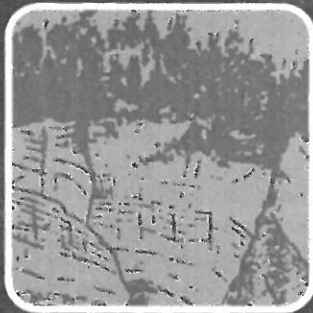




cultural geographies



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Travel projects: landscape, art, movement

Peter Merriman

Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University

Catrin Webster

Independent Artist

In this written exchange we explore our parallel interests in landscape, movement and visuality. One of us (Catrin) is an artist and educator who, for 20 years, has been developing new approaches to landscape; undertaking journeys by foot, bicycle, motorbike, train and van, and articulating her experiences of landscape through paint, photography and film.¹ The other (Pete) is a cultural-historical geographer who is interested in the long history of embodied movements, critical commentaries and aesthetic interventions by drivers, artists, academics, landscape practitioners, dancers, engineers and others who have explored or practised the tensions and relations between landscape, vision, movement and dwelling.² Our modes of expression and intervention are quite different, but in our work both of us have sought to explore the aesthetics, sensations and kinaesthetic dimensions of moving through the landscape. We are both concerned with seeing what landscapes can do, how they can affect us, and how they are practised and worked: when we drive through them, paint them or write about them. In addition, we are both interested in exploring the corporeal mobilities/immobilities and activity/passivity entailed in different kinds of movements and visualities, and Catrin's work has led her to actively engage with and reflect upon the unfolding of different landscapes when travelling.³ In this article we discuss landscape and movement by focusing on Catrin's work over the past 20 years.

Peter Merriman (PM): In a 1997 article in the magazine *Planet* you explain your fascination with the concept of landscape; how, for you, it links together rural and urban scenes, and has a genealogy which takes in classical and picturesque rural scenes, but also impressionist and abstract paintings which express the flux of urban life.⁴ What led you to approach your own artistic projects through the concept of landscape? And how are you trying to rework the concept?

Catrin Webster (CW): In my work I have approached landscape as a poetic construct, which describes a constantly shifting relationship between experience and place. It is never fixed and

does not in itself refer to actual terrain or location. It is the relationship between art – in particular, painting – and place, which is central to my work. I am concerned with the way in which history and memory shape expectations of landscape, how we interact with our environment, and the role art can have in consolidating and communicating experience.

As a painter, my research is primarily based on looking, on what is seen and how that can be interpreted through visual art. But it is not just what is seen that is important, it is also how you see it, what parameters you use, and what conceptual lenses and frameworks are put in place. Working as an artist in the 21st Century, what I see when I study the external world around me is very different from 18th and 19th Century artists such as Wilson, Turner and Constable, and their predecessors Claude and Poussin. Their work and dominant Western traditions of landscape painting have shaped people's expectations of what landscape is and how it should be depicted, and yet I would argue that this conceptual approach to landscape needs to be re-investigated and re-invented. The concept of landscape can no longer only be limited to the rural. It has to encompass the urban, and furthermore it also needs to express our changing relationship to the world around us, when the majority of people in the western world no longer work on the land and terrain is more often crossed by train, car or airplane. As you have shown in your work, landscape is often mediated by the architectures of the car and road,⁵ and my own work has examined how landscape perspectives are refracted through the architectures of the camera, train and van window.⁶ This situation is complicated further as we are developing a parallel space in the form of the internet and other digital media such as the mobile phone, which continues to transform our understanding of, and engagement with the landscape.

PM: Journeys, travel and movement have been at the heart of much of your work for the past 15 years. How did you come to approach landscapes in this way?

