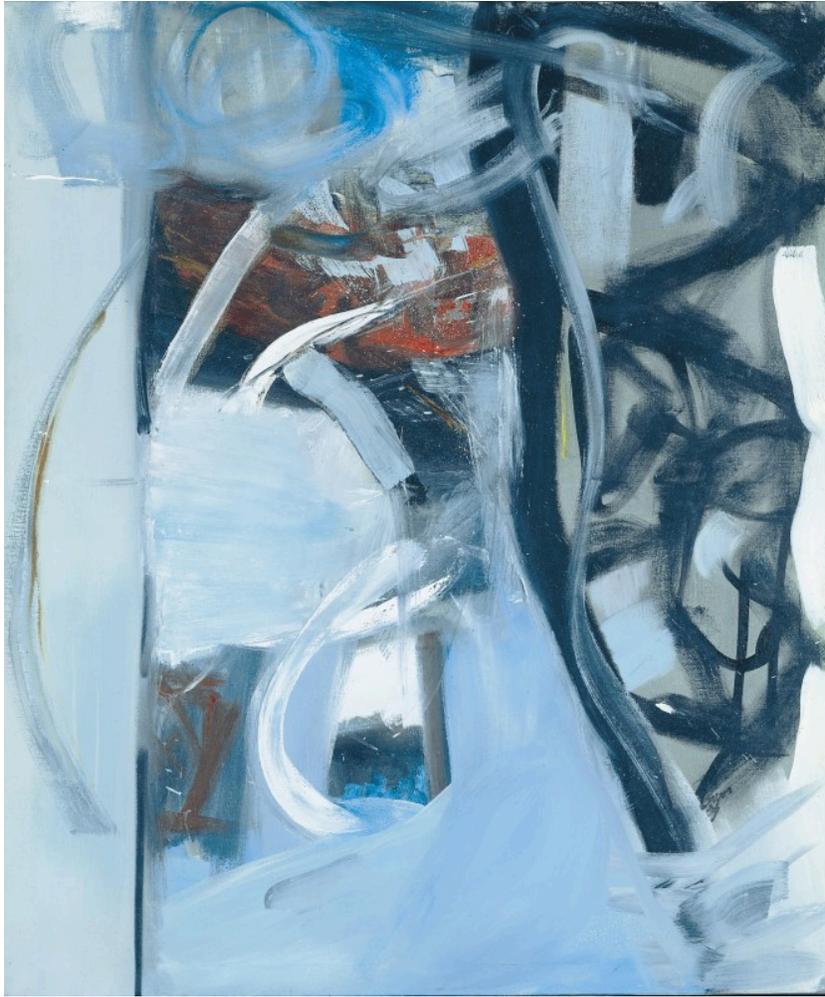


Figure 8.

Peter Lanyon, *Lost Mine*, 1959, oil on canvas, 183.2 × 152.7 cm. Collection of Tate (T06467). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Peter Lanyon (All Rights Reserved, DACS 2018).

In terms of a comparative approach, Brett's argument for aligning Lanyon and Davie with Williams holds good in stylistic terms, to a degree, for we are looking at British variants of post-war abstraction that took a vastly different direction from American abstract expressionism by investigating premodern and prehistorical sources in a lived relationship to an untamed rural landscape.¹⁵ But whereas Lanyon and Davie were regionalists committed to their rootedness in the specificity of the English West Country, the core emphasis Carew drew out in 1959 was on the *uprootedness* that made migration across multiple sites of belonging the distinguishing mark of Williams's diasporic trajectory. Moreover, while Williams was immersed in the premodern and precolonial world of Amerindian petroglyphs, albeit from the geographical distance obtained through migration, Carew made the equally important observation that Aubrey consistently turned his attention to contemporary science. Maridowa Williams confirms that throughout the

1960s and 1970s her father avidly read *Scientific American*, *Omni*, and other science periodicals. ¹⁶ The twin poles of Williams's interest in the science of rock formation, and the science of galaxy formation, alongside his interest in archaic Amerindian petroglyphs was beautifully synthesised by Carew in the following lines:

The Indians say that when the green skin of the living world is peeled off, then the earth becomes a coffin for the dead. And in Williams's mind are the varied patterns and shapes of this living world: superimposed on these are the new images of science, shapes under a microscope, pictures of nebulae in popular magazines, the bright blurs of trick photography and the torment of an uprooted man searching for an image of himself and of his people. ¹⁷

I would add that at the 2014 Cambridge University symposium on Aubrey Williams, convener Tim Cribb invited Robin Catchpole from the Institute of Astronomy, who helpfully pointed out something of which those of us in the humanities might not be aware, namely that light and colour are mediums that astronomers rely on to glean data regarding the distance between, and relations among, planetary phenomena. ¹⁸ Where Williams revealed his investment in astronomy directly in such late works as *Nebula in Orion* (1985), his painterly handling of atmospherics—with whole portions of his keynote works swathed in the light and colour of nuanced haziness—showed that Williams encompassed macro- and micro-cosmic dimensions in his ecological outlook from the outset.

Interstitial Ambiences

We have not only come far and away from primitivism, but we may also be getting closer to understanding why Williams was edged out of late modernist discourse on abstraction. At a time when formalist criticism sought to secure universal truths for “American-Type painting,” as Clement Greenberg phrased it, through a model in which art would self-reflexively take art alone as its primary subject matter, here was an artist from the colonies in whose cosmological and ecological consciousness art and science were not mutually exclusive, and nor were technology and petroglyphs, as each of these elements intermingle in the “figural” dimension of Williams's diasporic abstraction ¹⁹ The sheer scope, and philosophical gravitas, of Williams's combined interests, or more to the point, the inability of formalist critics to fathom their implications for late modernist art making, are among the reasons why his work came to be pushed aside.

Looking closely at Williams's sketches circa 1970, one of Brett's key insights was to reveal their protean quality of shape and line. Axe-head cones and oblong stacks call to mind Aztec, Olmec, Inca, Maya and other pre-Columbian motifs, yet as they morph into scientific drawings of cell formation, or slivers of epidermal tissue under a microscope, we see how the interpenetration of ancient glyphs and future technology informed Williams's investigative approach to abstract painting (Fig. 9).²⁰ In *Untitled* (1969) we see how Williams's ability to make lines and shapes "jump" from one plane of semantic association to another meant that the canvas surface, whose flatness and rectangularity were of utmost concern to formalists, had become instead a receptacle for a heterogeneous array of painterly mark making (Fig. 10).

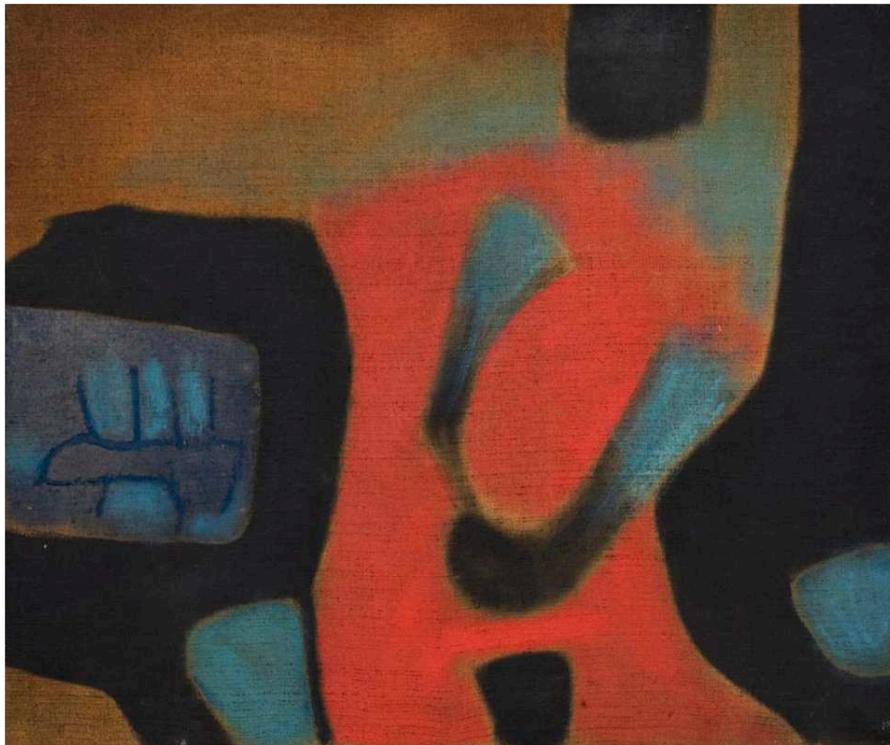


Figure 9.

Aubrey Williams, *Untitled*, 1969, oil on hessian, 61 × 74cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

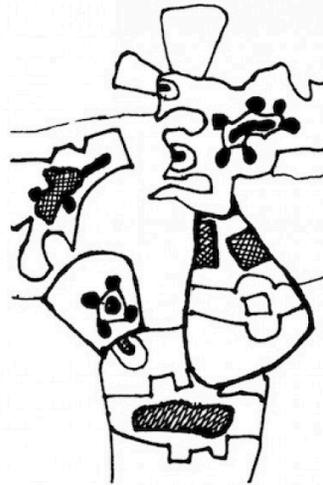
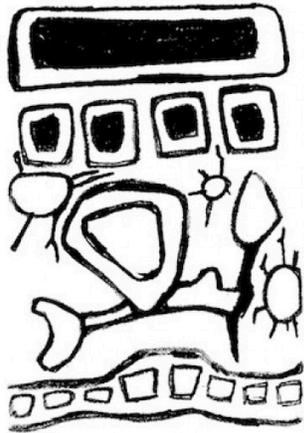


Figure 10.

Aubrey Williams, Details from Sketchbooks, 1970s, reproduced in *Aubrey Williams* by Andrew Dempsey, Gilane Tawadros, Maridowa Williams (London: Institute for International Visual Arts, 1998). Digital image courtesy of The Institute for International Visual Arts / the Estate of Aubrey Williams.

Optically speaking, red advances while blue recedes, yet in the very instant we are tempted to see and read the U-shape in *Untitled* as a hollow, with patches of blue thus “behind” it in spatial terms, any hint of illusionism is scotched by the matt black forms that rise up on the right and curl around a glyph-like inscription on the left. In an era when formalist criticism saw abstraction as an eliminative process of purification that would rid painting of all that was extraneous to its fundamental essence, the insouciant impurity by which Williams experimented—and clearly delighted—in combining a multiplicity of mark making procedures within each painting set him full square against the “rhetoric of purity” by which formalist discourse saw pure colour, pure line, and pure shape as transcendental qualities that would deliver timeless truths about the very essence of art.²¹ The strident impurity of a restlessly border-crossing mode of abstraction—touching on the astronomy of light from remote stars in the same breath as dwelling with skeletal remains in the bowels of the earth—was not just at odds with a purist formalism that defensively turned its back on a material world in constant flux, it also clearly departed from philosophical subject/object dichotomies by virtue of opting for a planetary ecology in which the human does not transcend the fluctuating world but is wholly entangled and immersed in its unending processes of becoming and perishing.

In 1966, as Williams began to travel back and forth between London and the newly-independent nation of Guyana, fellow artist and compatriot, sculptor Donald Locke, observed a “storm of activity” in Williams’s prolific output. Science was one of Williams’s principle sources during this time. Locke identified one such source was “a remarkable film made by a man called Haroun Tazieff who ‘collected’ and studied volcanoes.” Locke noted that “from this experience came an almost endless stream of paintings which were variously called *Magma, Lava, Volcano, Rockface*.” Insightfully concluding his 1966 article, Locke said “What is fascinating about these paintings ... is that they were closely related to the subject of pregnancy and parturition which has always fascinated him. He portrays the very molten rock as if it were flesh, *finding a unique equation between two diametrically opposing natures*.” ²²

To posit a practice of abstraction able to give birth to something new—parturition—as a result of figural mark making that moves between “two diametrically opposed natures” is to recognise an interstitial outlook that subverts the fixity of subject/object dualisms. Instead of the opticality by which abstract art should appeal “to eyesight alone,” as critic Michael Fried put it in his mid-1960s defence of colour field painting, Williams plunged headlong into the inchoate state of painting’s materiality prior to the moment when meanings are attached to discrete forms, thus bringing the beholder into contact with marks on a canvas surface that are charged with the capacity to “touch” us, and to “move” us, at the *precognitive and preverbal level of affect*. ²³ Displacing a purely optical model of perception in favour of a multi-sensory understanding of the embodied perceiver was all important. Where Locke observed figural shapes morphing from one plane of meaning (“rock”) to another (“flesh”)—with Brett too observing the way line and shape “jump” from one set of associations (cell formation) to another (Amerindian petroglyphs)—we come to realise we are in the presence of an *interstitial mode of abstraction* operating from a place of “inbetweenness”. By unfixing dualisms that ordinarily establish “diametrically opposed natures”—form/matter, body/soul, presence/absence—Williams decentred the formalist privilege of vision, inviting his viewers instead into an affective experience that began to chip away at the binary laws at the heart of logocentric reasoning. In a figural world no longer regulated by subject/object dualisms or the binary opposition of presence/absence, the question arises: what if life and death were no longer either/or terms, but merely way stations on an ecological continuum?

Diasporic Ancestralism

Tribal Mark II (1960) is a work asking just such a question (Fig. 11). Five plug-like shapes separating the dark grey zones at upper left and at lower right serve to hold in place the enigmatic form at the painting’s centre, but the

distribution of these five nodes also seem to intensify the Catherine wheel effect that imparts dynamic momentum to the composition. The tiny resin drip at lower right sparks the old anxiety of whether one is looking at an abstract painting the right way up; but on second glance, one notices that the drip's horizontal direction adds to the sense of a spiral-like, rotational, space whose biomorphic twists and turns have left behind the geometric preoccupations of primary interest to formalist critics. Indeed, the swirling vortex *Tribal Mark II* creates no longer implies a viewer who stands only perpendicular to the picture plane. The painting suggests a viewpoint from which its markings are to be seen from an aerial position, as though the viewer were hovering "above" the picture plane, looking down as if suspended over an archeological excavation.



Figure 11.

Aubrey Williams, *Tribal Mark*, 1961, oil on canvas, 76 2 × 101 5cm. Collection of Tate (T13342). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

In dried-out, bone-like colours, the firmly-delineated lines roiling in the encrusted oval at the painting's centre call to mind a foetus umbilically attached to its life-giving environment, but at the same time, this figural cluster evokes nothing so much as an exhumed Ice Age corpse preserved in peat—one thinks of Tollund Man unearthed in Denmark in 1950, although many other post-war excavations brought prehistoric corpses to light, many with their skins preserved. To come away from abstract art with a figurative reading is reductive; unacceptably so if the aim is to identify a referent, to say that the painterly mark making in *Tribal Mark II* actually depicts a foetus or a corpse. But if the aim instead is to demonstrate how figural

practice—poised on the borderline between abstraction and figuration—*produces a plurality of potential connotations by virtue of affecting us at the precodified level before such markings are fully formed*, then we begin to see how Williams put the element of formlessness—the not-yet-fully-formedness—associated with *informel* in post-war European abstraction into dialogue with ancestralism, a strand of African American modernism centrally preoccupied with questions of absence and presence, life and death, by virtue of addressing the legacy of uprooting and loss among “diasporised” peoples of African descent scattered and dispersed into the New World as a result of transatlantic slavery.

