

A frayed edge

Paul Gough

Edgeland

Once heralded as a '*fortress built by Nature for herself... a moat defensive to a house...*' our island is slowly unravelling. Across political, social and economic dimensions, Britain is beset and besieged. '*Our scepter'd isle*' is fast fraying at the edges.¹

Politically, these have been intense years. A tortuous and messy divorce from Europe is being tested daily at customs posts on the land and across invisible lines on the high seas. Once a totem of English authority, the White Cliffs of Dover have become irreversibly politicised. One faction regards them as unassailable battlements, while a rival party deploys their sheer white slopes as a vast projection screen to beam forlorn messages of loss to our European neighbours. North and south along the coastline, our Channel beaches have become the landing sites for waves of refugees seeking solace and security after perilous voyages from war-ravaged homelands.

Geologically even more is happening. Along every coastal edge, the tide nibbles away at soil and sand, grain by grain on the shallow eastern beaches and marshes, and then explosively, when tonnes of rock topple violently down the cliffs near Golden Cap in Dorset, or in great wedges of landslip on the Llyn Peninsula in North Wales. Everywhere it seems, politically, socially and geomorphologically, our country is on edge, threadbare and *a-frayed*.

Is there anything new in all this? After all, Britain has been besieged and blockaded for centuries, annexed and assaulted by air and by sea since the Doggerland bridge binding us to mainland Europe was finally snipped away some 8,500 years ago - relatively recently by geological standards.² British artists have long been attuned to this dynamic tension between earth and water, conjuring up epic visions of storm and deluge, and futile attempts to command the encroaching waves. As Julian Perry knows too well, the Suffolk town of Dunwich is renowned as the undisputed capital of coastal erosion:

“ In a catastrophic eighty-year period (between 1328 and 1408) the churches of St Bartholomew's, St Michael's, St Leonard's, St Nicholas, St Martin's and St Anthony's

¹ From William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, Act Two, Scene One, words spoken by John of Gaunt.

² The Dogger Bank itself remained an island until it was flooded forever by a tsunami caused by a submarine landslide off the coast of Norway some 8,200 years ago. See Barry Cunliffe, *Europe Between the Oceans, 9000 BC-AD 1000*, 2011.

(a Benedictine Chapel) one by one slid slowly down the sandy cliffs. Once a mile inland Dunwich had been steadily corroded by what geologists term 'longshore drift'. Periodically the impact was quite sublime: a single storm in 1347 wiped out 400 dwellings. But for much of the time the effect was silently corrosive, the relentless tides making their inexorable progress through the town. Not that the townsfolk did nothing by way of defence. In 1540 the churchwardens of St John the Baptist sold off all the precious plate to fund a pier to stave off the sea. Alas to no end; the water continued its western surge and the church went east. ³

Further up the coast in East Yorkshire, there are regular tours to visit the sites of two dozen villages also lost to the sea in the 14th century, but now reclaimed as a tract of salty land known simply as 'Sunk Island'. There is of course nothing to see on either land or map, not even a contour line. Nothing except curious ancient names - Penysthorp, Frismersk, Orwithfleet, East Somerte. All gone, swept away by the briny water, including one hamlet known only as 'Odd', memorable in the guide book for the line: 'The history of Odd is short.' Very few artists know these non-landscapes to heart: those that dare, roam their salty flats seeking out the motifs that might populate their paintings. As at Dunwich, it is difficult to know what to expect: there are no surviving stone walls, certainly no stone spires poking out of the soggy marshes, not a trace of centuries of habitation, nor evidence of an offshore English Atlantis strewn with sunken remains. Instead, there is only an overwhelming emptiness, a backwater amongst backwaters under mother-of-pearl skies, a place of dread fascination, and not one that lends itself easily to picture-making."