CW: The historical idea of a singular, framed landscape does not work well today, when it is more commonplace to observe the landscape from a car or train, or via media such as film and television, all of which are kinetic (Figure 1). Indeed, movement has perhaps always been central to the way in which people experience landscape, and consequently movement has emerged as central to the way in which I consider the notion of landscape. I am currently exploring this via both road and rail travel. I am interested in what is seen and in generating techniques for both refracting and articulating that experience; forming a visual language to describe and communicate that experience. What we see and how that may be depicted in painting is a huge problem, and my journeys through the landscape enable me to explore different artistic approaches. For example,



FIGURE 1 Mobile phone photograph taken while travelling through the Welsh landscape, 2005.

in 2004 I was awarded a Creative Wales Award to convert my Ford Transit van into a mobile studio and work-space which I used to spend extended periods living and painting in urban and rural landscapes (Figure 2). More recently, between 2005 and 2007, I was lead artist in 'The Travel Project', working as part of a creative team with three schools – one in Birmingham, two in rural west Wales – to explore children's experiences of rural and urban landscapes.⁷ The children travelled by train between Aberystwyth and Birmingham, visiting their host schools and a selection of rural or urban sites/sights – e.g. a beach and farm in Wales, and the Bull Ring Shopping Centre in Birmingham. The journey was itself important to the project, as the children used the railway carriages as mobile studios, developing their own methods of recording the journey using photographs, drawings and text (Figure 3).

PM: In discussing some of your paintings and collages which arose following journeys around London in the early 1990s you have described how they emerged from a desire to produce something tangible or coherent from your urban journeys; tangible records which contrasted with more ephemeral pieces you had been previously working on. At the same time you have described how these paintings were not approached in a representational manner, and how the embodied movement of painting itself refracts your movement through the landscape. How do you see the relationship between the representational and non-representational, and movement and fixity, as it is expressed in your artistic practice and your landscape paintings?

CW: I began recording journeys via photographs which I then montaged together to make a consolidated image of a place. This was a frustrating process because these montages were composed of visual fragments and only ever related to small aspects of a place. I turned to



FIGURE 2 Working in Snowdonia with my mobile studio PAM (Phenomenon of Artistic Mobility), 2004–05.



FIGURE 3 Drawing the landscape from the train between Birmingham and Aberystwyth. Children from Holy Family School Birmingham, working as part of *The Travel Project* in 2005, using acetate transparencies attached to the train window. Photograph by Cath Sherrell.

painting as it is the medium in which I feel most happy to explore the nature of landscape, my being in it and moving around it. Journeys through and in landscape are 'kinaesthetic', and this property is paralleled in the physical and tactile practice of painting.

In 1989 and 1990 I made a number of one and two day walks in mid-Wales. During the course of the walks I would stop and draw or paint. At times I would use only materials that were available in the locality: soil, plant pigments and sticks. These drawings were collated into 'Walk Books' which formed the basis for much larger studio paintings (Figure 4).

Movement is a continuous problem to deal with in painting. A painting is a static image, but the construction of a painting is performative. During my time in London in the early 1990s, painting became very difficult. I wanted to make a break from the more expressive, thickly-worked canvasses I had painted, in order to reconstruct the experience of walking through the Welsh landscape. In these works the visceral quality of the paint was used to create a painterly experience that paralleled the actual landscape. For a while I couldn't paint at all, and spent more time undertaking journeys. When I did begin to paint again I gave up on using brushes or tools which would link my paintings with traditional techniques of painting. Instead, I applied paint to the surface of the canvas using as little direct intervention as possible. I call this my 'test card' phase, as the paintings had all the elements necessary to create an image but denied the image. These were paintings about paint. The paint was poured, allowing gravity to draw the pigmented liquid down the surface. Over a period of time this process became very meditative, as I produced image after image, image painted over image, layer upon layer of poured paint. These paintings



FIGURE 4 'Walk Painting', Mid-Wales, oil on canvas, 195cm x 195cm, 1990.

were approximately 8' x 8' and, logistically, they were quite hard to make. They were physical but not expressionistic. The meditative nature of the painting allowed the process to dissolve, becoming automatic, and thus I was able to shift my focus from the conceptual properties of paint to the journeys I had been making around London. Now remembered movements around the city were played out on the surface. Sometimes the surface was like the hard glass of a window, between me and the world. I would breathe on it as I had done the glass; it would fog. The process of painting repeated the journey around the city. These were performance paintings whose end image only revealed part of an event which had taken place on the surface. Painting for me was and is a performance-based activity, as well as providing a record of my memories and experiences (Figure 5).

