

Garageland

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NATURE

art, culture and ideas



Get Back To It With

Jamie Shovlin's Birds, Andrew Bracey's Albino Animals,
Charlie Porter's Urban Garden, The Poseidon Adventure,
Tudor Re-Creation, Moby Dick and the Post Modern Animal.

Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?

Selling the great outdoors; Fiona Curran sends a postcard from the site of nature's commodification.

For many of us who live in the city, *nature* is synonymous with all that is *other* to our daily experience. A symbolic place of escape with clear air and untainted views, a place where senses are heightened, refreshed and invigorated by coming into contact with what seems like a more *authentic* realm of experience. In short, nature becomes a place *outside* culture and the social as we experience them in our everyday urban lives.

Our contemporary view of nature in the form of landscape for example, is influenced and framed by both tourism and advertising and as a consequence of this our experience of the landscape is usually mediated through its representation in the image via the brochure, the postcard, the photograph and the film, and in retrospect through the souvenir, 'the grasp of objects that bind us to some betokening'¹. Images of empty, timeless landscapes can be seen to relinquish the social and render any sense of time or place incidental, views become interchangeable as one more designated area of outstanding natural beauty replaces another.

The representation of these places that lie beyond our everyday experiences promise a form of escape from the oppression of the city. In tourist brochures, we frequently see romantic images of sublime landscapes devoid of people, populated only by mountains, forests, lakes and empty beaches. Similarly, in advertising the landscape becomes a theatrical backdrop for the drama of the eternal struggle between man and the wilderness. Man may now be present

but he is frequently alone, in his car, zooming through the natural world on roads that have tamed the wilderness and made nature into culture's plaything. We've all seen the images; there are no traffic jams here, just endless vistas of empty roads.

'... tourism immobilises the world, brings it to a halt as an image, a spectacle. It seizes it in the cliché, in the stereotype. Its representations suck the historical matter out of things, the better to embalm them in myth.'²

Such images bestow significance upon these scenes producing a sense of awe, a utopian vision of perfection that can never be experienced in reality. Landscapes are rarely empty or untouched; roads are congested, bins overflow, a phone mast is disguised as a tree and you have to queue to buy the postcard that shows you the view you came for in the first place. It is of course this spectacular 'view' that provokes and maintains our desire that there must surely be something behind the image. A something that is more *real*, authentic or true. Disappointment therefore enters the tourist experience in the same way that it enters all consumer experience in an exchange economy. Places have become commodities for consumption, spatial moments in the economic system. Images seduce us into believing in a *natural* world that has long since been lost (and perhaps never existed), yet this reality has been bypassed, it is the



image itself that has supplanted the real which, in Baudrillard's terms, has become *hyperreal*, or a simulacrum. This gap between our desires and our satisfactions gives rise to a sense of longing and nostalgia for what has been lost or never found and 'the search for authentic experience and, orrelatively, the search for authentic object become[s] critical. As experience is increasingly mediated and abstracted, the lived relation of the body to the phenomenological world is replaced by a nostalgic myth of contact and presence.'³

The souvenir object becomes crucial in this search, acting as a marker of the now-distanced physical and sensual experience, which it cannot retrieve but can attempt to rekindle by way of recollection. The objects we collect on our travels, the postcards we send and the photographs we take become a part of our sense of ourselves. If the original tourist experience in the face of the natural world for example, never quite lived up to our expectations, then the souvenir is destined to carry the weight of our disappointments and desires and, in its miniature form, take on the function of the fetish.

'There is something sombre about the things we've collected and own...and I feel a loneliness, a loss, all the greater and stranger when the object is relatively rare and it's the hour after sunset in a stillness that feels unceasing.'⁴

Lying somewhere between the past and the present, memory and forgetting, reality and imagination, longing and nostalgia, the souvenir is taken out of the circle of commodity relations and bestowed with a significance within the everyday. Stewart argues however, that 'the restoration of the souvenir is a conservative idealization of the past and the distanced for the purposes of a present ideology. We thus might say that all souvenirs are souvenirs of a nature which has been invented by ideology.'⁵

Nature then, far from lying outside the realm of the cultural, is reinscribed within the historical, political and contingent world of our everyday lives. Its appearance however, is suffused with the ideal and this ideality is, in part, the product of the sheer mass of images covering our world and of the technological condition of this spectacular economy. Signs without a signifier; the appearance of the natural is maintained in order to conceal the reality of its absence.

[1] Don De Lillo, 'Underworld', Picador, 1998, p.808.

[2] Peter D. Osborne, 'Travelling Light, Photography, Travel and Visual Culture', Manchester University Press, 2000, p.115.

[3] Susan Stewart, 'On Longing: Narratives of The Miniature, The Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection', Duke University Press, 1993, p.133.

[4] De Lillo, *op cit*, p.808.

[5] Stewart, *op cit*, p.150

Above: Paul Murphy, 'Deckchairs', 2006