Introduced in the 1920s by philosopher Alain Locke, “ancestralism” entailed depictions of African *objets d’art* among the Harlem Renaissance generation, but in the post-war period Hale Woodruff (1900–1980) turned to motifs in Akan and Yoruba art as a starting point for abstract works such as *Afro Emblems* (1950) (Fig. 12).²⁴ Woodruff’s pictographic inscriptions in serried boxes seem to be in conversation with the Latin American modernism of Joaquín Torres-García, although these are figural rather than figurative as they clearly elude referential identification. In positivist models of representation that assume what is absent really can be made present through acts of depiction, ancestralism tends to be misunderstood as a “reclaiming of roots,” as if African motifs triggered automatically an affirmative identification on the part of Afro-diaspora subjects. On closer consideration, one realises the whole reason ancestor figures are so important in the diasporic imagination is precisely because the diaspora’s forebears were unknown and undocumented as human subjects during the Middle Passage of their enslavement and were recorded, made legible to history, only as inventory, as commodity cargo.



Figure 12.

Hale Woodruff, *Afro Emblems*, 1950, oil on linen, 45.7 × 55.9 cm. Collection Smithsonian American Art Museum (1984.149.2). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Hale Woodruff / DACS, London / VAGA, New York 2018

Put another way, the critical project in diasporic ancestralism was never the recovery or redemption of the lost ancestor or an absent ancestry—as if the past could be restored to a state of plenitude—but an investigation into the *afterlife of the rupture* separating diasporised subjects from their place of natal origin, a traumatic rupture that left an open wound in which black diaspora subjects had to struggle to create new identifications with all that “Africa” stood for. Whether in figurative African American art of the 1920s, or in the abstraction Williams developed in the 1950s from a Caribbean-British perspective, artists working within the framework of diasporic ancestralism set out to address this afterlife of rupture not as a neutral “nothing” but as *the nucleus of traumatic affect* that made its presence felt—like a phantom limb—through its unsettling aftereffects.

Hauntological Traces

Looking at *Tribal Mark II*, I have suggested Williams’s abstraction produced an undoing of the life-death dualism, offering an intimation instead of a time-stretching continuum in which the not-yet-born and the long-since-deceased are way stations in an ongoing process of becoming and perishing. Within

the immediate post-war context, the African American abstract painter Norman Lewis (1909–1979) addressed the aftermath of cataclysmic events in ways that complement the gravitas Aubrey Williams brought to abstraction. In *Every Atom Glows* (1951) Lewis spoke to the science of nuclear fission that led to the atom bomb. Lewis's *Harlem Turns White* (1954) is not a depiction of an atomic aftermath, but it nonetheless engages abstraction to address traumatic events of world-historical magnitude whose scale exceeds our human ability to grasp them in consciousness (Fig. 13).



Figure 13.

Norman Wilfred Lewis, *Harlem Turns White*, 1955, oil on canvas, 127 × 162.5 cm. Collection of the Estate of Norman W. Lewis. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Norman W. Lewis / Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York.

Insofar as any attempt to “represent” such events diminishes the momentousness of the trauma, reducing it to mere anthropomorphic proportions, it is not that abstract paintings by Lewis or Williams put us in the presence of the unrepresentable—for as Mark Godfrey argues in *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (2007), the “unrepresentable” is too easily misappropriated by those who claim the events never took place—but that the entire interpretive centre of gravity shifts with regard to understanding abstraction as an inquiry into aftermaths that have been among the defining conditions of modernity.²⁵ Instead of the progress narrative whereby many formalists saw abstraction as the culmination of modernity in art, the

interstitial outlook in Williams's ecological approach leads instead to the counterview that modernity was a history of successive aftermaths, with one disaster piled up upon others.

However, unlike American abstract artists responding to traumatic events within their own lifetime, when we see a work such as *Death and the Conquistador* (1959) we need to understand that, at age 33, Williams was metaphorically leaping back in world-historical time, inviting us to imagine the cataclysmic advent of 1492—Europe's arrival into the New World—from the point of view of those whose ancestral homes were about to be decimated by the incoming colonists (Fig. 14). As with another painting of this moment, *El Dorado* (1958), in the collection of York University, we would be entirely wrong to think we are seeing a postcolonial artists indicting Western colonialism. Such a view would be mistaken not just because in 1958 British Guiana was not yet "post," but still very much a colony, owned by the Booker McConnell sugar corporation if not the British state. But we would also be mistaken because in the nondualistic universe opened up by Williams's interstitial space of abstraction, any clear-cut binary between coloniser and colonised, between victims and perpetrators, between the doers and the done to, has now been ambiguated—if not liquidated altogether—in favour of an ambivalent scene of entanglement in which *all* identities are implicated in the historical trauma and its aftermath.



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 14.

Aubrey Williams, *Death and the Conquistador*, 1959, oil on canvas, 83.5 × 133.8 cm. Collection of Tate (T13341). Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

Even as figural lines in crimson, black, and white seem to emerge into anthropomorphic shape in *Death and the Conquistador* they withdraw from legibility at the last minute, as it were, leaving only a tumult of fugitive traces on the picture plane. That colonial history weighed heavily on Williams's mind in this period is evident in *Revolt* (1960), a figurative painting that depicts the "decapitation of [a] planter's wife by an unshackled slave in the 1763 revolt."²⁶ Although Williams returned to figuration when he produced four paintings in the *Guyana Myths* (1971) series (also in Guyana's National Collection alongside *Revolt*) it was as if such recourse to representational practice capitulated to pressing exigencies within each political moment, with the reassessment of colonial history pressing in on the 1950s era of anti-colonial struggle, and pressures to re-mythify the nation that grew in the post-independence moment of the early 1970s. Whereas such representational paintings are unsatisfying in their literalness—itsself indicating the challenge of representability posed by colonialism's violent histories—*Death and the Conquistador* plunges the beholder into an immersive space in which figural evocations of life-and-death entanglements of coloniser and colonised pulsate with affective intensity precisely by virtue of the way the *not-yet-formedness* of the painterly markings stimulates our quest, as viewers, to decipher the inscriptions and, in the process, deepen our engagement with the sensuous materiality of the painting itself.

Where modernist internationalism disavowed the artist's social identity, such that the "sex, nationality, religion, politics or race of an artist" was irrelevant to aesthetic judgement, the object-directed values of formalist criticism did not just idealise vision as though it was a disembodied experience, but also entailed the anti-social attitude by which formalism turned its back on a world in constant flux, defensively retreating into the white cube as a space in which to find the self-certainty of unchangeable truths. In contrast to an object-directed stance that thinks of an artwork's meaning as deposited "in" the art object by the artist's intention, to be retrieved by the viewer, we are more likely today to acknowledge that the cultural production of meanings always entails a *social* relationship, that the value of an artwork lies not "in" the work, as if it were self-sufficiently autonomous, *but in our relationship to it*. In this way art history has come to understand that different audiences may produce divergent readings of the same work, and that meanings attributed to a work change according to the time and place of its reception. Where Williams put forward abstract paintings that do not ask for the passive intake of optical data so much as they plunge the viewer in affective experiences shot through with sensory intensities, his ecologically-minded abstraction asks us to participate in what the artwork makes "thinkable" as a result of the interstitial boundary crossing performed by its figural mark making.

Williams and the Caribbean Artists Movement

Williams took a leading role in the formation of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM). With salon-style meetings held in his Hampstead studio before the organisation—led by Kamau Brathwaite, John La Rose, and Andrew Salkey—convened at the West Indian Students' Centre in Earl's Court, CAM was a distinctively diasporic phenomenon as artists and writers from various island origins came together in London to formulate a pan-Caribbean outlook in the optimism of the 1960s ferment driven by the politics of decolonisation. Anne Walmsley's month-by-month documentation of CAM's activities gives us a meticulous account of the ways in which aesthetics and politics were articulated viz-à-viz poetry, novels, music, theatre, and the visual arts.²⁷ For my part I want to isolate just one moment, a statement that was part of Williams's contribution to the June 2 1967 Symposium on West Indian artists that featured sculptor Ronald Moody, painter Karl "Jerry" Craig, and textile designer Althea McNish. Commenting on the work exhibited, Williams said:

I seem to see a current of organic and pantheistic philosophy in all the work shown here ... Strangely, I saw many South American forms in all the work. As a matter of fact, these claw-like forms occur in all the work, and seem to be a sort of Caribbean signature theme... if you look at the work of people like Wifredo Lam, of Matta, of Tamayo ... somewhere you will find this very strange, very tense, slightly violent shape coming in. *It has haunted me all of my life and I don't understand it.*²⁸

Identifying "claw-like forms" as "a sort of Caribbean signature theme," Williams zeroes in on figural mark making as a practice that harbours a pluripotentiality of meaning. The most important thing we need to notice about this "very strange, very tense, slightly violent shape coming in," is that Williams says "It has haunted me all my life and I don't understand it." To be haunted is to be affected by past events that are resistant to conscious understanding, events whose opacity to consciousness means the past resists narrative resolution. To be ghosted by something not present but absent, is to be haunted by the aftermath of traumatic events in the psychoanalytic sense that trauma is not a memory but the afterlife of an experience that was so overwhelming, so incapacitating, that it was never digested into consciousness in the first place. Past events that resist being filed away into the narrative storage system of conscious memory are "unclaimed experience," in Cathy Caruth's words, undigested events that roam the psyche with persecutory force since they can find no abode within the categories of consciousness that give meaning to experience.²⁹

That Williams located himself in an art historical context that conjoins Latin Americans, Matta from Chile, Tamayo from Mexico—and Caribbeans, Lam from Cuba—clearly shows that however much he admired the North Americans, he did not identify himself with either the formalism or the transcendentalism that framed the dominant narratives of post-war abstraction. In 1967 Williams was making a lateral or transversal move to reframe his practice within an interpretive paradigm grounded in what today would be called “the global South,” and which at the time would have been referred to as “the Third World.” Implicit in such a move that no longer regarded New York or London as the epicentre of artistic life was a further shift away from an exclusively anglophone context to embrace a Spanish-speaking one as well by virtue of the prominence Williams gave to Latin American artists. In any event, the common factor in the lineage of the “claw-like forms” through which Williams connects Lam, Matta, and Tamayo is colonial history.

In *Science, Conscience et Patience du Vitruer* (1944) the angular biomorphic shapes surrounding the “glass being” of the painting’s title bear “claw-like” forms that Matta arrived at through his conception of living beings as made up not of solid substances but of oscillating waves of matter and energy (Fig. 15). Claw-like forms are found in Lam’s paintings such as *Zambezia*, *Zambezia* (1950), where a limb with three jagged edges pointing left rises from a blue female torso that also bears a horse’s tail. In this and many other works, Lam was addressing the *femme-cheval*, the metaphorically hybrid “woman-horse” evoked in self-descriptions among Vodun participants who enter a trance possession state (Fig. 16). Where language conventionally separates agent and patient, subject and object, the folklorist Lydia Cabrera, with whom Lam was in conversation when he returned to Cuba in 1940, explained the undoing of such either/or dualisms in her following gloss on the *femme-cheval*:

The phrase ‘the saint rides someone’ signifies that a spirit or divinity takes possession of an individual’s body and acts as if it were its master ... one calls ‘horse’ or ‘head of saint’ the one into whom a saint or orisha has introduced himself ... [and when] one says ‘the saint descends and rides his horse’ [that means] ‘the man or woman into whom he has introduced himself is no longer him or herself, he has become the saint.’³⁰

It is this breaking-apart of conventional dualisms that is at issue in the “claw-like” forms whose hauntingness was so significant for Williams as he framed his practice within a Caribbean and Latin American constellation. Since “claw-like” refers not to a figurative depiction with a recognisable referent, nor to a symbol with one invariant meaning, it is not so much a sign that

successfully correlates a graphematic element (signifier) with determinate ideational content (signified), but rather an inscription of *the multifarious figural*, marking the potential of the inchoate, the not-yet-fully-formed, to produce an excess or surplus of meanings all at once.



Figure 15.

Roberto Matta, *Science, Conscience et Patience du Vitreur*, 1944, oil on canvas, 200 × 450 cm. Private Collection, Paris. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, DACS London 2018.



Figure 16.

Wifredo Lam, *Zambezia, Zambezia*, 1950, oil on canvas, 125.4 x 110.8 cm. Collection of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (74.2095). Digital image courtesy of ARS, New York / ADAGP, Paris / DACS, London, 2018.



Figure 17.

Denis Williams, *Composition I*, 1954, watercolour. 30 × 20.3 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of the Estate of Donald Locke.

My third example of such “claw-like” forms, *Composition I* (1954) is by Guyanese artist Denis Williams, who was not a family relation but an artist-cum-archeologist who, as the first Director of Guyana’s Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology, was a significant interlocutor for Aubrey Williams after Williams’s return visits to Guyana became more frequent from 1970. The potent red and black ground in *Composition I* intensifies the menacing aura that radiates from the skeletal biomorph that forms the watercolour’s white-coloured figure (Fig. 17). To the extent that colonial history provides the context for the “very strange, very tense, slightly violent shape coming in” that these three examples from Williams, Lam, and Matta all foreground, I suggest that in the presence of such figural marking we have now left behind the subject/object dualisms of the Cartesian or Kantian subject who strove to master the universe by means of representation. In the face of “hauntological” markings that have left something “claw-like” in their wake,

one could further suggest the beholder is no longer quite as human as the liberal humanist cogito that was once held in place by monocular perspective, but is now a human who is becoming undone by virtue of ghostly traces all the more affecting in their pluripotentiality since these figural marks have not yet been codified or cut up by the cultural laws and social conventions of form.

Abstraction as a Site of Decolonisation

In an earlier essay I sought to explore these aesthetic effects generated in Williams's work—disturbing and alluring in equal measure—by turning to the concept of “fossil identities” put forward by Wilson Harris.³¹ I now wonder, however, whether concepts of “trace” and “hauntology” proposed by Jacques Derrida may provide more of a bridge between philosophical questions raised by Williams's interstitial mode of abstraction, and an art historical framework that can demonstrate the relevance of work Williams created during decolonisation to questions that have come to define the present as “postcolonial.” In the following quote, Derrida describes *trace* as a phenomenon of the differencing activity of language. Although he is addressing the repeatability or iterability of marks that eventually come to function as signs, marks that are formalised at the point where temporary fixity brings the slide of signifiers to the closure that correlates signifier (form) with signified (meaning), he also draws attention to the ambivalent temporality whereby *trace* is both absent and present at once:

It is because of difference that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called present element is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be articulated by the mark of the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past.³²

Simultaneously embracing the future that is yet to come and the past that has not completely gone, *trace* anticipates the later concept of “hauntology,” in which Derrida discusses the persistence of utopian desires for the future, despite the eradication of hope as a result of the devastations left behind in the aftermath of political revolutions.³³ In light of such theoretical precepts, the many-sided significance of *Triptych* (1976)—one of the most important works in Williams's oeuvre—takes on further ramifications, politically as well as aesthetically (Fig. 18).



Figure 18.

Aubrey Williams, “Arawak”, “Carib”, and “Warrau” Triptych panels, 1976, oil on canvas, 243.8 × 731.5 cm. Location unknown.