PM: Over the past two decades your approach to landscape has been bound up with a range of technologies and visual media, including the technologies of video and painting but also the technologies of transportation, all of which enable different visualities (e.g. the visualities afforded by train windows, van windscreens, TV screens etc.). Have you used technologies such as video



FIGURE 5 Painting in the landscape. Photograph by Hannah Mann (hannahmann83@googlemail.com).

because they convey different aesthetics of landscape, they can refract movement differently, or articulate different experiences?

CW: For me the use of different media when trying to record or express some experience of landscape is as much about the development of painting language as it is to do with trying to capture a particular landscape aesthetic. I have been concerned about the many claims that painting is 'dead' which have been made since the invention of photography in the 1840s. Digitization of photography is a very exciting development in relation to painting, as the process – though extremely technical – relates more to processes of painting than to those of wet photography. A digital image is comprised of a digital store of colours which can be manipulated in any way you want. You can even use the digital information from a portrait to make a landscape – and so on and so forth. The potential to manipulate light and colour, and to deconstruct form is very much the language of painting. Furthermore, the relationship between painting and digital images was made very apparent when I began to use my mobile phone video recorder to make films (Figures 1 and 6). Because the images are so pixilated, when slowed down they demonstrate how each frame is constructed from blocks of colours. Light is key, as it is fundamental to both painting and photography, and these films often remind me of Turner paintings. For me such technologies are important because they are accessible to all and form part of a contemporary way of looking at landscape. The mobile phone is especially important as a means to create a snapshot of a particular place, providing another window on the world. There's another dimension too, in that these images, once digitized, can be uploaded on to the internet, becoming part of a global portfolio of local landscape experience mediated by the digital process. This changes not just

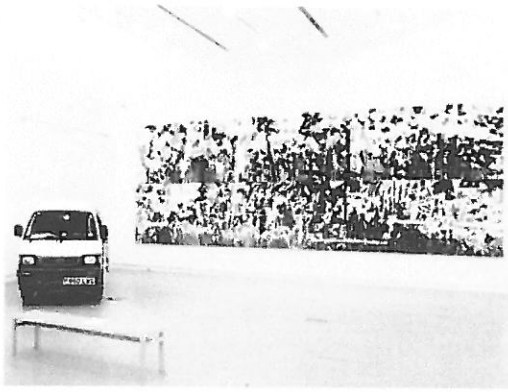


FIGURE 6 'Cinematic Welsh landscape', a performance painting made during 'The Travel Project' Exhibition at Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 2007, using mobile phone films of journeys through the Welsh landscape in my mobile studio and home.

the vocabulary of landscape aesthetics, but also our interactions with the landscape. Therefore, I try to embrace contemporary image-making technologies in my paintings and I have produced a body of work investigating the visual properties of film and video imagery, which includes drawing from film, painting from video stills, and using found images like postcards (Figures 7 and 8). I want to explore the potential for such images to change the concept, process and material quality of painting.

PM: In the catalogue to your 1995 'Mapping Wales' touring exhibition you describe your intention to 'map' urban and rural Welsh landscapes using post-conceptual techniques of painting, and you express a hope that your work will 'convey a new sense of the Welsh landscape'.⁸ Do you feel the need to challenge more traditional or conventional narratives of Wales and its landscapes? Does this new aesthetic arise from a particularly personal sense of Welshness or of Welsh landscapes?