These were the opening words in an essay written to accompany *An Extraordinary Prospect*, a memorable show of paintings by Perry, staged in London a decade ago. In researching the debacle of Dunwich, it is easy to dismiss its demise as an historic aberration, a curio leveraged from the annals of medieval history. Yet, this is no distant anomaly. Since that exhibition the corrosion continues, the ocean advances. Its incremental creep is insidious, almost invisible to the watchful eye. Yet it can also be abrupt and explosive when, without warning, great wedges of land slide spectacularly into the tide. Over the decade, Perry has remained alert, attentive to the ecological disasters unfolding, watching as his very subject-matter vanishes under the pressures of global climate change. In more recent exhibitions he has shifted his gaze from the panoramic to the microscopic. 'When Yellow Leaves'

³ Paul Gough, 'Painting on the edge' in *An Extraordinary Prospect: The Coastal Erosion Paintings*, Austin Desmond Fine Art, 2010.

presented a body of painfully exquisite paintings that focussed on the crisis facing British trees. Seductive in their dramatic compositions, their unflinching detail and skilled manipulation of the painted surface, Perry offered a dystopian vision of leaves blighted by disease, invasive pathogens, and unseasonal shifts in global weather patterns. 'Evening Sycamore' (2014) and 'Oak Tree' (2015) describe curled and browning leaves apparently afloat and disembodied from their host, harbinger of a virus that might be carried in the lowering skies and acid rain-loaded clouds. Tempting as it is to see these paintings as part of the pantheon of high British landscape painting – Constable, Cotman, Gainsborough – there is in these works an unyielding air of sombre reverence, a force of foreboding more northern European in tone and mood. Informed by Grunewald and Durer, and the apocalyptic aura of Otto Dix, there is little comfort in these images, each rendered with the disquieting fidelity of a medieval altarpiece.⁴

Embattled places

British painting has long been acquainted with the catastrophised landscape, besotted by the imagery of ruination and the Romantic call of decay and dereliction. In Gustave Dore's 1873 engraving 'The New Zealander', the eponymous solitary figure in a black cape clutches an artist's sketchbook as he peers across the blackened buildings of a once-elegant city. Ghostly stumps of pale masonry protrude from the marsh; white classical columns are suspended in mid-air; the cast-iron pillars of a bridge rust in the slowly rising waters of a sluggish and reedy river. This is London imagined after a catastrophe, glimpsed by an Antipodean who sketches the ruins of St Paul's Cathedral exactly as did those European gentlemen who ventured south to sketch the picturesque decay of ancient Rome. 'When we contemplate ruins', writes Christopher Woodward, 'we contemplate our own future'. For statesmen, ruins predict the fall of Empires; for philosophers they warn of the pointlessness of our aspirations. For the artist and poet, they signal not only the inexorable cycle of mortality, but also question the very purpose of their art. 'Why struggle with a brush or chisel', runs the argument, 'to create the beauty of wholeness, when far greater works have been destroyed by Time?'⁵

For the Romantic artist, poet or composer, these may seem inviolate sentiments, inevitable truths, a refuge for those who bow to fate. Not so with Julian Perry. Not one to shy from

⁴ 'When Yellow Leaves' was shown at Maccalls Gallery, Kent from September-December 2015, and toured to Gainsborough House Museum, February 2017. Curator Rebecca Hone wrote of Perry's work reaching far beyond conventional gallery audiences to those interested in botany, conservation, ecology and the politics of land use.

⁵ Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins: A Journey through History, Art and Literature*, 2001.

uncomfortable realities, he brings the battle to each of us, reminding us of our obligations, a call to arms, in fact a call to urgent corrective action. Using his art as an attempt to arrest time, Perry is no commonplace painter but instead a warrior, fighting back not only against man's onslaughts on the natural world, but its own civil strife, element against element, exacerbated by human folly and our unthinking impact on the natural order.

Back in 2004, Perry's exhibition 'Testament' drew its inspiration from Epping Forest, London's 'threadbare back garden' hemmed in by dual carriageways and encroaching building plots. His work captured the crude detritus of the peri-urban scenery, with its beguiling blend of the bucolic and the urban - hubcaps trapped in trees, lay-bys peppered with sporting car tyres, shopping trolleys parked in the undergrowth. Marion Shoard coined these unloved, unseen and often unexplored spaces as the 'edge land', a hidden hinterland of brick piles and rubbish tips, derelict industrial plant and ragged landfill, scruffy allotments, abandoned ordnance lying amidst rogue plants.⁶ Many decades ago, the naturalist Richard Mabey in his book 'The Unofficial Countryside' had opened our eyes to the vitality of these unkempt places.⁷ He marvelled at the resilience of nature in such abject conditions, its refusal to be ground down by toxic contagion. Mabey's astonishment at the hardiness of natural things resonates with Perry's wry view of the Epping hinterland and reminds us of another astute observer of the English scene, the painter Paul Nash. Before the Great War little more than a modest painter of fluffy elms and vapid sunsets Nash was transformed by his experiences while serving as a British infantry officer on the Western Front.