From left to right, the panels are titled Arawak, Carib, Warrau, all peoples indigenous to the Caribbean region. “Claw-like” forms abound in *Triptych* in its suggestion of skeletal remains rising out of dark earth. Six “claws” spread out from an oval crab shape in the lower left panel; the figure dominating the central panel summons up from the ground a fossilised creature whose seven vertebrae form a diagonal line culminating in a sharp, angular beak. Thinking of the context in which it was commissioned, it is revealingly audacious that, ten years after independence—with decolonial futures now politically menaced by nationalism, by ethnic sectarianism, and by state authoritarianism—an abstract painter chose to appropriate the moment as one in which his intervention would create a mood of sombre contemplation. The postcolonial future that has yet to come and the colonial past that has not yet gone were thereby put before the beholder, in 1976, not in a representational dualism that wanted to say who was responsible for the stalemates of the post-independence Caribbean, but through a *hauntological mode of abstraction* in which *interstitial trace structures* punctured the nucleus of disavowal encircling all that was unsaid and unspoken in the aftermath of a new nation having been formed.

We could say that what “moves” us, what “touches” us, what “affects” us, as we behold a work such as *Triptych* is that we have entered into a strangely double-facing relationship to a past that is not completely gone and a future that is yet to come. As with *Bone Heap* and *Tribal Mark II*, what pushes through the picture plane is a sense of the hauntedness whereby the traumata of the colonial past is a present-absence—not yet fully gone because the aftermath of its devastating violence lives on in a present that has not yet arrived at a viable political alternative. A standstill such as this brings us back to the question of disavowal. In a nondualistic universe with no fixed separation of agent and patient, there can be no heroes and villains: coloniser and colonised are always intimately entangled, umbilically

interdependent in the affective space that Denis Williams, in a series of extraordinary watercolour studies done in the 1950s that deserve a seminar in their own right, called “the inner plantation.” ³⁴

So deeply was disavowal implanted into the colonial formation of Caribbean societies, as Stuart Hall explains in his posthumous memoir, that it was not until after independence that Guyana or Jamaica, both very different in their own right, came to speak of themselves as multiethnic societies or plural societies. ³⁵ To say Williams’s “claw-like shape” pierced the *nucleus of disavowal* that locked vast areas of historical experience into the realm of the unspeakable, the unrepresentable, is to say that in 1976 Williams was one of the first to demarcate the ambivalence of the postcolonial condition. Likewise Wilson Harris, in his 1976 essay “Fossil and Psyche,” spoke to the predicament that literary scholars Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford parse in the following exegesis of the “fossil identities” concept:

each living person is a fossil in so far as each man carries within himself remnants of deep seated antecedents ... By entering into a fruitful dialogue with the past one becomes able to revive the fossils that are buried within oneself and are part of one’s ancestors.

Petersen and Rutherford add the all-important qualifier that while fossil identities may open

insight into a new dimension of psychic possibilities which up until then one had been unaware of ... the same search for roots can give an entirely different result and can be used to foster a narrow nationalism ... What must be remembered is that fossils like living beings contain restrictive as well as explosive rooms or spaces and the fossil value of our *human and ahuman* antecedents can either act as positive forces or can become prejudices, hideous biases. ³⁶

Disavowal is not something people do self-consciously (which means it is a psychic defence similar to but not equivalent to the ego’s acts of denial), yet the key issue here is the sheer amount of affective labour—psychic energy—involved in keeping the unspoken unsaid.

Hall repeatedly made the point that everyone “knew” Jamaica, for instance, was a black majority society, but that it was only in the 1970s that Jamaica began to *think of itself* as a black majority society. ³⁷ Prior to the decolonial

transformations set in motion in vernacular forms such as reggae, in movements such as Rastafarianism, and in the upsurge in literary, performing and visual arts during the 1966 to 1972 period when the Caribbean Artists Movement was at its height, what everyone knew but no-one talked about was thus an open wound: this was precisely the animus motivating Williams as an artist—the grain of sand becoming a pearl—when he said, in 1967, “it has haunted me all my life *and I don’t understand it.*” With this quest to understand being the driving force behind his painterly innovations, Williams intuited that a buried absence is never a neutral “nothing” but a radioactive void: the violence with which past trauma exert aftereffects is one that attracts more violence to the primal scene in which the fossil was buried. Where disavowal blocked colonial history from passing into the past, one thinks of Jonestown, the cataclysmic mass suicide that took place in Guyana’s hinterland in 1978: a future event impregnated with the potential to repeat the violence of colonial conquest that Williams had addressed in *El Dorado* in 1958, a dark star from the age of empire continuing to absorb the living present into the void of its black hole.

“In art things get said in ways in which they can’t get said in any other domain,” said Hall in a 2007 conversation with Bill Schwarz.³⁸ The aesthetic ingenuity of Williams’s diasporic abstraction exemplifies such an understanding of critical art as that which is capable of breaking through the unsaid, the unspoken, and the unrepresentable. As Williams deployed abstraction to map out the planetary scale of postcolonial predicaments, his figural mode of mark making is urgently relevant as it intervenes in the contemporary dilemma whereby, as Schwarz put it, “There is today so much obeisance to the idea of multiculturalism that those domains in our lives which remain trenchantly untransformed, still subject to a racial or colonial logic ... lack the requisite vocabularies with which to make them speakable.”³⁹ Paradoxical it may be to suggest it was an abstract painter who made colonial trauma speakable, but we can come at the complex relationship between words and abstract art in another way.

Coda: Cenote

Williams often seemed discomfited by the verbal medium, even though in his articles of the late 1960s and early 1970s he spoke to the decolonial moment with penetrating insight. Williams also contributed to far-reaching debates on the British-born generation of diaspora artists in events such as the 1987 Creation for Liberation panel held in London.⁴⁰ Watching Imruh Bakari Caesar’s important film documentary, *The Mark of the Hand: Aubrey Williams* (1986), one senses Williams’s discomfort, at times, with the interviewer’s presumption that the artist’s words will somehow “explain” his abstract paintings, as if their meaning will be finally fixed once we hear the artist

himself speak. There is a fraught moment when, in the hinterland where his relationship to soil and land first took shape, Williams says he would prefer listening to Shostakovich rather than carry on with the interview.⁴¹

It would be entirely wrong to think the artist was nonverbal. Far from it, in his 1970 essay, “Caribbean Visual Art: A Framework for Further Inquiry” (valuably reprinted in Anne Walmsley’s indispensable *Guyana Dreaming* anthology), Aubrey Williams was among the first to use “postcolonial” as a key term. At CAM’s first conference, held at the University of Kent in September 1967, Williams had said “Art is always in the foreground; it is the true avant-garde ... It always seems in the history of man that the arts give the direction for the technology, for the philosophy and the very life of the people.”⁴² In the context of his participation in the Caribbean Writers and Artists Convention which planned ahead for the first region-wide arts festival—Carifesta—that took place in Guyana in 1972, and in which Williams chaired the Art Sub-Committee, he followed up this line of thought in his 1970 essay. The avant-gardness, as well as the world-historical scope, of Williams’s thinking is heightened by what is at stake in the sixth heading that concludes his sequence of periods in Caribbean art history that he laid out as follows—“1. Pre-Columbian 2. Post-Columbian 3. The Colonial Brainwashing 4. Post-Colonial Vision 5. Caribbean Art Today 6. Cenote.”⁴³

Cenote, also spelled *zenote*, is a phonetic translation of an indigenous Amerindian word (Fig. 19). In the language of natural history, cenote are circular pools opening onto underground caves, all concentrated geographically in the north east Yucatán peninsula because of an asteroid that created the Chicxulub crater 66 million years ago (Fig. 20). But Williams was also using *cenote* figurally when he wrote, “The Maya when involved in their process of disappearance ... placed their jewellery and their most intimate objects of material value in their wells. These wells were then called Cenote. Literal translation is impossible, but near meanings would be Total or Everything of Us.” As he concluded his 1970 essay, it is crucial to notice his sixth heading does not designate a teleological endpoint: “From out of the amalgam of our Pre-Columbian past, or slave past, our quick political growth and our social awakening—these blended with our cataclysmic position in our technology-ridden world—from this Cenote must come the visual identity of Modern Caribbean Man today.”⁴⁴ *Cenote* cannot be an ending if this is the point from which a future visual identity emerges. This is also to say *cenote* cannot be fixed in the precolonial past as something belonging to the Maya or to the Amerindians alone, for the word has now become cross-culturally translated as a *double-facing trace structure*, imbued with the pastness of ancient petroglyphs while at the same time radiant with future pluripotentiality.



Figure 19.

Aubrey Williams, *Cenote*, 1983, oil on canvas, 95.5 × 127cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).



Figure 20.

John Stanmeyer, *Xkeken, Cenote, Mexico*, photograph. Digital image courtesy of John Stanmeyer, National Geographic.

Aubrey Williams's work deals with an ecological materialism on a planetary scale. Like a fossil identity harbouring utopian and authoritarian possibilities, *cenote*—in Williams's handling of the term—is cataclysm's trace, an underwater archive storing archaic treasures for posterity and a place of futurity anticipating the rediscovery of an extinct civilisation. For me, some of the most memorable scenes in Imruh Bakari Caesar's invaluable film portrait are those in which we see Aubrey listening to Shostakovitch in the jungle, an image that is always called to mind for me when I see *Quartet no. 15 opus 144* (1981) from the Shostakovich series (Fig. 21). In a setting worlds away from the one inhabited by the Russian composer, we glimpse a pluriverse in which particles assemble, decay, and reassemble in the time-space continuum of *cenote*, which is not a void or a hole but a passageway from one realm into others.



Figure 21.

Aubrey Williams, *Quartet No. 15 Opus 144*, 1981, oil on canvas, 132 x 208 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Aubrey Williams (All rights reserved, DACS 2018).

Footnotes

- ¹ A useful point of entry to the field is provided by Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, London: University College Press, 1997.
- ² Guy Brett, "A World Aesthetic" [1988] in *Guyana Dreaming: The Art of Aubrey Williams*, ed. Anne Walmsley, Sydney: Dangeroo Press, 1990, 97.
- ³ Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History Since the 1950s*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2014, 10–24. Artist Sonia Boyce and art historian Leon Wainwright were among invited speakers at the *Aubrey Williams: In Profile* Study Day held at Tate Britain, 21 September 2007; the 2010 exhibitions were accompanied by the catalogue *Aubrey Williams: Atlantic Fire*, ed. Reyahn King, Liverpool: National Museums Liverpool and October Gallery, 2010.
- ⁴ Stuart Hall, "Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three 'Moments' in Post-War History," *History Workshop Journal* Vol 61 n 1, March 2006, 10.
- ⁵ The Museum of Modern Art visitor handout, March 30 1969, cited in Susan Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: Art Museums in the Age of Black Power*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 207.

- 6 See, "Disavowal," Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, 1968 trans. Donald Nicholson Smith, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974, 118-121.
- 7 Barnor Hesse, "Symptomatically Black: A Creolization of the Political," in *Creolizing the Political*, eds. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011, 37-61.
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- 13 Gavin Butt, "America and its Discontents: Art and Politics, 1945-60," in *Companion to Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones, Malden MA: Blackwell, 2006, 24.
- 14 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 1971: trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011.
- 15 See *The Dark Monarch: Magic and Modernity in British Art*, eds. Michael Bracewell, Martin Clark, and Alun Rowlands, London: Tate Publishing, 2009.
- 16 Maridowa Williams, interview with the author, London, 10 October 2017.
- 17 Jan Carew, "Portrait of the Artist," in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 1990, 66-67.
- 18 *Now & Coming Time: A Symposium on Aubrey Williams and the Textual and Visual Arts of Guyana and the Caribbean*, 26 April 2017, University of Cambridge.
- 19 Clement Greenberg, "American-Type Painting," [1955] in *Art and Culture: Selected Essays*, Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1961, 208-229.
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- 21 Mark Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
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- 31 Kobena Mercer, "Black Atlantic Abstraction" in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer, London and Cambridge MA: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2006, 182-205.
- 32 Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy* trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 13.
- 33 See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, 1993; trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 1994.
- 34 See Evelyn A. Williams, *The Art of Denis Williams*, London: Peepal Press, 2012.
- 35 Stuart Hall with Bill Schwarz, "Race and Its Disavowal," in *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2017, 95-106.
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- 37 See Stuart Hall, "Race, Class, and Pluralism in Caribbean Societies" in *Race and Class in Post-Colonial Society*, Paris: UNESCO 1977, 150-182, and Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, 222-239.
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- 42 Aubrey Williams, "The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean," *Savacou* no 2, September 1970, in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 1990, 15.
- 43 Aubrey Williams, "Caribbean Visual Art: A Framework for Further Inquiry," *The Literary Half-Yearly*, Mysore, Vol XI no 2 July 1970, in Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming*, 1990, 21. Following his return visits to Guyana, Williams developed a close relationship with the Jamaican art scene through his friendship with Karl Parboosingh, which is touched on by Claudia Hucke, *Picturing the Postcolonial Nation: (Inter)Nationalism in the Art of Jamaica, 1962-1975*, Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2013.
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“The Art Game”: Television, *Monitor*, and British Art at the turn of the 1960s

Michael Clegg

Abstract

This article examines the coverage of the visual arts by Monitor, the pioneer arts magazine series broadcast by the BBC between 1958 and 1965. It explores Monitor’s place in the evolution of approaches to visual art on British television and assesses Monitor’s wider impact on the “art support system” (in Margaret Garlake’s phrase) of the late 1950s and 1960s. Through readings of three Monitor films (“Scottish Painters”, about Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde, “George Chapman: Painter in Wales”, and “Private View”) it argues, firstly, that a new emphasis on story or parable by programme makers came at the expense of engagement with critical debate of the kind maintained by print media and radio, and, secondly, that by the turn of the 1960s television was shaping the approach of commercial galleries whilst simultaneously masking its institutional power to viewers in favour of a disinterested, everyman pose.

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The BBC's first broadcast of *Monitor*, on 2 February 1958, brought something new to television. The series' open ended "magazine" style used a brand name, a regular time slot and a recognisable lead presenter, in this case Huw Wheldon, to marshal into single programmes diverse segments about the arts by various directors. The format had been successfully developed by the broadcaster in current affairs, notably through *Panorama* and *Tonight*, but this was a first experiment in translating it to dedicated reporting on the arts.

¹ Shortly after the first transmission Anne James, assistant to the production team, wrote in an internal memo that, "it is quite certain that this is the only programme of its type in the world." ²

Television itself had emerged as a powerful cultural presence during the 1950s, and with remarkable rapidity. On 1 January 1950 only 3.75 hours of programming per day were broadcast, to a potential audience of 340,000 households; a decade later 17.5 hours were provided to 10.5 million licence holders, with, from September 1955, a choice of channels between the BBC and the new, commercially-funded Independent Television. ³ If the impact of television on how families spent time and arranged their homes was profound and immediate, the effect on the culture of the visual arts is harder to judge. ⁴ However the available evidence suggests that here too the influence was significant, as shown by such indicators as exhibition visits. In discussing a survey of attendance at post-war exhibitions, a *Burlington Magazine* editorial in 1966 noted that "television was not a factor at all until the 'Dutch Pictures' in 1953, when Sir Gerard [sic] Kelly made his famous appearance on screen, raising the attendance from about 2,000 a day to . . . 13,000 . . . Kokoschka's exhibition would never have been so well attended, had it not been for his appearance on TV." ⁵

Within the art history of the British post-war period, however, the role of television as a still new, and potentially disruptive, medium has not been a subject of analysis. ⁶ The scholarly literature which does exist on the development of arts television comes instead from a film and media studies tradition. In the case of *Monitor*, for example, a single scholarly article, published in 2011 by Mary Irwin, considers the institutional context of the series' creation and the marginalisation of women within its production team. ⁷ *Monitor* is discussed extensively in two book-length critical histories of arts television, one published in 1993 by John Walker, and one in 2007 by John Wyver, which each propose typologies of arts programme, with *Monitor* recognised as the prototype arts magazine. ⁸ However, whilst of great value in its own terms, this literature is primarily concerned with television history, and makes limited connection to the art historiography of the period—for example few links are drawn between television coverage and the vigorous critical debates then being conducted in print and subsequently examined by

art historians such as Margaret Garlake and James Hyman.⁹ John Wyver has published a detailed study of a single *Monitor* episode, Ken Russell's programme-length film "Pop Goes the Easel" from 1962; however, Wyver's primary concern is again with television history and the innovative semiotic freedom of Russell's direction (Fig. 1).¹⁰

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 1.