CW: When you talk about a place or landscape there is always a political dimension to that discussion, especially if it is a country which has had to struggle to maintain and develop autonomy as Wales has. I am very aware that my own Welsh identity has had a bearing on my interest in landscape. I have lived in North and South Wales, and I now live on the mid-West Wales coast in Aberystwyth. Having grown up within a rural setting I have always had a particular relationship to landscape, and the countryside of Wales is very much a part of who I am. However, I believe it is important to be forward-looking when thinking about landscape. There is a fine balance between respecting landscape traditions and acknowledging that landscape is alive and must not be solely based on preserving a singular aesthetic. I think that landscape in art, and most particularly in painting, has a real problem in trying to deal with what 'is' rather than what we know there to have been. My desire to 'convey a new sense of Welsh Landscape' is to try to experience Wales in the knowledge that many previous artists have tackled this landscape through painting, while also being honest to the situation as it is presented to us today.

PM: Do you conceive your practices of journeying – by bicycle, foot, motorcycle, van, train etc. – as exercises in discovering the Welsh nation and landscape? And do you find that your journeys outside of (and away from) Wales – for example, in your 1996 journey from Aberystwyth

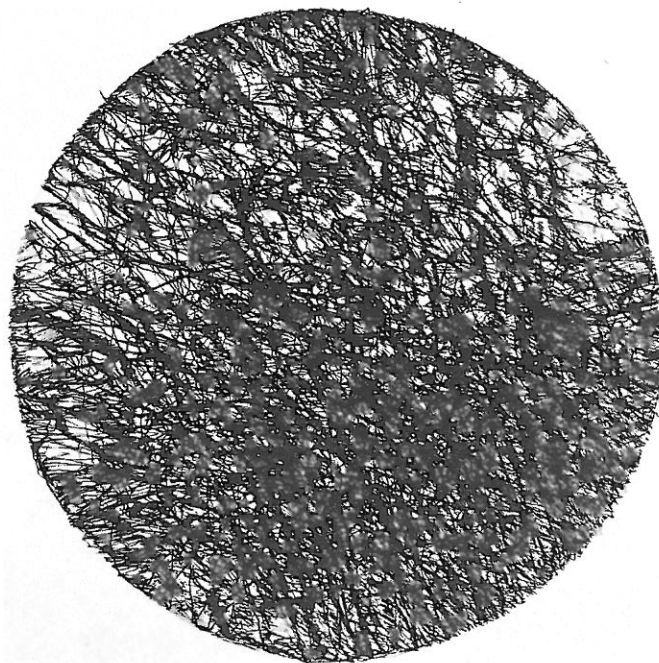


FIGURE 7 'TV Drawing', pen and ink on paper, diameter 30cm, 2006. This was produced by studying video footage and sketching the moving images.

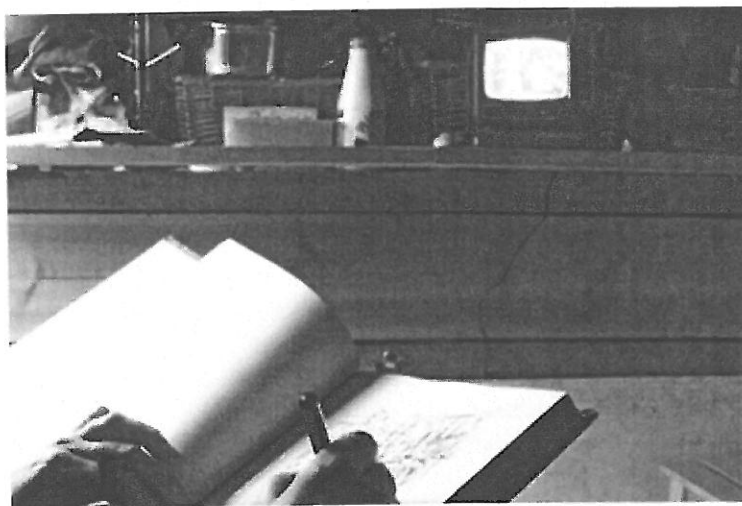


FIGURE 8 Drawing from TV images inside my mobile studio/home, 2005. Using a video recorder, I recorded journeys through my van windscreen. Here I am sketching from the recorded images. Photograph by Hannah Mann (hannahmann83@gmail.com).

to Crete, or in journeys around Iceland and Rome – provoke different senses of attachment, belonging and different motivations for journeying and exploring, as you are less familiar with your surroundings?