In 1916, in a letter home, he wrote of walking through a wood (or at least what remained of it after recent enemy shelling) when it was little more than 'a place with an evil name, pitted and pocked with shells, the trees torn to shreds, often reeking with poison gas'. A few days later, to his astonishment, that 'most desolate ruinous place' was drastically changed. It was now 'a vivid green', bristling with buds and fresh leaf growth:

'The most broken trees even had sprouted somewhere and in the midst, from the depth of the wood's bruised heart poured out the throbbing song of a nightingale. Ridiculous mad incongruity! One can't think which is the more absurd, the War or Nature...'⁸

Nash's ecstatic vision permeates Perry's work at that time, lending visual forms and ambience to his emphatic renditions of Epping forest and its hinterlands. Perry paraphrases

⁶ Marion Shoard, *Edgelands: an essay*, 2002. See also: Paul Farley and Michael Symmonds Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness*, 2011.

⁷ Richard Mabey, *The Unofficial Countryside*, 1973.

⁸ Paul Nash, *Outline: An Autobiography and Other Writings*, 1948.

Nash: in 'Coppicing for Nightingales' (2000) a wooden causeway zig-zags into the thickets, evoking, as William Feaver has noted, 'the tenuous, but unavoidable, parallels to be drawn with the Zig-Zagging duckboards of the Western Front in the paintings by Paul Nash, whose images of martyred trees and suppurating shells holes recur.'⁹ One winter in the forest, Perry was attracted to a frozen pond surrounded by thin, spare saplings, their shadows black across its frozen veneer, the surrounding woodland covered in piled snow. This, though, is no ordinary pond. In late autumn 1944, several V-2 rockets fell on Epping Forest, creating sizeable craters, war wounds now rendered a civic amenity. Perry has continued to be drawn towards these edgeland places where boundaries weave and waver, where enclaves occur and refuges are recreated through man's intervention, He has a natural affinity for in-between, or liminal, places in our landscapes, places that are ostensibly empty, but full of latent energy and unexpectedness. Historically, these phenomena have often found their most extreme form in the disputed territories of 'No Man's Land', where painters, poets and writers have become obsessed with its phantasmagoric terrain. Welsh poet David Jones described its unmappable topography as a place of 'sudden violences and long stillnesses' marked by:

... sharp contours and unformed voids [its] mysterious existence profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment.¹⁰

Frayed edge : corroded tips

There is little by way of enchantment on the beleaguered east English coast, which Perry knows so well and paints with such incision. Here, along the fraying edge of a land subject to a relentless tidal drift, bungalows are perched perilously on friable embankments. 'Trees don't tumble spectacularly into the sea.', he states. 'They slide almost imperceptibly down on to the beach to be gradually washed away by the tides.' Under impassive and dispassionate cerulean blue skies, local catastrophes occur weekly. How is it possible for any artist or writer or poet to convey the tragedy of such places, the profound loss of livelihoods and property, and the irretrievable vanishing of the very stuff that makes up the British Isles? We may in the recent past have been prepared to fight them on the beaches, but what happens when the same beaches appear to be fighting us? Patiently and rigorously over decades Perry has set to the task, hauling his painting paraphernalia many miles, to locate *the* motif that would best summarise the fraying edge of the country. The resulting subjects are memorably totemic – fossilised trees stand proudly out of the sand, a single erect trunk is

⁹ William Feaver, *Julian Perry: Testament: The Epping Forest Paintings*, Guildhall Gallery, London, 2004.