Ken Russell, *Monitor: Pop Goes the Easel*, 1962, film, 42 minutes. Courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b00drs8y/monitor-pop-goes-the-easel>).

In her work on the social history of British art from 1945 to 1960, Margaret Garlake has developed the concept of the "art support system" to describe the network of institutions which underpins artistic activity in a modern state.¹¹ Though Garlake does not consider the emergence of television, her concept provides a useful framework for addressing this lacuna in the art history of the period, and for thinking about both the vectors through which television could affect art and how television related to existing aspects of the social context for art. Looking primarily at art production, Garlake emphasises the expansion of art education, the creation of new commercial dealerships, and the emergence of the state as a patron in post-war Britain. Of course, elements of the "support system" also shaped the reception of art, for example by establishing its monetary value and the terms of critical debate. These included art publishing and commercial and public galleries, but of particular importance were those institutions that supported critical discourse. Garlake notes that "ideas and theoretical constructions characterise the support system of the 1950s" in particular, the period was one of intense debate around such issues as abstraction, realism and political commitment.¹² Both Garlake and Hyman have described some of the channels through which these conversations were pursued, notably serious but non-specialist magazines such as the *New Statesman* and the BBC's *The Listener*.¹³ Radio, too, offered a channel for substantial critical interventions, from Nikolaus Pevsner's Reith Lectures, *The Englishness of English Art*, in 1955 to David Sylvester's review of *The New American Painting* on the Third Programme, the Corporation's principal cultural radio network, in 1959.¹⁴



[Watch Video](#)

Figure 2.

Ken Russell, *Monitor: Scottish Painters*, 1959, film, 12 minutes. Courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02j4ps1>).

In the rest of this article, I use *Monitor* to consider television's evolving role and its impact on the "art support system" at the turn of the 1960s. After an assessment of the place of *Monitor* in the history of visual art on television, detailed readings are made of three *Monitor* programmes: "Scottish Painters" (Fig. 2), directed by Ken Russell, from 1959, which is about Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde; "George Chapman: Painter in Wales", directed by David Jones, from 1961; and "Private View", directed by John Schlesinger, also from 1961, which is about four young artists approaching their first solo shows (Fig. 3). Through these I look to demonstrate how, as television stepped into the arena of contemporary art, it started shaping other institutions around itself. Yet at the same time it also obscured its own increasing impact on the art market and on the reception of art by representing itself as a naïve commentator, aligned with its imaginary viewer on the outside of the support system. Developing approaches by programme makers also tended to avoid engagement with the key contemporary critical debates that were being pursued in print and echoed on radio, emphasising instead biography and helping to establish the conditions for the "promotional culture" that was to further reshape the British art scene. ¹⁵



[Watch Video](#)

Figure 3.

Jimmy Howie, *Monitor: Private View*, 1960, film, 38 minutes. Courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5qKgYgRvPA>).

Early Television Coverage of Visual Art and the Creation of *Monitor*

Coverage of visual art was substantial within television's limited pre-war output and much of this was presented by artists themselves.¹⁶ Regular television broadcasting in the London area started on 2 November 1936. Almost immediately, on 7 November, John Piper presented a talk from the television studio about the art on display in London's commercial galleries. This programme, *The Autumn Galleries*, started a short series that ran until March 1937.¹⁷ Other artists were invited in to discuss their own work: for example a series entitled *The World of Women* included short programmes in February and March 1937 by Laura Knight (on painting), Lady Kennet (on sculpture), and Pearl Binder (on illustration).¹⁸ Academic perspectives emerged with the television debuts of R. H. Wilenski and Kenneth Clark in the series *Artists and their Work* in December 1937, the latter presenting a piece on Florentine paintings in the National Gallery.¹⁹ The next programme in this series featured Paul Nash on surrealist art.²⁰

Pre-war visual art coverage was dominated by the illustrated lecture from the television studio, complemented by occasional conversations (for example between Piper and Serge Chermayeff) and group discussions (such as the “Traditional versus Modern Art” debate chaired by William Rothenstein in 1939, for which a full transcript was published in *The Listener*).²¹ These formats continued to be utilised and developed when television broadcasting resumed at the end of the war, when visual art was again given substantial airtime. Coverage of exhibitions included John Rothenstein on the Tate’s show of American painting in 1946, the modernist critic Douglas Cooper on van Gogh’s *The Yellow House* in 1947, to coincide with a Tate show of the artist’s work, and a brief attempt to revive the gallery round-up in 1950, this time presented by the painter Rodrigo Moynihan. The series *The Eye of the Artist*, which ran from 1947 to 1949, epitomises the eclectic subject matter being tackled at the time. It featured a programme on the art of India, invited an artist to paint live in the television studio, and hosted a conversation about the potential of industry and commerce to act as modern patrons. In 1958 Kenneth Clark’s programmes for the new commercial channel Independent Television (ITV) started with the series *Is Art Necessary?* However, the use of expert guests (including John Berger in the third episode) was soon abandoned in favour of a more focused lecture format, which was also adopted for Clark’s *Five Revolutionary Painters* in 1959 (Fig. 4).²²

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 4.

Kenneth Clark, *5 Revolutionary Painters: Pieter Brueghel the Elder*, 1959, film, 28 minutes. Courtesy of BFI (<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-pieter-brueghel-the-elder-1959-online>).

Given how little material survives, the content of these programmes is often difficult to judge. However, they seem to have engaged multiple viewpoints on intellectually-challenging and controversial (if mainstream) topics. For example, the *Radio Times*’ listing for *Argument on Picasso*, which was broadcast for the artist’s seventieth birthday in October 1951, noted that, “Discussion still goes on over the work of one of the most controversial figures of our time” and promised that the debate would be “taken up in the studio” with the aid of original drawings borrowed from the Institute of Contemporary Arts.²³ John Wyver has argued that the predominant formats for presenting visual art in British-made television before 1962 gave primacy to the word, with an explanatory voice constraining the polysemic possibility of pictures.²⁴ This is a useful emphasis, but it is also worth noting that the voices heard in such programmes articulated diverse critical viewpoints, as with the debate in *Argument on Picasso* or the use of a partisan, contentious art critic such as Douglas Cooper as well as established figures such as John

Rothenstein. There was also an interplay between different media, with connections made between television and the established critical culture of radio: Cooper's van Gogh piece, for example, was linked to an extended discussion on the Third Programme.²⁵

From 1951, the BBC began to show a number of films directed by John Read, son of the prominent art critic Herbert Read, several of which were made as co-productions with the Arts Council.²⁶ As films these were more ambitious productions than the largely studio-based live television output. The focus was on British art, and often—as in the case of Moore, Sutherland, Piper, and Sickert—on a modernist inflected idiom, but also with an emphasis on the British landscape and the British artistic tradition.²⁷ Most took the form of filmed profiles, often emphasising the act of creating a particular artistic work. As John Wyver has noted, they offered the viewer an unusually open-ended approach, in contrast to more overtly didactic formats, and had a limited contribution from critics (characteristics which were to be inherited by aspects of *Monitor's* content, discussed below).²⁸ A partial exception to this approach was Read's "Artists Must Live", first broadcast in 1953, an investigative essay into a perceived crisis of patronage narrated by Basil Taylor (Fig. 5).

[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 5.

John Read, Artists Must Live, 1953, documentary television broadcast, 29 minutes. Courtesy of BFI (<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-artists-must-live-1953-online>).

In 1958, most of Read's output to date, along with two new films, one on Reg Butler and a further one on Henry Moore, were packaged into a series, *British Art and Artists*, and shown during *Monitor's* first summer break. *Monitor's* own first episode in 1958 included a six-minute segment on Jacob Epstein (who was 78 in 1958 and was to die the next year) which was also directed by Read (Fig. 6). The soundtrack used an archive recording of Epstein reflecting on his work and practice, his words juxtaposed with still photographs of his sculpture and his studio (taken by Anthony Ireland of the RCA). The camera roves amongst details within these stills, the results spliced with pre-existing film of Epstein carving. The short film put down a marker for how directorial ingenuity would be applied to presenting visual art within *Monitor* and indicated Read's influence on its approach.



[Watch Video](#)

Figure 6.

Introduction by Huw Wheldon with photography by Anthony Ireland, Monitor: Jacob Epstein, 1958, documentary television broadcast, 7 minutes. Courtesy of British Broadcasting Corporation (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0160sd6>).

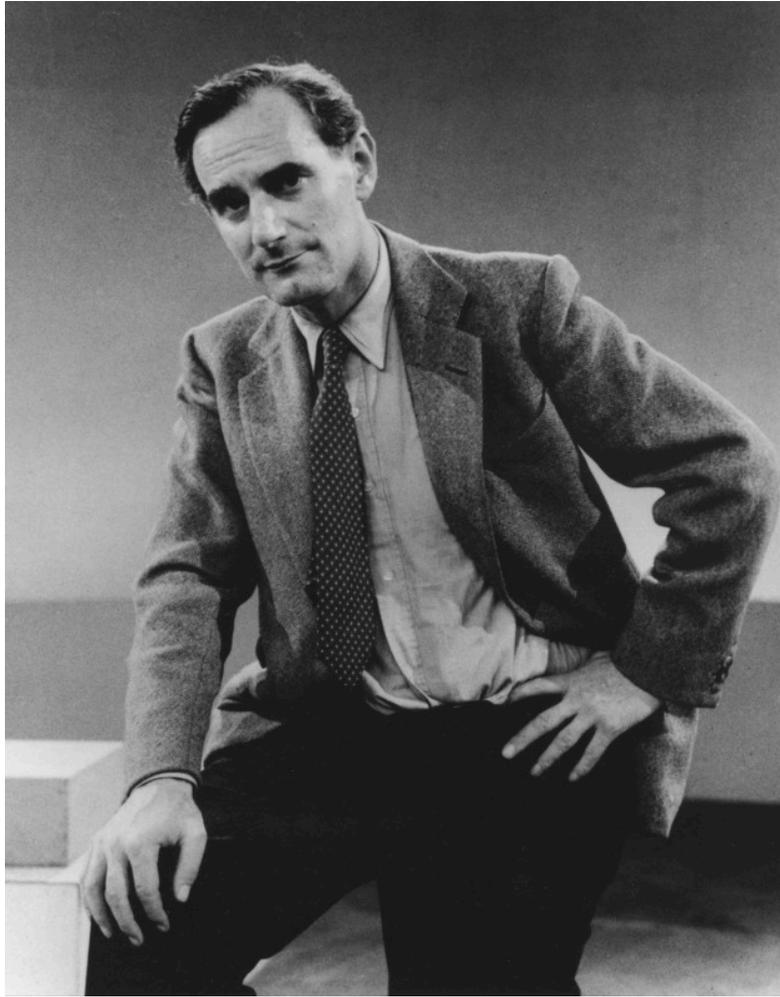


Figure 7.

Bob Collins, Sir Huw Wheldon, 1958, bromide print, 36.5 × 29 cm. Collection of National Portrait Gallery, London. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Bob Collins / National Portrait Gallery, London.

Despite the relatively rich context of visual arts programming, by the mid-1950s, as the audience grew rapidly, the BBC perceived a gap in its coverage. Partly this was about the lack of a format which brought together all the arts in one, distinctive place, but there also seems to have been a sense that the existing offer lacked immediacy and responsiveness. As late as 1956, Catherine Freeman, a BBC staffer, felt that it was “extraordinary” that the BBC didn’t have a serious series which covered the range of arts and had topical bite.²⁹ *Monitor* was the BBC’s response and, as noted earlier, within the production team the first edition was seen as something entirely new (though Read’s short Epstein segment indicates how *Monitor*’s innovation encompassed existing traditions). The series aimed at a comprehensive coverage of theatre, literature and music, as well as visual art and, whilst it paid attention to the art of the past, the magazine format

was intended to support the reporting of current events such as exhibitions and performances. From 1958, the forty-five-minute programmes were broadcast fortnightly at around ten o'clock in the evening, with a regular summer break. Huw Wheldon (Fig. 7) acted as presenter, principal editor and figurehead for the *Monitor* brand from the first transmission until August 1964; a final season under Jonathan Miller ran until July 1965.³⁰ *Monitor's* innovative format, combined with Wheldon's concern to develop new talent, made the series the cradle for a number of influential careers in production, direction and presenting. Its staff included Miller, Melvyn Bragg and Humphrey Burton, as well as the future feature-film directors Ken Russell and John Schlesinger.³¹

Monitor's influence on broadcasters is clear from ITV's launch of an imitator, *Tempo*, in October 1961. However, the size and composition of the series' audience is difficult to reconstruct. *Monitor* was frequently broadcast after 10:00 p.m., later than other magazine programmes such as *Tonight*, with a regular 6:15 p.m. slot, and *Panorama*, which usually started before 9:00 p.m. A 10 p.m. slot was used for other arts coverage (the *British Art and Artists* series aired at a similar time) but suggests the expectation of a relatively niche audience. One specific piece of information comes from an "Audience Research Report", compiled after the first broadcast of Ken Russell's *Monitor* film, "Pop Goes the Easel" in 1962.³² This gives an estimated audience of seven percent, against twenty-six percent for ITV programmes shown at the same time (given the two-channel environment, the percentages seem to be of the total potential audience).³³ No comment is made about this being an unusually low figure, so again the indication is of a niche audience. *Monitor* gained some positive reaction in the popular press: it was named as the *Daily Worker's* "Programme of the Year" in 1958 and, whilst Peter Black in the *Daily Mail* described it as "the television equivalent of a posh weekly," he was generally supportive. However, the series was also willing to play up to a highbrow image; for a repeat of "Pop Goes the Easel" in 1963, the *Radio Times* listing defiantly reproduced the *Daily Worker's* previous condemnation of the film's elitism: "A form of audience rejection at its worst".³⁴

***Monitor's* Coverage of the Visual Arts**

The visual arts were at the core of *Monitor*. John Walker has estimated that within the first sixty programmes twenty-eight percent of content related to painting and sculpture, the largest single subject.³⁵ However, analysis of the nature and scope of this coverage is hampered by the lack of a published register of contents for *Monitor*.³⁶ An attempt at such a register, for visual arts coverage, is provided at [Appendix 1](#). This was made possible by the launch, in 2014, of *BBC Genome*, a searchable database of content from the

BBC's *Radio Times* listings magazine. As *Radio Times* entries are not always comprehensive and there are some transcription errors in the *Genome* database, available information from BFI collections and the BBC Written Archive was also used to supplement or correct the data where this was available. ³⁷

Appendix 1 shows all identified content related to contemporary British art.