CW: I would not put it in such political terms as that. I think my desire to travel in Wales is more of a visual thing than to do with trying to determine a particular Welsh landscape. There can be no definitive description of a particular place, as what we see and how we see it is constantly shifting. My surveys are about gaining a really deep knowledge of a place. I have had a broad experience of Wales, and I want, through my journeys around the country, to make that knowledge more profound (Figure 9).

I want to know what is there beyond my own path around the landscape – what happens when you take a different route around a familiar place which allows you to see another side to things. Travelling always presents new perspectives beyond the ones you already know. Even a familiar route looks totally different at different times of the year, or day, or with different weather. My travels around other countries maintain my sense of wonder at the world and fuel my desire to find a means to communicate that experience – especially when travelling in countries such as Iceland. Travel and adventuring enable me to look differently at both familiar and unfamiliar places. Travel is a creative process which requires you to use your imagination – to take a leap of

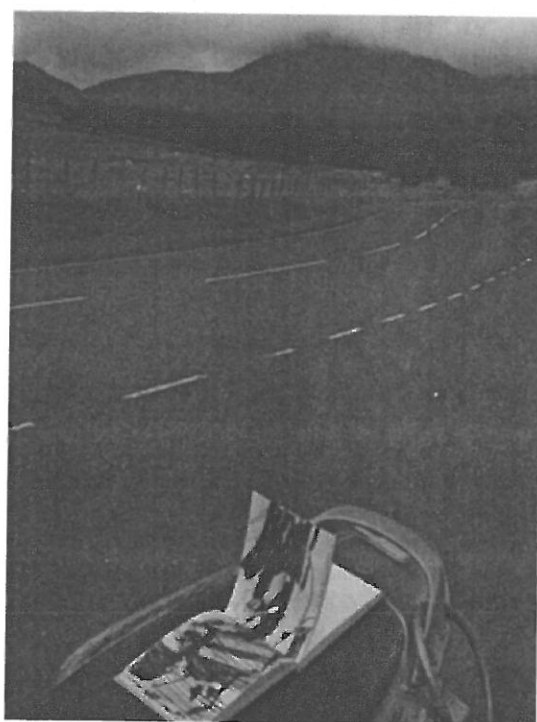


FIGURE 9 'Wilson's Land' 2008. I regularly undertake a motorbike journey through landscapes which the Welsh artist Richard Wilson (1714–1782) painted in West Wales; undertaking sound recordings, sketches, and using the journey and its events for inspiration. I have repeated the journey in different weathers at least fifty times, travelling from Machynlleth, through Penegoes (Wilson's birthplace), Mallwyd, Cross Foxes (near Dolgellau), past Cadair Idris (the subject of a famous Wilson painting) and back to Machynlleth.

faith into the unknown. What's more, the history of the western landscape tradition puts forward certain landscapes as places worthy of study – the Grand Tour, for example, saw artists travel through Italy and Greece for almost 200 years. My interest in contemporary landscape is very much positioned in relation to this history of landscape painting and travel.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank David Matless for his insightful comments on earlier versions of this article, and Hannah Mann and Cath Sherrell for permission to reproduce photographs.

