

SOURCE AND PRESENCE

recent artwork by Dalziel + Scullion

On Monday, I knelt and picked up shed peony petals - one by one - from the carpet behind the front door. In carrying the dead stems outside, more petals dropped to the step. I left them there: the slivers of deep red-purple on the rough grey-white of the flagstone looked like blood and looked beautiful.

Tuesday

I sit in the Dundee studio of Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion and watch their latest artwork, a film called 'Source'. Dalziel + Scullion are two artists who have collaborated together in making art - of video, film, sculpture, photography, sound and installation - since 1993 and 'Source' is their latest creation. It continues their invitation to reflect on a new relationship with nature that, while aware of shifting political agendas that surround contemporary environmental issues, beckons us closer and ever deeper into nature itself: a showing more than a telling, of new ways of perceiving, defining, relating to and living in our world.

I consider then, a journey unfolding through a landscape, of a young boy, both seen and seeing, from the edge of the sea and on inland. He is a figure - a form, an image, a story - tiny and immense, familiar and completely different all at the same time. As he wanders this earth, his bright orange jeans look like the exoticness of washed up orange peel glimpsed on rock, in sand, amongst grass and moss, against the bark of gnarled trees. 'The remnants of a once great forest.' In contemplating the world around him his very being becomes part of the matter on which he sits and stands and rests and senses. Somehow his presence brings it shape and scale, perspective, shade and light and meaning. Somehow he completes the beauty; and somehow he is framed by it.

Wednesday

I walked down the brae to the beach. The weather was mixed - not made up its mind yet about whether to be cold or warm, breezy or still, rainy or glorious sunshine. I saw two black slugs and an embryonic bird on the path, fallen from its nest to its death. It had no feathers at all, only translucent skin, but its pale yellow beak was already perfectly formed.

The beach is a shingle one made from material ranging from minute pieces of mustard-yellow, china-blue and cotton-white shells. They grow to larger pebbles, stones and volcanic rock melted together of every shape, size, pattern and colour. Some are smooth and rounded, others bear scars and breaks, some are dull and others shine like rough-edged diamonds. They lie together, all touching. I sat on one like the hide of an animal - a zebra, or maybe a tiger - and remembered that last summer we combed the shore here for skeletons and driftwood.

The sea sucked and dragged and sifted and dredged all the matter of the shore, like it was sucking and dragging and sifting and dredging me. 'Panning for gold.' That sound: I could feel it pulling down - all the way down until it reached my feet and drew me to, and into, earth. I was embedded in the here and now - connected and a part of things. The sea was patched with streaks of sunlight - spots of close encounters. Gulls and terns stood still on the islands. 'Like me.' The beach was framed with arcs of bright orange seaweed marking the sea's margin and they looked like strands of fiery, orang-utan hair.

Thursday

The boy lies curled into black rocks and amongst a million blue mussels. He wriggles, squirming like a small apricot fish or insect, trying 'to see his way through' and 'gaze into' and 'listen to' and 'being still with' and 'becoming the same as' crevices, wells and pools. His hand grabs the rock like a small fleshy crab. 'And flies off again like a little white butterfly.'

Soft, dark hair is ruffled by wind, blown by fragrances from faraway and the health of blood pulses under and through skin like a secret stream. 'Fully alive.' He skips through ice-age boulders and the patch of his freckles echo the patterns of lichen on the stone. Then as he paddles I can hear voices: echoes of swimming pool play. A long-legged spider steps on his hand, synchronising with fingers and a centipede walks the clearing of his cheek, passes close by an ear and heads for a thicket of fringe. Light shadows flow like peacock markings. A snail on henna vegetation waves its yellow eyes. And two red, needle bugs scuttle down cracks in the rocks.

John Muir said: "Everything is hitched to everything else." Yet all retains itself - its true identity: the image (the disclosure) of 'I am' within. The rockscape the boy moves through witnesses past and present movements and clashes of continents and perhaps also visits from other worlds now closeted in this one. 'Violence and protection; benevolence and threat.' These are the bones of a great sleeping creature or the architecture of a long-lost cathedral or the inner dome of an ancient observatory. 'All that beauty falling down on you.' 'Saying, hello, we're here.'

He stands absorbed into the mouth of a great black cave and hears the sound of a rushing train. Then rain, so loud it roots you to the spot. '...with a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of rumour.' These words of Thomas Merton describe rain as speech pouring down, "Selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water, washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside...Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, the rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen." The sound is a mixture of music and song, vibrations and echoes of notes and noises that indicate hidden things as well as those that are plainly seen: the ticks and knocks and hammerings and melodies and calls of birds, animals and insects; the scratchings and growings and buzzings and sappings of plants and undergrowth.

I went back to the beach today. All the orange seaweed had gone.

Friday

The boy stands at the foot of the waterfall. Its long, white mane falls to dark water below creating an icing-sugar monsoon of leaping white dust-prickles: 'Water thorns.' Sharp enough to draw blood. Then speckles of foam appear and float like constellations in a night sky. 'Calling earth to stars.'

The mathematician Bernhard Riemann once said that he didn't invent equations, he found them in the world where they had been hidden. If Dalziel + Scullion uncover rumours of meaning too then perhaps it is not too far fetched a notion to suggest that the earth stories they excavate hitch up with our own earth stories as well. 'As long as it talks, let's listen.'

Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion are Research Fellows at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee. Over the last decade, they have created a body of work that has been recognised for its distinctive vision and sensitivity to its context and the environment. Their work, 'Source', was commissioned to celebrate An Tobar's 10th anniversary and was shown there from 18 May to 30 June 2007.

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