³⁸ Twenty-five such programmes or programme segments were found, representing approximately a third of the total visual art coverage (based on the number of programme segments; their length is not known). Of the remainder, approximately one half featured historical subjects, often linked to major exhibitions (such as the 8 December 1963 piece on Goya, coinciding with the opening of *Goya and his Times* at the Royal Academy). The rest was dedicated to contemporary overseas artists or thematic essays (such as John Berger on the nude on 12 October 1958). Living British artists also acted as presenters or discussants: most notable was Michael Ayrton, discussed further below, who acted both as the subject and maker of programmes. Richard Hamilton was also prominent, interviewing Jean Tinguely in June 1964 and Marcel Duchamp in June 1962 (the latter programme with contributions from Eduardo Paolozzi).



[Watch Video](#)

Figure 8.

Introduction by Huw Wheldon, *Monitor: Henry Moore*, 1960, documentary television broadcast, 21 minutes. Courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00drs8s>).

Jonathan Miller compared Wheldon's approach as principal editor to that of "a middle class, middlebrow artistic big game hunter, who went out on the veldt with a shotgun and Henry Moore fell out of a tree."³⁹ The register at [Appendix 1](#) suggests some truth in this caricature, with features on big game such as Epstein (twice) and Elizabeth Frink as well as Moore ([Fig. 8](#)). However, the programme listing also shows a wider range of subjects and suggests a further influence on content in terms of what Wheldon himself described as trying "to make good television with all that that implies."⁴⁰ In his *Monitor* anthology, Wheldon elaborated on his conception of what makes good arts television. It should have the "nature of parable," presenting something simple and memorable but laying claim to a wider truth, while the physical world shown should "lend intimations" to the subject.⁴¹ Several programme segments are thus anchored by a focus on place: Carel Weight and Ruskin Spear in Hammersmith (28 September 1958); George Chapman in the Rhonda (29 January, 1961, and discussed further below) and Edward Bawden in the contrasting surroundings of rural North West Essex and industrial London (10 November 1963). Character and story are often used to add resonance to the featured art, and the artistic big game often contrasts with a recurring interest in the eccentric amateur. This might be read as a middlebrow (in Jonathan Miller's word, quoted above) taste for whimsy, but equally it seems to have been intended as a provocation to traditional art hierarchies; the two most notable films of this kind were directed by the young iconoclast Ken Russell: "Mr Cheshier's Traction Engines" (1 July 1962) and "The Dotty World of James Lloyd" (5 July 1964). Similarly, there is a repeated interest in the stories of young artists, with an emphasis on lifestyle and a narrative of current struggle and future possibility ("Private View", 8 May 1960, "Pop Goes the Easel", 25 March 1962, and "New Generation 64", 26 April 1964).

Wheldon's conception of good television coverage of visual art met some resistance. This is apparent in a measured critique of the series made by Basil Taylor, himself a substantial television contributor, in a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts also in 1961.⁴² Whilst Taylor praised *Monitor's* output, he nevertheless saw its influence as in part detrimental: "The beginning of *Monitor* in 1958 was an important occurrence ... but valuable and successful as this programme has been, it may be used to illustrate another unfortunate trend."⁴³ Taylor's view was that not only had *Monitor* led to a diminution in the number of freestanding visual arts programmes, but it had also consolidated a tendency, ascribed to Read's earlier films, to treat art as something separate from the everyday flux of events, "something in capital letters".⁴⁴ Taylor's language pushes back at the idea of presenting art as a parable, full of nebulous meaning. Though *Monitor's* items were rapid

responses to current topics, they seemed to Taylor “premeditated” and to subsume art into the show’s own “identity of very high class and sophisticated journalism.” ⁴⁵

Whilst the register of *Monitor* contents at [Appendix 1](#) provides an idea of the scope of coverage of contemporary British art by the series, and some of the principles underlying the selection of topics, a fuller account requires attention to the material itself. This is made difficult, however, by the limited quantity of remaining content. ⁴⁶ Although many programme segments were produced on film, this was not systematically preserved; only films by Ken Russell were retained as a matter of course, by the director himself, leading to a bias towards Russell’s idiosyncratic output in the surviving material. ⁴⁷ [Appendix 1](#) is annotated to show where programme segments related to the visual arts remain accessible for research. ⁴⁸

Though limited, what material remains nevertheless provides rich evidence for how *Monitor* positioned itself within the existing structures of the art support system. In the following sections I look at three of the surviving programmes in detail. “Scottish Painters” and “George Chapman: Painter in Wales” exemplify Wheldon’s idea of the “parable” as a form for *Monitor* coverage and show the consequences of this for how it related to wider critical debate. “Private View” addresses the art market and other aspects of the art support system directly, showing how *Monitor* placed itself in relation to them for the viewing public.

“Scottish Painters”

The eleven-minute “Scottish Painters”, broadcast on the 25 October 1959, was Ken Russell’s fifth film for *Monitor*. He had conceived it as a tribute to its subjects, the painters Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde, whom he had first seen whilst working at a London gallery in the late 1940s. Russell had been seduced by their unconventional pose, describing them as the first real artists he had met. ⁴⁹

Colquhoun and MacBryde had moved to London from Scotland during the War, whilst in their late twenties. ⁵⁰ Though they lived together, their close and complex sexual relationship remained private. The pair frequently exhibited together, starting with their joint show at the Lefevre Gallery in 1944, but also separately, with the more precocious Colquhoun’s first solo exhibition at the Lefevre in 1943. Wartime paintings of ruins, shelters and mysterious meetings led to a critical association with neo-romanticism, then a predominant force through the work of Graham Sutherland and John Piper. However, both artists owed an early debt to Wyndham Lewis’s linear modernism and, in the later 1940s, moved towards cubist-influenced figure

studies (in particular Colquhoun) and still lives (exclusively MacBryde). Cubist ideas came from a familiarity with the leading French figures (the pair had visited Paris in 1938) but also a friendship with the Polish émigré, Jankel Adler, who was their neighbour in the mid-1940s. ⁵¹

“Scottish Painters” is built around the narrative conceit of following a painting by each artist from its beginning to its completion (Figs. 9 and 10). ⁵² In a striking opening section a horse and cart emerges from ripening cornfields into a down-at-heel village (Kersey in Suffolk, where the artists had recently moved) where MacBryde and Colquhoun are disgorged from the back carrying blank canvasses. In a matching closing sequence, the cart, artists and canvasses (implicitly now complete) depart in the hope of finding buyers. As has been noted, Wheldon saw a good television narrative as having the nature of a parable and, with the combination of artistic journey and bucolic scenery, Russell delivers on this formula. The main, middle section of the film shows first MacBryde and then Colquhoun at work in their cottage studio, with these scenes of painting broken up by montages of their past work. There is an attention to technique and the act of physical creation: MacBryde uses newspaper to apply textured paint; Colquhoun applies delicate paint strokes to represent the trimmings of a dress, the camera cutting from his eyes to his brush.



Figure 9.
Robert Colquhoun, Circus Woman, ca.1949, oil on canvas,
104.1 × 79.1 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of
Estate of Robert Colquhoun / Bridgeman Images.



Figure 10.

Robert MacBryde, *Still Life with Melon*, 1959, oil on canvas, 50.8 × 61 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Robert MacBryde.

The voice-over commentary follows the same structure. Brief comments from a narrator over the opening and closing sequences are lyrical, emphasising the rural location and the artists' straitened circumstances. The bulk of the commentary, however, gives space for the artists to speak for themselves. Both give cogent, serious descriptions of their interests and approaches. MacBryde is sometimes heavy-handedly fanciful (as in his appreciation of citrus yellows) but also revealing when, for example, he describes painting as problem solving with the artist at risk of "blundering about". Colquhoun talks about nostalgia in his work (a suggestive comment given that he was seen to have broken with neo-romanticism around 1943) and about the painter's potential reliance on repeated "stocks in trade" (again perhaps knowingly, as this was a trait for which he himself faced criticism).⁵³

Viewed now, there is a tension in the tone of the film. It treats the physical act of painting with great seriousness; in this it followed the tradition of the artist biography established by Read in films such as "Henry Moore" (1951) and "Graham Sutherland" (1954) where the creation of a new piece is also central. However, the wider activities and issues surrounding artistic production are either ignored or treated with a belittling humour.

The approach is biographical but that biography is partial, with a restricted view of how commercial and critical realities shape Colquhoun and MacBryde's lives. Whilst we are told that their home was chosen to allow access to London and their dealer, there is no consideration of either painter's artistic career or its necessary engagement with peers, buyers, critics and a world of changing ideas. Colquhoun and MacBryde's careers had, in fact, seen a notable reversal, Colquhoun's in particular. At his solo show in 1943 Colquhoun had been feted as, in the words of Robert Melville in *The Listener*, "the most promising young painter in England".⁵⁴ The height of their joint success came in the late 1940s, including an exhibition in New York in 1948 which was followed by Alfred Barr's purchase of a work by each artist for the Museum of Modern Art. However, as late as 1951, eight years before "Scottish Painters", both featured in *Anthology One*, the principal exhibition of "progressive" painting within the Festival of Britain, and were picked out by Le Roux Smith Le Roux's review in *The Listener* as amongst "the spoilt darlings of present-day British painting."⁵⁵

Whilst the precipitous decline in their critical reputations followed in part from troubled personal lives—in the face of reversals both drank excessively, alcoholism leading to the production of minimal new work in the mid-1950s—it was also closely bound up with some of the major artistic developments, and critical fashions, of the moment.⁵⁶ Colquhoun, in particular, had been a vehicle through which critics had reflected on evolving approaches to contemporary painting. For example, in four essays in the *New Statesman*, published between October 1947 and August 1949, Patrick Heron reviewed Colquhoun's work with varying degrees of enthusiasm but always with particular concern for how effectively Colquhoun had absorbed, and moved beyond, the achievements of cubism. This was at a time when British post-cubism was increasingly out of favour; initially, and for Heron, because of a failure to measure up to the European masters, but increasingly because of a turn against the whole cubist enterprise which, by 1957, David Sylvester was describing as "stale".⁵⁷

With the impact of American abstract expressionism on British artistic debate, starting with the Tate's show *Modern Art in the United States* in 1956, Colquhoun became critically irrelevant.⁵⁸ Patrick Elliott and Adrian Clark observe how Colquhoun's retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1958, though a moderate success and a brief reminder of former glories, was immediately followed by an exhibition of Alan Davie's ebullient symbolic abstractions. Davie was Colquhoun and MacBryde's near contemporary as a Scottish painter but his work exemplified the new ascendancy of Manhattan and abstract expressionism.⁵⁹

Yet none of this intensely varied career history is acknowledged in “Scottish Painters” and, in particular, the dynamic critical debates which, at least in part, determined the trajectory of Colquhoun and MacBryde’s fortunes is invisible. Colquhoun and MacBryde are presented as aesthetically self-sufficient and their connections to a wider world suppressed. Russell may not have wished to labour their fall from favour, having initiated the approach to them to make the film, but the result is that their difficult circumstances are treated with sentimentality. The mood of the opening and closing sequences is one of amused whimsy, with the rickety cart, set to elegiac music from a brass band, disgorging its eccentric passengers to their tumbledown cottage; in this section the tone is similar to that of Russell’s later piece on the eccentric amateur painter A. W. Chesher. MacBryde himself seems to have seen the film in this way, complaining in a letter to the producer, Peter Norrington, that it made the pair out to be a couple of itinerant bums.⁶⁰

“George Chapman: Painter in Wales”

“George Chapman: Painter in Wales” was first broadcast in January 1961, fifteen months after “Scottish Painters”. The sixteen-minute film shares with the earlier work the device of a journey which both opens and closes the film and establishes the importance of the setting for the rest of the piece. However, the journey itself is distinctly different: rather than being a passenger in an old-fashioned cart, Chapman is at the wheel of his own VW campervan driving through the industrial landscape of the Rhondda valleys. Chapman’s control of his journey provides a visual metaphor for his career; in contrast to Colquhoun and MacBryde, *Monitor* captures him at a moment when his reputation was ascendant, despite earlier struggles. Born in 1908, Chapman had come to painting after working as a commercial artist. He attended the RCA in the late 1930s and in 1951 joined the artistic community in Great Bardfield. It was his trips to the Rhondda from 1953, however, which provided the subject matter for works which established a national profile, with a first one-man show at the Piccadilly Gallery in 1956.⁶¹ A little ahead of the broadcast, in August 1960, his *Rhondda Suite* etchings were displayed at the gallery of their publisher, St George’s Press, whilst Chapman also had an exhibition at the Zwemmer Gallery that year.

“George Chapman: Painter in Wales” was directed by David Jones, a *Monitor* regular since 1958 although still in his twenties.⁶² The film was regarded as particularly successful by Wheldon and others at the BBC, being taken to the Venice Film Festival in July 1961, when it was also repeated for British audiences. The text was anthologised by Wheldon in his *Monitor* collection published in 1962.⁶³ Such enthusiasm is unsurprising, given the way that

the film successfully deploys and develops ideas about how *Monitor* should present its subjects, such as the fable-style narrative, which were endorsed from within the production team.

A voice-over delivered by Chapman provides the commentary to the film; his idiosyncratic delivery (he had been deaf since childhood) adding to its flavour. Although presented as Chapman's own, unmediated narrative, its outline seems to have been informed by Jones' directorial vision: in his initial approach to the artist, on 22 November 1960, Jones suggested three broad themes ("your personal discovery of the Rhondda, your reasons for wanting to paint it, your enthusiasm for the people and the landscape and so on") and these continued to structure the finished work, again bringing biography to the fore.⁶⁴ The picture of Chapman that emerges from the film is of a man consumed by his "discovery" of the Rhondda, and dedicated to his attempt to create "a sort of visual novel of the mining valleys."⁶⁵ We are told about the studio-home he has created from a picturesque former doss-house in Aberaeron, on the mid-Wales coast, and we see him travelling relentlessly between there and his subjects in the Rhondda. However, correspondence between Chapman and Jones shows this to be a partial view that abstracts Chapman from a more varied professional context. The cottage in Aberaeron was itself not Chapman's main home at the time; indeed, during filming, he was in the process of completing a move from Great Bardfield to Hethel, near Norwich. Both Great Bardfield and Hethel gave him access to London, where he held a regular teaching post ("need the money" he says to Jones in an undated letter) as well as taking part in metropolitan cultural life (in a letter to George's wife, the artist Kate Chapman, on 8 December 1960, Jones talks about them all meeting at the Royal Court's production that weekend).⁶⁶ True to Wheldon's ideal of the parable as a form for *Monitor*, Chapman is portrayed as a man who has found success by committing himself to his true vocation, painting the Rhondda; the other entanglements of a personal and professional life are edited out. As with "Scottish Painters", the emphasis is on biography, but it is a partial biography.

