

Dalziel + Scullion: Oystercatchers at Carstairs

The oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus*, will usually lay a clutch of three eggs in a nest scraped from an open patch of sand or shingle. These eggs, in the evocative language of expert ornithologists, are 'cryptic': that is, each has a unique set of dappled markings transferred to the blank shell at birth. These marks, archipelagos of stippled and flaked islets, are created to blend the egg into the specific site and habitat, a beautiful if imperfect camouflage against this ground nesting bird's many predators.

In defence of its young and its territory the oystercatcher is, nevertheless, resilient. Mating for life and returning to the same nesting site year on year, this robustly elegant bird is a common character on seashores throughout the world. In appearance the oystercatcher's striking black back and white underside contrasts with its distinctive long red bill. It is this bill, designed to prize every variety of mollusc and gastropod from the marginal lands along the tideline, that has given the bird its fanciful name. Although it is unlikely the oystercatcher ever has dined on oysters this bill has proven to be surprisingly adept. And so, in recent years, like so many other seabirds, the oystercatcher has migrated inland where it feeds near streams and rivers on earthworms and insects. Likewise its nests and eggs are now found on broken land and gravel banks on rural sites and near to built-up areas.

The ecology of this uncommon common wading bird has become a focus for the most recent project by environmental artists Dalziel + Scullion. For nearly two decades this partnership has explored issues in the ethics of environmental change and the interaction of human kind and nature. In keynote projects like *Drift*, 2001, *Storm*, 2003, *Some Distance from the Sun*, 2006, and, *Speaking the Land*, 2010, they have examined themes of glacial ecology, habitat change, evolutionary biology and narratives of landscape. Moreover they have engaged a multiplicity of media ranging through video, installation, sound and image works, sculpture and lens-based practice. It is this last medium that is the vehicle for their latest project.

Dalziel + Scullion's meditation on the oystercatcher is designed for a commission from The State Hospital at Carstairs. This hyper-secure unit is planned to care for, treat and house 'individuals with mental disorder who, because of their dangerous, violent or criminal propensities, cannot be cared for in any other setting'. The State Hospital, situated in Lanarkshire midway between Glasgow and Edinburgh, has recently undergone a refurbishment that includes substantial elements of new build. The hospital has conformed to a 'green' agenda and has initiated, as far as is possible, a sustainable energy and environmental policy. For all this it is a heavily protected complex and is secured by three borders of security fencing with open land between each perimeter. To the south of this complex the River Clyde wends and coils its way through the landscape where it is nourished by its many feeder streams and burns: notably the River Medwin and the Douglas Water. The proximity of these waterways, and the protected environment of the hospital, has brought the oystercatcher to this inland site. Between the rings of fencing, and in the perimeter environs, this resilient bird has colonised the grounds. Dalziel + Scullion have taken the oystercatcher image from the locale and placed it within the hospital walls.

In practical terms the project involves five light-box images and a large panoramic photograph to be situated in two public spaces within the building. The artists have carefully explored the local ecology, photographed oystercatchers, their nesting sites, and eggs. They have also recognised the predators of these eggs and the neighbouring flocks of aggressive seagulls, now commonly ranging inland and occupying urban spaces. As a counterpoint they have photographed oystercatchers in more traditional habitats, specifically on the island of Lewis in the Western Isles. From this treasure-chest of images Dalziel + Scullion have digitally manipulated scenes and episodes that configure the world of the oystercatchers at Carstairs.

The photographic images themselves are subtle and 'cryptic': the viewpoints are oblique, the narratives allusive and enigmatic, the semiotics enthralling and fugitive. Those images that directly reference the Carstairs complex have a particular resonance. In a keynote photograph oystercatchers are shown pecking for food alongside the perimeter fencing. In the protected environment of the security fence the clover and buttercups thrive and the birds use their long bills to prize worms from the pasture. Typically Dalziel + Scullion have adopted a low viewpoint, looking along the level of the grassland in order to create an intimacy with the world of their subject. This sense of identification with the perspective of the oystercatcher parallels the artists' insistence on countering the scan of the human eye. In their work they have sought to foreground nature and to recognise Nature as the fundamental constant in existence. This is not simply a romantic mysticism, but occupies the territory of a challenging environmentalism. And so, as a counterpoint to the image of oystercatchers with fencing the artists have looked upwards to the roofline of a timber building in the grounds of Carstairs. Here, against a dramatic grey sky, a pair of oystercatchers protect their chick from a marauding seagull. This photograph, all angles and perilous edges, evokes a mood of theatre and danger that speaks to the everyday hazards of the natural world: its nuanced tones of silver and grey a signal of the perennial contest in the natural world, and the ever-present threat of destructive energies. In contrast a more benign photograph from the Carstairs complex presents an oystercatcher attending a young chick, alongside two eggs, on a sand and shingle bank; a scene of extraordinary domestic harmony and natural compassion. In these works, it might be suggested, the fundamental play of life is enacted and the multitude of nature's forces recognised.

As the sweep of the artists' lens moves beyond the immediate boundaries of Carstairs so the horizon broadens. A view of the River Medwin is glimpsed from between the legs of an oystercatcher as the bird rises from a clutch of its speckled eggs, the peculiar 'cryptic' markings occupying the foreground of the photograph and juxtaposed against the pebble beach. The backside and the bird and the fragile legs offer a comic frame for this intimate landscape. In contrast an image of an oystercatcher incongruously perched on a fencepost presents the bird surveying a wheatfield. The horizon line is markedly divided with three trees occupying the right horizon and an industrial conveyor-belt, distributing building aggregate, positioned on the left horizon. The oystercatcher is presented at the centre of this composition appraising the scene. With this work the dialectic of nature and technology is presented in a manner that perfectly encompasses the artists' environmentalist programme.

The final photographic image is a significant contrast, an oystercatcher on the rocky seashore of the Isle of Lewis. Here, in its 'natural' habitat, the bird is viewed against a shoreline of astonishing sea-stacks and wave-weathered rocks. In fact this work relates back to the specific facility at Carstairs. For, where other images are taken within the grounds of the State Hospital and in its immediate environs, this image of the Lewis shoreline echoes the nomenclature of individual units and spaces within the hospital, all named after the islands of Scotland. In some ways this stands as testament to the manner in which Dalziel + Scullion have approached this sensitive commission. Whereas any direct reference to the secure unit is impossible, this mediation on the vicissitudes of nature and environment represents a subtle allusion to life's contingency.

And yet, with this image of an oystercatcher on the Isle of Lewis, the array of photographs turns in a circle from nature to artifice to nature. The axis of this movement is the very core of Dalziel + Scullion's mission. For these are images of permanence and change, of ecological boundaries and man-made fissures, of natural resilience and environmental transformation: a reflective and radical nature poetry in a time of uncertainty.

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