Biographical notes

Peter Merriman is Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at Aberystwyth University. His research focuses on mobility and cultures of landscape, and he has written widely on the spaces and practices of driving. He is the author of *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-Historical Geography of England's M1 Motorway* (2007). He can be contacted at: Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, SY23 3DB, UK; email: prm@aber.ac.uk

Catrin Webster is an independent artist based in Aberystwyth. She studied at Falmouth College of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, London, and since completing her Postgraduate Higher Diploma in 1993 her work has been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions in the UK, Italy and Iceland. Catrin has taught fine art at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, Swansea Metropolitan University, Coleg Sir Gâr, and Aberystwyth University, and since February 2006 she has been undertaking a PhD in the School of Art at Aberystwyth University. Her work is held in a number of public collections, including those of the Arts Council of Great Britain, Hayward Gallery, London. She can be contacted at: Unit 16, Creative Units, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, SY23 3GL; email: catlizweb@hotmail.co.uk

Notes

- ¹ Catrin has been exploring the role of journeys in shaping landscape experience since the early 1990s, and her art works on landscape and travel and the relationship between different 'architectures' and landscapes have been exhibited in a range of solo and group exhibitions, including: 'Mapping Wales' (Aberystwyth, Cardiff and Muscat (Oman), 1995), 'En Plein Air' (Aberystwyth and Cardiff, 1997), 'Walking in Rome' (British School in Rome, 1997), 'Travelogue' (Newtown, Wales, 1998), 'Transports: paintings from Italy and Greece 1996–98' (Swansea, 1998–9), 'Locomotion' (Worcester, 1998), 'The Wanderings' (The Samling Foundation, Lake District, 1999), 'In transit' (Naples, 1999), 'In A Marine Light' (South Shields, 2000), 'Place/Works on Paper' (London, 2000), 'Expanded View' (Ikona, Birmingham, 1998–99), 'Transports-Performance' (Rome, 1999–2000), 'Terra Firma' (Reykjavik, 2002) and 'The travel project' (Aberystwyth, 2007).
- ² See e.g. P. Merriman, *Driving spaces* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2007); P. Merriman, "A new look at the English landscape": landscape architecture, movement and the aesthetics of motorways in early post-war Britain', *Cultural geographies* 13 (2006), pp. 78–105; P. Merriman, G. Revill, T. Cresswell, H. Lorimer, D. Matless, G. Rose and J. Wylie, 'Landscape, mobility, practice', *Social and cultural geography* 9 (2008), pp. 191–212; P. Merriman, 'Lawrence Halprin, modern dance and the American freeway

landscape', in T. Cresswell and P. Merriman (eds) *Mobilities: practices, spaces, subjects* (Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing, 2010).

³ This is not to suggest that car or train passengers, TV viewers or photographers are ever wholly 'passive' or 'immobile', but we are interested in the complex, relational, embodied mobilities and visualities of bodies interacting with vision and motion machines in landscapes.

⁴ C. Webster, 'Being there', *Planet: the Welsh internationalist* 122 (1997), pp. 17–25.

⁵ Merriman, 'A new look at the English landscape'; *Driving spaces*.

⁶ Catrin Webster, 'Painting, the built environment and landscape', *Creating utopia* (Newtown, Oriel Davies, 1997), pp. 59–66.

⁷ In addition to Catrin, the project team included Cath Sherrell (Visual Arts Education Officer, Aberystwyth Arts Centre), Mary Medlicott (storyteller), Becky Knight (artist) and Sue Jones Davies (actor). Sixty primary school children and teachers from three schools participated in the project: Holy Family School (Birmingham), Ysgol Llangynfelyn (Taliesin, Ceredigion) and Ysgol Llanfihangel-y-Creuddyn (Ceredigion). See *The travel project: encouraging rural and urban dialogue and exchange 2005–2007* (Aberystwyth, Aberystwyth Arts Centre, 2007).

⁸ C. Webster, 'Statement', in *Mapping Wales/Mapio Cymru: recent paintings by Catrin Webster* (Aberystwyth, Ceredigion Museum, 1995), p. 23.

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