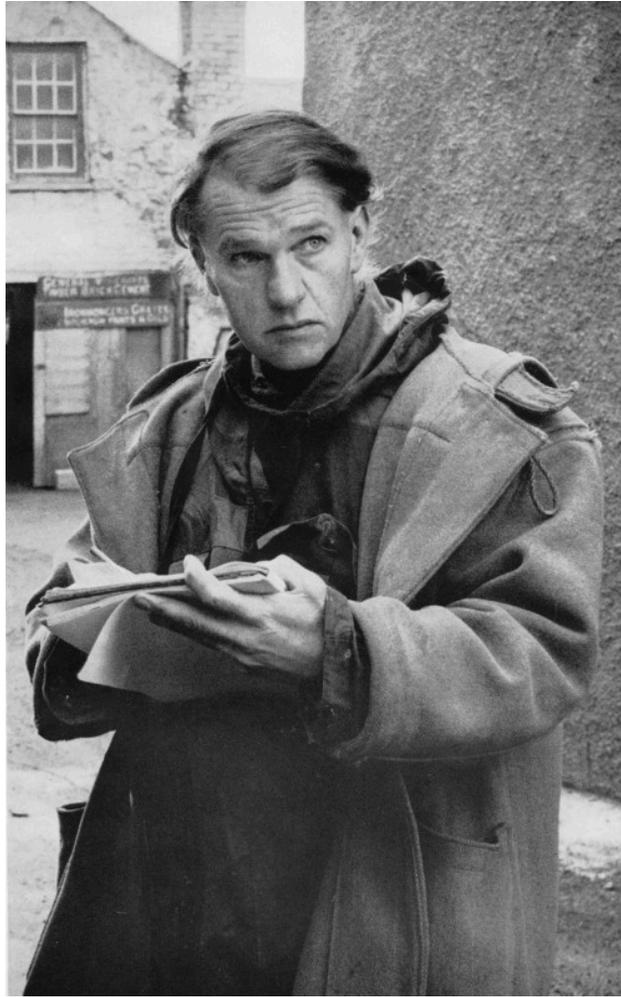


Figure 11.

Unidentified photographer, George Chapman drawing, reproduced in *Monitor: An Anthology* by Huw Wheldon (London: Macdonald & Co., 1962). Digital image courtesy of Huw Wheldon.

The single act of artistic creation, which was placed at the heart of the depiction of Colquhoun and MacBryde, is replaced in “Painter in Wales” by a series of short scenes of Chapman sketching in the Rhondda, whether from the open doors of his van, with a home-made drawing board strung from his neck, or working with clay in his studio (Fig. 11). Nonetheless, the act of making is again given great authority; here an authority over a place and its people. A repeated trope in the film is to dissolve short documentary sequences into Chapman’s representation of the same scene: a face becomes a clay model on which Chapman is working; a mural on a wall becomes the same design in a painting (Fig. 12). In an extension of the idea, a shot of a turning pithead gear dissolves into Chapman’s printing press. Through this editorial process there is an elision between the camera and the artist’s eye, and that perspective is then offered to the viewer, who can thus share something of the artist’s imaginative authority; we look at an everyday

scene and it is transmuted into the permanence of art. It is a technique which flatters the audience, but also avoids any reflection on the relationship between the visiting artist and his rooted subject, straightforwardly affirming the power of art to transform place.



Figure 12.

George Chapman, *God Save The Queen*, 1959, oil on canvas, 95 × 120 cm. Collection of Goldmark Gallery, Uppingham. Digital image courtesy of Goldmark Gallery, Uppingham.

Chapman's commentary, on the other hand, is articulate, reflective and self-aware; it works successfully as an independent text in Wheldon's *Monitor* anthology. It is also more wide-ranging than the commentary of Colquhoun and MacBryde in "Scottish Painters", touching on the vicissitudes of his early career, if never explicitly addressing the commercial realities of succeeding as an artist. In the broadcast Chapman, briefly, even makes his own contribution to debates around relevant modes of modern painting: "Of course narrative painting is supposed to be out of date and very dangerous ground for an Englishman, but so far as I am concerned it gives me an object and a purpose." However, additional material on this topic in Chapman's text was excised from the broadcast, though Wheldon felt able to include it in his published anthology. This significantly extends his passing critical reflection, concluding with an overt critique of the state of abstract painting: "I think that abstract painting has now reached a dead end, that there isn't anything more to be said in that medium. I can only see in abstract painting what I saw thirty years ago in its great days, and I think that a little bit of human interest would do an enormous amount of good. Even Picasso, at times, has told a story, like he did in *Guernica*". As with "Scottish Painters", the editorial

decision to cut this material means that detailed engagement with current critical ideas and disputes is avoided in favour of a biography of the artist as a creative individual. However, and again as with the earlier film, the result is to obscure issues central to that creative life. Whilst Colquhoun and MacBryde had already suffered a reversal in fortunes, Chapman was also to find the commercial environment increasingly difficult as the decade progressed and he retired from professional painting for over a decade from 1969. It was a commercial eclipse which can be ascribed to a critical turn against realist narrative painting and toward abstraction, the very ground that his edited commentary addressed.⁶⁷

Looking across “Scottish Painters” and “Painter in Wales”, a deliberate lack of engagement with—or even acknowledgement of—a wider critical community seems to be a significant strand within *Monitor’s* approach (though limited evidence means generalisation should be cautious). This cannot be ascribed to an institutional bias on the part of the BBC as a whole: in the intense artistic debates of the 1950s it frequently provided platforms for trenchant, independent comment. Le Roux’s largely negative review of the *Anthology* exhibitions (quoted earlier) was initially broadcast on the Third Programme, then reprinted in *The Listener*. In 1951 *The Listener* also published Basil Taylor’s review of *Abstract Painting in England* at the Gimpel Fils galleries, initiating the first round of the “abstraction versus realism” debate, the key critical fissure of the decade, which was largely fought in the magazine’s letters pages.⁶⁸ In addition, *The Listener* had a regular “Round the London Galleries” column which was authored by a roster of significant critical figures who regularly ventured onto disputed terrain: Lawrence Alloway’s punchy critique of those describing John Bratby as a “kitchen-sink” painter being a well-known case in point.⁶⁹ In the preceding decades television too, as noted above, had used debate formats and contentious voices, and linked to material in *The Listener* and on radio.

Disengagement from critical debate thus seems to have been a feature of one particular approach adopted by *Monitor*. Material in the *Monitor* production files supports the conclusion that this was a conscious stance, or at least one preferred by some of its influential staff and programme makers. For example, a memo from John Read, discussing possible content ahead of the first series, proposes a piece on the “neo-realists” represented by the Beaux Arts Gallery and sets out his stall in a way that could equally refer to “Scottish Painters” or “Painter in Wales”: “David Sylvester or John Berger would be suitable to write about their work but I think one would get the best out of this subject by a straightforward film impression of a studio and the artist at work and cutting this to tape recordings . . . I would prefer a documentary treatment without critical comment.”⁷⁰ One determinant of this aversion to critical debate is likely to have been a desire on the part of *Monitor’s* producers to avoid the political, given the BBC’s obligations to

impartiality and the frequently politically-charged nature of criticism (for example, Berger's antipathy to abstraction as lacking class-based social commitment). After the first edition of *Monitor*, item three on the agenda of the production meeting was, "emphasise that the programme must have no politics or current affairs." ⁷¹

However, a further, potentially more important, influence on this a-critical stance was the production team's view of what made good television. The production files show that some senior BBC executives were sceptical about the televisual qualities of visual art in general: Kenneth Adam, the Controller of Programmes wrote in a memo dated 2 February 1958, "On the whole I feel . . . that exhibitions make dull television." ⁷² The *Monitor* team had more faith in their material, but saw a need to present art in a particular way. Above, I traced how Wheldon's ideal of the parable form can be seen in the selection of contemporary art topics and the narrative structure of "Scottish Painters" and "Painter in Wales"; nothing would have been more antithetical to a parable's exalted air and claim to universal meaning than explicit critical commentary or historical contextualisation. More generally, the production files reveal a view that television's strength lay in acting as an extension of the audience's own vision, a neutral channel for experience. The production assistant, Anne James, captured this in a succinct pair of metaphors, "a feature of *Monitor* since its commencement has been the use of the camera as an explorer—a probing eye." ⁷³

"Private View": Representing the Art Support System

Disengagement from critical debate did not mean that *Monitor* avoided difficult ideas. Wheldon's interview with the artist and writer Michael Ayrton (broadcast on 8 October 1961 as "The Myth of Icarus") is replete with Ayrton's multi-layered interpretation of Icarus's fall, seeing this as an archetype of the grand gesture and through it linking the two contemporary technical obsessions of space flight and nuclear holocaust. These ideas are presented, however, as the hard-won creative insights of a practicing artist. Unacknowledged is that Ayrton was also a prominent critic and a *Monitor* insider: an adviser to the production team who went on to make his own films: "The Lost Michelangelo", broadcast on 19 January 1964, and "Minotaur and Oracle", 10 May 1964. This disavowal of the series' relationship to wider art networks is the topic of the rest of this section.

In a change to its standard format, *Monitor's* 8 May 1960 edition comprised a single forty-minute film entitled "Private View", directed by John Schlesinger and with a script by Mitchell Raper. In a further innovation (at least in the *Monitor's* approach to the visual arts) the film took as its overt subject not

the creative individual but the institutional conditions of artistic production; that is, to use the concept introduced earlier, aspects of the art support system (and in this it had an earlier progenitor in Read's "Artists Must Live").

The film retains elements of biography, with a main central section formed from segments on the lives of four young British artists. However, all the material is organised around the question, posed in the broadcast's *Radio Times* listing, "What does it mean to be a young artist trying to break into the art world, to live by painting?" ⁷⁴ Developing the theme, the film presents itself in its opening sequences as an investigation of how an object created "in some obscure moment of pain or exhilaration" becomes that "strange commodity" that is an artefact in the "artistic marketplace." Its main concern is thus with the institutions that most immediately determine artistic value: galleries and their patrons. The title—"Private View"—emphasises that this is a closed, privileged world; one to which the film will give the viewer temporary access. The early working title, "The Art Game", took these connotations further still, suggesting that artistic value lies with the canniness of the players—artists, dealers, buyers—and that the film will reveal their machinations. ⁷⁵ In adopting the stance of a disinterested observer, however, the programme hides the place television had itself taken in the art support system, including its own influence on the art market.

In the film, the four featured artists (Anthony Whishaw, James Howie, Sonia Lawson and Allan Rawlinson) are all shown preparing for their first solo shows, though this common characteristic is revealed only at its end. ⁷⁶ In contrast to "Scottish Painters" the idea of an artistic career is central to "Private View", although here the issue is one of career potential. Nonetheless, the biographical pieces also have much in common with Russell's film. Each artist provides the voice-over for his or her respective segment and is given space to describe their objectives and practice. Again, there is a focus on the work involved in creativity: Howie illustrates how he mixes his own paints; while for each artist the struggle to find a functional studio is made central (epitomised in the image of Rawlinson beating sculptural panels in his parents' back garden).

As with "Scottish Painters" and "Painter in Wales", the concern to engage sympathetically with the artist's standpoint as a practitioner is at the expense of any recognition that the reception of art—and hence an artistic career—is shaped by institutions and ideas. Nor is there acknowledgement of the changing terms of current critical debates. A pre-production synopsis of the film has handwritten annotations which place each artist in a critical category ("expressionistic" against Whishaw (Fig. 13), "neo-abstract" against Lawson (Figs. 14 and 15), "abstract" against Howie and "abstract-copper" against Rawlinson) but even this limited critical vocabulary is excised from

the broadcast film.⁷⁷ The only additional perspective that is, implicitly, invoked is that of a putative everyman, baffled by “modern art”. Both Lawson and Rawlinson respond to questions about the popular reaction to their work. Lawson answers diffidently (“[I] don’t expect people to understand”), while Rawlinson defends his working-class neighbours: “[my] neighbours don’t appreciate precisely what I’m trying to do [but it’s] a beginning. If more modern art is brought to ordinary people [they] will begin to like it”. This question of popular reaction displaces any engagement with the ideas of critics, gallery owners, or patrons.⁷⁸



Figure 13.

Anthony Whishaw, *Corrida*, 1955-6, oil on canvas, 100 × 300 cm. Collection of Tate (T14296). Digital image courtesy of Anthony Whishaw / Tate, 2018.



Figure 14.

Sonia Lawson, *Entrance to a Garden*, 1959, oil on canvas, 34 × 25.3 cm. Collection of Royal Academy, of Arts, (03/272). Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts, London.



Figure 15.

Sonia Lawson, *Still Life*, 1958, oil on hardboard, 121.5 × 71.3 cm. Collection of Royal College of Art (RCA_CC722). Digital image courtesy of Royal College of Art, London.

By excluding the perspectives of those in other components of the art support system, the film's approach to its ostensible theme is limited. In particular, the characterisation of the "artistic marketplace" moves towards caricature. The four artist profiles are framed by opening and closing sequences which dramatise the titular "Private View". The programme thus starts with a close-up of a champagne glass (and an accompanying soundtrack of corks popping) before cutting to a painting's-eye view of ogling buyers. The closing sequence returns to the scene: this time we are in an opulent car, the chauffeur checking his watch while, seen through the gallery window, his employer turns to buying art. The symbolism is clear: we viewers are outside this world of luxury consumption, positioned instead alongside the artist—and the chauffeur—as subjects of a secret operation between the gallery and the buyer; the television camera has given us the opportunity to

peer in, but only to end by emphasising our continued exclusion. This gesture of sympathy with the artist means, however, that the concrete ways in which the market shapes artistic production and careers (and the factors which shape demand in that market) are mystified rather than explored. This was a point felt by at least one contemporary viewer, the poet and critic Hilary Corke, writing *The Listener's* weekly television review and stating bluntly: "why and how had these four, out of so many, been picked by the galleries for promotion? Some answer to this question had been implicitly promised by the terms of reference . . . But of the mysterious leap from private studio to public gallery, nothing." ⁷⁹

In its content and grammar "Private View" thus constructs a position for itself on the outside of art's commercial institutions. However, the production file for the film makes clear both the close relationship between programme makers and their art market colleagues and the extent to which artists and dealers had come to recognise television as itself an agent shaping that market. Potential participants in the programme were nominated by exhibiting institutions (both private galleries and artists' societies, such as the Artists International Association) at the request of the production team, and the shape of the film (including the linking theme of the first solo exhibition and the private view) emerged from these contacts and the suggestions made. Equally the participants themselves recognised the potency of television in creating a market for their work. Ahead of a repeat of the programme in August 1962, one of the artists wrote to the producers asking that a note be included to publicise a forthcoming show at the New Art Centre, London; a request that was refused.

The mutual dependence between artists, commercial galleries and arts television comes across with particular force, however, in archival material on the development of another *Monitor* film, "A Sense of Order", broadcast on 10 November 1963, on the mature artist Edward Bawden. The origins of the piece are in informal contacts between David Jones, for *Monitor*, and the director of the Zwemmer Gallery in London, Michael Chase (and references to meetings in the archived correspondence suggest wide and frequent contact). ⁸⁰ Written notes from Chase in 1962 floated a number of ideas for features on artists connected with Zwemmer, but not, at the start, Bawden; Chase was, in fact, initially keen to follow-up *Monitor's* 1958 piece on John Bratby. However, once the idea for a Bawden film emerged, Chase was explicit that he saw it as a commercial opportunity, writing to Jones on the 18 December 1962 that the timing looked promising given a planned Bawden show in the autumn of the next year and expressing the hope that the broadcast might coincide with it. This was a view echoed by Bawden himself in the summer of 1963, when both filming and the Zwemmer show were delayed but their synchronicity maintained. After the broadcast, Chase

expressed himself very pleased with the resulting interest around the exhibition; in writing a thank you letter to Jones on 17 November, he noted how the visiting public to Zwemmer were all talking about the programme.⁸¹

Conclusion

Whilst television had been affecting attendance at public galleries since at least 1953, the explicit interest in current events embodied in *Monitor's* magazine show format extended the potential for such real-world impacts. The correspondence within the *Monitor* production files shows that by the turn of the 1960s television was a significant player in the promotion of commercial exhibitions and of artists, and one which other institutions, notably commercial galleries, were prepared to court. Television had established itself as an important component of, in Margaret Garlake's phrase, the "art support system", and as such became a necessary part of the social history of post-war British art.

In exercising such market power, television was operating on territory previously occupied largely by print-based critics (who also provided many of the voices to be heard on radio). Yet the evidence of the three *Monitor* programmes considered in this article shows the production team creating programmes which adopt a stance quite different to that of traditional print critics. In these films television positioned itself for the viewer as a fellow outsider to art's institutions and, in particular, to the business of selling pictures. Moreover it acted as a non-combatant in critical debate, even when changing critical ideas were fundamental to understanding the careers of its subjects.⁸² Wheldon's introduction to his *Monitor* anthology, occasional comments in the production files, and the selection of "Painter in Wales" to go to the Venice Film Festival all suggest that the primary motivation for this approach was a particular conception of what made a good presentation of visual art for television (the sense of parable, the presentation of the camera as an extension of the viewer's eye) which picked up on aspects of John Read's television films of the 1950s.

This did not mean that *Monitor* abandoned other previous approaches to visual art on television which were aligned more closely to print and radio precedents. On 3 July 1960, as one example, John Berger and Douglas Cooper presented a programme segment on Picasso, to coincide with a Tate retrospective. As films, the surviving *Monitor* material is likely to under-represent such critic-led programmes, which are more obviously suited to the studio. Nonetheless, the programme listing at [Appendix 1](#) indicates that material such as the three films considered in this article were a core part of *Monitor's* output, a point reinforced by Basil Taylor's criticism of the show,

quoted earlier, where his bracketing of it with Read's films and characterisation of its output as too highly polished suggests just this approach. For Taylor, *Monitor* had cemented a new and unfortunate trend.

In reviewing critical responses to Francis Bacon, David Alan Mellor describes a "promotional culture" which remade the British art scene from the late 1950s. This trend reached maturity, he suggests, in March 1963 with the broadcast of David Sylvester's Third Programme interview with Bacon through which "the age of the artist-celebrity broadcast interview had commenced."⁸³ Whilst the initial Sylvester-Bacon interview was thus transmitted on the radio, the examination of *Monitor* presented here suggests that television, as it extended its audience and its formats, was also a contributor to this remaking of visual art's relationship with the media, with emphasis shifting from openly-argued criticism to a biographical orientation, even as television remained shy about its own impact on art markets and institutions.

Footnotes

- 1 *Panorama* was launched in 1953 and emphasised investigative journalism (though still broadcast, it no longer uses the magazine format); *Tonight* followed in 1957, mixing a range of items from current affairs and science to light-hearted pieces and topical songs.
- 2 BBC Written Archive Centre: *Monitor* General Production File, T32/937, undated. (For BBC Written Archive material used throughout this article, all rights reserved). As it matured *Monitor* experimented with new formats, including single-film programmes such as Ken Russell's dramatised biopic of Elgar and John Schlesinger's *Private View* which is discussed in the article. Whilst producers aspired to a regular time slot as part of the series' identity, this proved difficult to achieve, as witnessed by their increasingly irate notes to senior BBC staff.
- 3 See Tony Currie, *A Concise History of British Television 1930-2000* (Tiverton: Kelly, 2000), 35. Initially this choice was available in London only.
- 4 For the impact of television see David Kynaston, *Family Britain, 1951-57* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 464-65, 670-71.
- 5 "Editorial," the *Burlington Magazine*, 108, no. 755 (Feb. 1966), 57-59. The exhibition of Dutch works was held at the Royal Academy, the Kokoschka show was at the Tate in 1962.
- 6 *Monitor's* run, from 1958 to 1965, straddles the end point of one common demarcation of the post-war period, as stretching from 1945 to 1960; however, as with any periodisation, joints are fuzzy and I use the term as a matter of convenience.
- 7 Mary M. Irwin, "Monitor: the Creation of the Television Arts Documentary," *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 8, no. 3 (2011): 322-336; in particular Irwin uncovers the role of the *Monitor's* intended producer, Catherine Freeman, prior to the recruitment of Wheldon.
- 8 John Walker, *Arts TV: A History of Arts Television in Britain* (London: John Libbey, 1993), 45-50; John Wyver, *Vision On: Film, Television and the Arts in Britain* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 27-31.
- 9 Margaret Garlake, *New Art New World: British Art in Postwar Society* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1998); James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War 1945-1960* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2001).
- 10 John Wyver, "The Filmic Fugue of Ken Russell's Pop Goes the Easel," *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 14, no. 4 (2016): 438-451.
- 11 Garlake, *New Art New World*, 4.
- 12 Garlake, *New Art New World*, 10.
- 13 See Garlake, *New Art New World*, 40-41; Hyman, *The Battle for Realism*, 7.
- 14 Pevsner's Reith Lectures are available online from BBC Radio 4 at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00h9llv>.
- 15 For "promotional culture" see David Alan Mellor, "Framing Bacon: Reception and Representation from Little Magazine to TV Screen, 1945-1966" in Ysanne Holt and David Alan Mellor, eds., *Bacon Reframed: A Themed Issue on Francis Bacon* (Taylor & Francis: Abingdon and New York, 2009) (= *Visual Culture in Britain*, 10 (3))
- 16 A history of the visual arts on television before 1962 is given in Wyver, "The Filmic Fugue", 440-443.

- 17 *Radio Times*. Issue 683 (30 Oct. 1936): 89; Issue 703 (19 March 1937): 51.
- 18 *Radio Times*. Issue 697 (8 Feb. 1937): 47; Issue 701 (8 March 1937): 51; Issue 703 (19 March 1937) 50. As a sculptor Lady Kennet is better known as Kathleen Scott. Pearl Binder, who also made a later episode on fashion, was a founder, in 1933, of the left-aligned Artists International Association.
- 19 *Radio Times*. Issue 739 (3 Dec. 1937): 18; Issue 741 (10 Dec. 1937): 21.
- 20 *Radio Times*. Issue 746 (14 Jan. 1938): 17.
- 21 *Radio Times*. Issue 695 (22 Jan. 1937): 49 and Issue 816 (19 May 1939); *The Listener*, Issue 543 (8 June 1939): 1191-95 and 1223. The *Radio Times* synopsis of *Traditional versus Modern Art*, giving a feel for its format, is as follows: "A debate with Sir William Rothenstein in the chair. Examples of the work of Braque, Picasso, Matisse, Cézanne, Paul Nash, McKnight Kauffer, Klee, Dali, and Wadsworth will be shown and compared with pictures painted by Laura Knight, Russell Flint, Lamorna Birch, Frank Brangwyn, Burne-Jones, Alma-Tadema, and Watts, and distinguished artists and critics in the studio will put forward arguments for and against them."
- 22 See John Wyver, "Television," in Chris Stephens and John-Paul Stonard, eds., *Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation* (London: Tate, 2014), 123-131, 126 and 129.
- 23 *Radio Times*. Issue 1458 (24 October 1951): Page 50.
- 24 Wyver, "The Filmic Fugue", 441.
- 25 See *Radio Times*. Issue 1262 (23 Dec. 1947): 34.
- 26 The Art Council co-productions included profiles of Graham Sutherland (1953), Walter Sickert (1954) and John Piper (1955) and the thematic films *Artists Must Live* (1953) and *Black on White* (1954). Arts Council films are available via an .ac.uk domain from <http://artsonfilm.wmin.ac.uk>
- 27 Extracts from John Read's documentary *Henry Moore* are available online from the BBC at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0069slp/clips>.
- 28 For Read's films see Wyver, *Vision On*, 17-23.
- 29 Quoted in Mary M. Irwin, "*Monitor: The Creation of the Television Arts Documentary*," 326. As noted, art exhibitions had been covered previously, but through occasional, ad hoc programming. This gap was also felt by outsiders, Peter Black in the *Daily Mail* wrote after the first programme, "A magazine of the arts fills a vacuum that has existed for too long in television," *Daily Mail*, Issue 19218 (3 Feb. 1958): 10.
- 30 Mary Irwin provides an assessment of Miller's reorientation of *Monitor*; see Irwin, "*Monitor: The Creation of the Television Arts Documentary*," 332-35.
- 31 Clips from Ken Russell's documentaries for *Monitor* are available online from the BFI at <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1030022/index.html>.
- 32 BBC Written Archive Centre: "Pop Goes the Easel" Production File, T32/1021. Other programme files consulted in this research do not include such a report; the reference to a *Monitor* average "reaction index", however, implies such reports were compiled.
- 33 The report states that the programme received an estimated twenty-six percent of the "Band I" audience. This seems likely to be a socio-demographic stratification, but no definition is given.
- 34 BBC Written Archive Centre: *Monitor* General Production File, T32/937; *Radio Times*. Issue 2072 (29 July 1963): 21; *Daily Mail*, issue 19409 (15 September 1958), no page number.
- 35 See Walker, *Arts TV*, 46. Walker estimates that twenty-one percent of content was given over to theatre, seventeen percent to music, twelve percent to literature, seven percent to ballet and opera and six percent to cinema.
- 36 Irwin refers to a "full programme schedule" for *Monitor* recorded by the production assistant Anne James which is held privately.
- 37 BBC Written Archive Centre: *Monitor* programme index cards; BFI Collections Search, <http://collections-search.bfi.org.uk/web>.
- 38 Defined by the relevant artist(s) having been alive within twelve months of the programme's broadcast. In using "contemporary *British* art" as a category I am not making an argument about an innately national tradition; rather this reflects the historical reality of the 1950s and 1960s in which the social context for the production and reception of art (that is the institutions of the art support system) was organised at the national (and local) level, as was television, delivered through national and regional broadcasters. "Visual art" was a category coming under strain at this period: the impact on classifying *Monitor* content is limited, though I have excluded a short piece on the musician and performance artist Bruce Lacey from 20 May 1962.
- 39 Quoted in Irwin, "*Monitor: the creation of the television arts documentary*," 333.
- 40 Huw Wheldon, *Monitor: An Anthology* (London: Macdonald, 1962), 13.
- 41 Wheldon, *Monitor*, 11.
- 42 *Tempo* was initially edited by Kenneth Tynan. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive listing of programme contents and only very limited *Tempo* material survives (the BFI holds some but none relates to the visual arts; a DVD was produced by Network in 2013 and includes *Painter at Work*, a piece by Peter Newington on Graham Sutherland (8 Apr. 1962) and *The Medium-Sized Cage* created by recent RCA graduates (31 March 1963). For this reason alone, *Tempo* is not considered further here.

- 43 Basil Taylor, "The Presentation of the Visual Arts," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 109, no. 5064 (1961), 942-953, 944.
- 44 Taylor, "Presentation," 949.
- 45 Taylor, "Presentation," 947.
- 46 Irwin, "Monitor: The Creation of the Television Arts Documentary," 322, suggests that just four hours survives from across all *Monitor's* themes, though this may be something of an underestimate.
- 47 On Russell's film preservation see Michael Brooke, "Ken Russell: The *Monitor* Years," BFI Screenonline, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1030022/index.html>. Wheldon referred to Russell as "the most original, unpredictable mind among us," see Wheldon, *Monitor*, 13. Programme segments not produced on film were broadcast live and not, in general, preserved in recordings.
- 48 Principal research access to BBC film material is via the British Film Institute (BFI) National Film and Television Archive. Thirteen *Monitor* items on the visual arts were identified in the Archive (and forty-seven on other subjects). Six of these are by Russell. One of the Russell films, "Scottish Painters", is considered below. Three are concerned with the artist as amateur (the films on Cheshier and Lloyd and "Always on Sunday" (1965) in which Lloyd stars as Henri Rousseau). A theme of eccentricity also permeates "A House in Battersea" (1961) about an elderly Pre-Raphaelite collector. The final Russell film is the programme-length "Pop Goes the Easel" (1962). Of the seven other programme segments held by the BFI, "Private View" and two pieces featuring Michael Ayrton are discussed below. Two, "The Middle Class Magician" and "Cheese!", are from *Monitor's* final episode in 1965. "A Line on Satire" (1958) is about the art of political cartoons (paralleling John Read's BBC/Arts Council film, "Black on White" from 1954). The historical subject piece *Dürer* is from 1961. A limited and changing set of material, aimed at a broader audience, is on the BBC website under various headings, for example, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00dtyvd/episodes/player>. It is hard to verify the precise scope of surviving material: for example, in August 2015 the BBC made available a *Monitor* film on pop artist Joe Tilson (1964), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02wky7t>, not available via the BFI; a copy of "George Chapman: Painter in Wales" is held by the Fry Art Gallery (purchased from the BBC).
- 49 See Michael Brooke, "Scottish Painters (1959)." At BFI Screenonline, no date, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/935980/index.html>.
- 50 For the biographies of Colquhoun and MacBryde see Patrick Elliott with Adrian Clark and Davy Brown, *The Two Roberts: Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBryde* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2014), 50-52 (for their personal relationship,) 29 (for their friendship with Adler).
- 51 For the extent and limits of Colquhoun's familiarity with Adler see Adrian Clark, "The Reputation and Achievement of Robert Colquhoun: A Reassessment," *The British Art Journal* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 77.
- 52 That the paintings are complete may be a fiction; the painting Colquhoun is shown working on in the film is identified in Elliott, *The Two Roberts*, 77, as *Circus Woman* (Fig. 9), now in the City Art Centre, Edinburgh and MacBryde's as *Still Life with Melon* (private collection) (Fig. 10).
- 53 See Clark, "The Reputation and Achievement of Robert Colquhoun," 80.
- 54 Quoted in Elliott, *The Two Roberts*, 32.
- 55 Le Roux Smith Le Roux, "Twentyfive Years of British Painting", *The Listener*, issue 1166 (5 July 1951): 17.
- 56 For the impact of alcoholism see Elliott, *The Two Roberts*, 57.
- 57 See Clark, "The reputation and achievement of Robert Colquhoun," 77-78; Sylvester quoted in Hyman, *The Battle for Realism*, 135.
- 58 See John Walker, *Cultural Offensive: America's Impact on British Art since 1945* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 50-53; Clark, "The Reputation and Achievement of Robert Colquhoun," 80.
- 59 See Elliott, *The Two Roberts*, 77.
- 60 BBC Written Archive Centre, "Scottish Painters", T32/959, 3 November 1959.
- 61 See Robert Meyrick, *George Chapman* (Uppingham: Goldmark Gallery, 1992), 10-13.
- 62 By the date of the broadcast, Jones was also producing a play at the Tavistock theatre and this went on to be the core of his career, including a period with the RSC in the 1970s.
- 63 Wheldon also showed a continuing commitment to Chapman's work, opening a one-man show at the Reynolds Gallery, Plymouth in 1981, after a lengthy hiatus in Chapman's artistic career (see the obituary by Robert Meyrick, reprinted in University of Aberystwyth, School of Art Collections, on-line catalogue: <http://museum.aber.ac.uk/collections-artistcollections-georgechapman-obituary.php>).
- 64 BBC Written Archive Centre, "George Chapman", T32/991, 22 November 1960.
- 65 Wheldon, *Monitor*, 170.
- 66 BBC Written Archive Centre, "George Chapman", T32/991, 8 December 1960.
- 67 Meyrick, *George Chapman*, 18-19. There is no direct evidence for why material was edited out of the broadcast, but it is striking that almost half the excised commentary relates to critical debates, and this removed the majority of such material; at the least a decision was made to remove content that might, from a different perspective, be considered amongst the most interesting.
- 68 See Garlake, *New Art New World*, 40; round two was largely fought out through the *New Statesman*.

- 69 Lawrence Alloway, "Round the London Galleries", *The Listener*, issue 1486 (19 Sept. 1957): 427. As noted earlier, gallery round-ups had also been a feature of television, but had disappeared by the 1960s; in 1966, in an evaluation of the state of television's visual arts coverage, Michael Billington's primary complaint was the absence of just such a critical round-up of new exhibitions; "Art on Television", the *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 108 no. 762 (Sept. 1966): 490.
- 70 Dated 20 Jan. 1958; BBC Written Archive Centre, *Monitor* General Production File, T32/937. Both Sylvester and Berger were active participants in the "abstract versus realism" debate; making their rejection from the proposal a clear turn away from live contemporary concerns. Read is, however, a sophisticated voice and also proposed a regular staged confrontation between critics: a "what the critics say" along the lines of "what the papers say"; this idea was not pursued.
- 71 BBC Written Archive Centre, *Monitor* General Production File, T32/937; item one for the meeting was "Huw Wheldon's suit." It is also possible that the principal concern for the *Monitor* team was avoiding the current affairs territory of *Panorama* and *Tonight*.
- 72 BBC Written Archive Centre, *Monitor* General Production File, T32/937, note dated 20 Feb. 1958.
- 73 BBC Written Archive Centre: *Monitor* General Production File, T32/937, undated.
- 74 See Appendix 1.
- 75 BBC Written Archive Centre, "Private View", T32/971, undated.
- 76 Of the four, Wishaw and Lawson went on to have successful art careers, being elected as full Royal Academicians in 1989 and 1991 respectively. Howie too continued as a professional painter until his death in 2011 (see *The Scotsman*, 4 Aug. 2011, <http://www.scotsman.com/news/obituaries/obituary-james-howie-painter-and-dancer-1-1777965>). I have found no further evidence of Rawlinson's career.
- 77 BBC Written Archive Centre, "Private View", T32/971, undated.
- 78 A concern over popular reaction is prominent in Wheldon's introduction to programme segments; for example, he prefaces a 1958 piece on John Bratby, "This is a painting by John Bratby. It hangs in the Tate Gallery, where there are several more of his paintings, paid for, of course, as usual, by you and me. . . . Some people think that he's marvellous, others think he's wasting his time and ours." (BBC Written Archive Centre: *Monitor* scripts (introductions), 16 March 1958).
- 79 Hilary Corke, "Critic on the Hearth: Orthodox Heretics", *The Listener*, issue 1625 (16 May 1960): 898.
- 80 BBC Written Archive Centre, "A Sense of Order", T32/1057.
- 81 BBC Written Archive Centre, "A Sense of Order", T32/1057, 17 November 1963. David Jones' letters following "Painter in Wales" also make jocular reference to the commercial benefits of the programme; writing to Kate Chapman on 12 June 1961 he says, in the context of its showing at Venice, "let's hope lots of rich Italians start writing to George for pictures when they've seen it" (BBC Written Archive Centre, "George Chapman", T32/991, 12 June 1961).
- 82 This absence of engagement with contemporary critical debate might also account for the lack of attention paid to television in the existing art history of the period, which has often been focussed on that debate.
- 83 Mellor, "Framing Bacon", 232. Their first televised encounter was "Fragments of a Portrait", directed by Michael Gill and broadcast on 18 Sept. 1966.

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Snapshots from No Man's Land

Pippa Oldfield

Abstract

No Man's Land: Women's Photography and the First World War is a national touring exhibition curated by Pippa Oldfield of Impressions Gallery in Bradford, and co-produced with Bristol Cathedral, The Turnpike, and Bishop Auckland Town Hall, supported by Arts Council England Strategic Touring. The exhibition was held at Impressions Gallery between October and December 2017 and tours to the venues mentioned above in 2018 and 2019. In this Cover Collaboration, Pippa Oldfield reflects on curating an exhibition of war photography by women and the research involved in recovering the work and experiences of women photographers.

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In 1914, a war correspondent working under the auspices of the British Army published a collection of stories in which the phrase “No Man’s Land” appeared for the first time. The author, Lt. Col. Ernest Dunlop Swinton, had recently returned from the Western Front where he witnessed “that wilderness of dead bodies—the dreadful ‘No-Man’s-Land’ between the opposing lines”.¹ The term No Man’s Land, signifying a desolate wasteland or indeterminate territory, became widely used during the conflict. The term is still being used a hundred years later, although its meaning has expanded beyond the context of war to indicate any area that is unclaimed, barren, or ill-defined. It became a pertinent metaphor for me when researching and planning an exhibition of women’s war photography. Much of that material is virtually unknown, and has conventionally been treated as peripheral to the canonical aesthetics of war photography, which emphasise combat action.

Most people tend to have a specific idea of war photography as something made on the battlefield by a risk-taking photojournalist: a very masculine, even macho, undertaking. Women’s contributions do not fit neatly into this genre. Due to professional, educational, and cultural reasons, women have been less likely than men to venture into combat zones, either as photographers or soldiers.² In 1917, the British military admitted women in auxiliary roles, but the ban on women undertaking close combat roles was not lifted until 2016. Consequently, women’s participation in war has been less thoroughly documented than that of men. I wanted to draw attention to women’s experiences and viewpoints in the exhibition.

My approach as a curator has been to bring historical material into dialogue with contemporary photographic practice. The show features three historical photographers—Mairi Chisholm, Florence Farmborough, and Olive Edis—and three contemporary artists—Alison Baskerville, Dawn Cole, and Chloe Dewe Mathews. I was interested in seeing continuities and connections across the century, and exploring how gender issues and the legacies of the First World War might affect us today. For this reason, the photographers featured in the exhibition are not separated into “then” and “now”, but placed as if they were in conversation with each other. Rather than attempt an exhaustive survey of women’s photography from or about the First World War, I chose six powerful bodies of work by six women working on different topics from distinct viewpoints. Their work explores an array of themes and approaches—portraiture and women’s work; public and private histories; landscape and memory—and ranges from France and Belgium to Russia and Afghanistan. Collectively, their work demonstrates that war photography can be an incredibly broad endeavour, made by anyone who has something to say on the subject of war.

This *Cover Collaboration* focuses on pictures from photo albums made by Mairi Chisholm (1896–1981), a volunteer first-aid worker at the Western Front.³ Their digital publication here allows an opportunity to reflect on Chisholm’s photography, as well as present unpublished material that was not included in the exhibition. Chisholm was just eighteen when she volunteered as a driver for The Flying Ambulance Corps, a medical unit in Belgium, along with Elsie Knocker, whom she had met on the British competitive motorcycling circuit. Knocker, a forceful and brilliant woman in her thirties, recognised that many injured soldiers were dying of shock while waiting to be transferred to hospitals. She and Chisholm decided to set up their own independent first-aid post just yards from the trenches, initially in the cellar of a bombed-out house in Pervyse, a village in West Flanders. Over the course of the next few years, they ran several first-aid posts in abandoned buildings in the area, serving the Belgian Army in an entirely voluntary capacity.



Figure 1.

John Hassall, *The Kodak Girl*, 1910, advertisement poster for Kodak cameras. Digital image courtesy of National Science and Media Museum/Science & Society Picture Library (All rights reserved).

Like many other female volunteers going overseas, Chisholm took a camera to record her experiences. Snapshot photography, made possible by cheap, lightweight, and easy-to-operate cameras such as the Kodak Brownie introduced in 1888, had become hugely popular with women prior to the War. Photography was marketed as a suitably feminine pastime through advertisements featuring the Kodak Girl (Fig. 1).⁴ This chic and modern figure used her camera to record her adventures and travels, encouraging women to make photographs in which their own viewpoints were central.

The pictures made by women working on the Western Front, however, seldom resembled the pleasant seaside strolls and motor excursions envisaged by the Kodak adverts. Chisholm's images record her intense life under fire and are startling in their range, veering from humorous and

domestic to graphic and disturbing. Freed from the restrictions imposed upon British soldiers and press photographers, Chisholm recorded the corpses and casualties of war, which were rarely seen in newspapers of the period.

But Chisholm also demonstrated a mischievous sense of fun and vitality: a kind of gallows humour. Some of her most striking and unusual images show her friends and colleagues passing time in the tense interim between offensives. She captured “Gypsy” (her nickname for Elsie Knocker) pulling faces and peeking over walls. She photographed colleagues in a makeshift playground constructed by soldiers: the see-saw became a rite of passage for visiting top brass who rarely experienced bullets flying over their heads. Pets were clearly important to Chisholm, and many of her photographs record the antics of cats and dogs—such as Dunkie, Gros Gris, and Shot—that shared her temporary homes in bombed-out buildings. She also seems to have been friends with a number of African soldiers from the French and Belgian colonies, perhaps sharing an affinity for being “out of place” in a world dominated by white men.



Figure 2. Unidentified photographer, possibly Elsie Knocker, "Self and Jean-Batiste", Mairi Chisholm with Jean Batiste, a Belgian Congolese soldier, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 3.
Mairi Chisholm, "Winkie Spaight" Irene "Winkie" Gartside-Spaight in No Man's Land, ca.1916. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 4.

Mairi Chisholm, "Helen Gleason, Pervyse 1914", Gleason, posing with a snapshot camera, met Chisholm while working for Dr Munro's Flying Ambulance Corps, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 5.

Mairi Chisholm, "Gypsy", Chisholm's nickname for Elsie Knocker, Pervyse, 1915. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 6.

Mairi Chisholm, "Lt. Aertz, Gypsy and Dr Lejeune", Elsie Knocker and two Belgian soldiers, Pervyse, 1917. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 7.

Mairi Chisholm, "Dunkie and Gros Gris", Pervyse, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

Chisholm later compiled a number of photo-albums, which are now conserved in the National Library of Scotland (Figs. 8, 9, 10)⁵ The collision of material in these albums—corpses and exploding shells juxtaposed with gramophones and rowing boats—perfectly reflects the incongruities of her life. Her diary records,

I don't think I shall ever forget my life at Pervyse, it is all so strange and weird and at times so lonely, and yet there are moments when you forget everything and laugh and giggle like children.⁶

Not all the images that Chisholm carefully captioned and pasted into the pages were made by her. Pairs of images depict Chisholm and Knocker in identical settings, indicating that Chisholm passed her camera to her colleague to register her own presence at the scene. She also collected photographs made by others: one such snapshot shows her in a rowing boat nicknamed “the Punt at Henley”, another example of the ways in which soldiers and volunteers made the best of incredibly hard circumstances. Such muddled authorship would trouble traditional art historians, but I argue that questions of attribution are not necessarily useful or even relevant in this case. Whether Chisholm herself took the photograph, asked someone else to make it on her behalf, or collected it from a third party, her albums demonstrate a clear engagement with her material and the creation of a narrative in which her own viewpoints and experiences are central. Although we cannot know Chisholm’s motivations for compiling the albums it is likely that—like many other women and men after the First World War—she intended them as tools of remembrance that might vividly recall the extraordinary events of wartime, years later.⁷



[View this illustration online](#)

Figure 8.

Mairi Chisholm, Double-page spread from one of Mairi Chisholm's photo-albums, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



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Figure 9.

Mairi Chisholm, Double-page spread from one of Mairi Chisholm's photo-albums, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



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Figure 10.

Mairi Chisholm, Double-page spread from one of Mairi Chisholm's photo-albums, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 11.

Unidentified photographer, Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm on the cover of Home Chat magazine, 13 April 1918. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

Although she began making photographs for her own interest, Chisholm soon put them to good use in the UK, promoting the work of the two women to raise funds for their medical work. A number of bulging albums of press cuttings have survived, attesting to the growing celebrity of the two women, who became known as “The Madonnas of Pervyse” and appeared in national newspapers in France, Belgium, and Britain (Fig. 11). Chisholm and Knocker were also photographed by official war photographers and press photographers.⁸ These images tend to be formal and posed, and very different from the personal and anarchic character of Chisholm’s own photo albums. For the *No Man’s Land* exhibition, I wanted to convey Chisholm’s own experience of war, and so the images on display have all been

reproduced directly from her photo albums. The exhibition also includes facsimiles of the pages themselves, revealing how she sequenced and captioned her images.

One of the most extraordinary photographs made by Mairi Chisholm shows a woman standing atop a burnt-out tank, wrapped in a heavy coat caught by a gust of wind. It became the signature image of the *No Man's Land* exhibition, even though, like a number of other photographs I included, it had never before been publicly shown or published. At first the identity of the woman was a mystery but by deciphering the caption in Chisholm's photo album, and with the help of Professor Alison Fell at University of Leeds and Catherine Shanahan at Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, we were able to identify her as Irene Gartside-Spaight, known to her friends as "Winkie", who was a volunteer at the Western Front. This striking image of Spaight surveying No Man's Land is an apt metaphor for the recovery of women's histories through their photographs, and for the compelling ways in which women have persistently surveyed and commented upon the effects and experiences of war. Chisholm and her colleagues not only depicted No Man's Land in a literal sense, but their work also demonstrates that the terrain of war photography has long been occupied by women.

Footnotes

- ¹ The term appears in a short story called "The Point of View" in *The Green Curve and Other Stories* by Ole Luk-Oie (Lt. Col. Ernest Dunlop Swinton), published in 1914 by Garden City New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, p.243.
- ² I discuss war photography as a gendered practice in greater depth in my doctoral dissertation "Calling the Shots: Women's Photographic Engagement with War in Hemispheric America, 1910-1990", available online at <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk>.
- ³ The albums are conserved in The Chisholm Papers, National Library of Scotland, reference Acc.8006. IWM (Imperial War Museums) holds Chisholm's diary, written between 1914 and 1916, and a number of photographs which are available to view online as part of the Women of Pervyse collection at www.iwm.org.uk/collections. For a period account, see G.E. Mitton (1917) *The Cellar-House of Pervyse: A Tale of Uncommon Things from the Journals and Letters of the Baroness T'Serclaes and Mairi Chisholm*, London: A&C Black. The foremost biography is by Diane Atkinson (2010) *Elsie and Mairi Go to War: Two Extraordinary Women at the Western Front* London: Arrow.
- ⁴ For more on the Kodak Girl, see John P. Jacob, Alison Devine Nordström and Nancy Martha West (2011) *Kodak Girl: From the Martha Cooper Collection*, Göttingen: Steidl. For Kodak marketing campaigns in wartime, see Nancy Martha West (2000) *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia.
- ⁵ The Chisholm Papers, National Library of Scotland, reference Acc.8006.
- ⁶ Cited in Diane Atkinson (2010) *Elsie and Mairi Go to War: Two Extraordinary Women at the Western Front*, London: Arrow, p.72.
- ⁷ There is an outstanding collection of First World War albums, including many by women, in the Liddle Collection, Special Collections, University of Leeds, reference LIDDLE/WW1. Some of these are featured in New Focus (eds) (2017) *No Man's Land: Young People Uncover Women's Viewpoints on the First World War* Bradford: Impressions Gallery. For an excellent discussion of snapshots and albums by male soldiers in the First World War, see Janina Struk *Private Pictures: Soldiers' Inside View of War*, London: I.B. Tauris.
- ⁸ Images of Chisholm and Knocker by British official photographer, Lt. Ernest Brooks can be found in IWM (Imperial War Museums), Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection, available to view online at www.iwm.org.uk/collections.

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