¹⁰ David Jones, *In Parenthesis*, 1937.

washed over by the surf (*Sea Tree, Suffolk*, 2009), in another a silver birch looms overhead, afloat in a wash of the palest silvery-grey (*Benacre Birch III*, 2015); *Top Lit Trees* and *Fallen Tree*, both from 2017, subject the tangle of roots and branch to a spotlight of attention. In English we describe a collection of gathered and arranged objects, rather poetically – and optimistically – as ‘still life’. Elsewhere it is known more ominously, but in Perry’s case much more truthfully, as ‘*nature morte*’, a deadened nature that may well be teetering on the brink. Perry’s most recent paintings, vast compositions such as *Forest Edge* (2021) recall the benighted woodland of Uccello’s *Night Hunters*, with its illusion of a benign scene that only slowly reveals its dark significance, nature at both its physical edge and its ecological tipping point, a narrative – like the Uccello - that is both hunted and haunted.

Other recent compositions incorporate the remnants of formerly-firm architectural features; *Pillbox with Bladder Wrack*, from 2019 is an extraordinary example. There are few contemporary painters capable of endowing such banality with such passion and with such precision. With a painterly flourish that takes in the vigour of late Bomberg as well as the colouration of the Norwich School, Perry dazzles us with an array of artistic assets. The rosy glow of exposed brickwork, the exquisite pale blue reflections in the oozing puddle, the granular arcs of denuded sand are all proof of a painter in his prime.

In other artworks, the ruins and rubble are more subtle, their tragedy captured in the glimpse of an earthen bank incongruously peppered with fridge freezers, or the uncanny image of a 1920s villa, *Suffolk Cliffs* (2010) replete with exquisitely described red roof tiles, leaded windows and neatly maintained guttering, as it peers incredulously over a sloppy, fugitive bank of earth as if guessing at its inevitable fate. Eschewing the obvious drama of such scenes, Perry allows pictorial juxtaposition to convey the magnitude of the creeping catastrophe.

Yet, Perry knows that exactitude cannot convey truth. Despite the sense of dramatic expectancy that pervades this work, despite the extraordinary violation and inevitability, Perry wanted the components of this landscape to have a future as well as a past, however ordinary. This explains, in part, the poetic decision to create floating forms that appear to freeze the land in time and space. Instead of sliding inexorably into battered banality, Perry offers us the remarkable prospect of poetic redemption. Instead of atrophy and collapse we are offered lightness and grace. In a leap of surrealistic imagining, which Paul Nash or Tristram Hillier might instantly have understood, the pill-boxes, 1920s semis, Fish and Chip shops and other seaside *monumentalia* have been salvaged from a briny doom, and offered

instead an extended existence frozen, suspended, in paint on panel, far above the fraying fray.

Perry cites many precedents for his audacity. He takes no easy refuge in obvious comparators – English surrealists such as Eileen Agar or John Armstrong, or the strange seaside paintings by Edward Wadsworth – but he points also to those telling details in landscapes by Constable or Cotman, painters who also learned their trade on the eastern side of England, not far from the crumbling edge patrolled by Perry. ‘Look closely at a field of corn painted by Constable’, he argues, ‘you can actually see that it’s not quite ripe, you can feel the very moment that the breeze wafted through it. That moment is frozen in time, never altered since 1810, and I’ve always wanted to capture that temporal quality in my work.’ In his paintings and his boxed constructions, Perry has defined nature in a way that Cotman or Crome could never have imagined possible, but he does so not to be sentimental, nor to meaninglessly turn back the clock. There is a toughness about his work that stops it being maudlin or even mawkish. After all, it takes an unusual confidence to set up an easel within yards of some cliff edge calamity and peer into the misery of another’s disaster. Grayson Perry, in an insightful review of ‘A Common Treasury’ also identified this stubborn trait, this refusal to become nostalgic in the face of a common tragedy.¹¹ Much of Julian Perry’s robustness is achieved through the rigorous and deeply intelligent application of his craft. Capable of lovingly rendering any given surface – whether it be rusting Crittall windows or wispy *cirrus stratus* - he is not seduced by easy pictorial solutions; his formal arrangements are tough-minded. Look for example at the handling of the tissue-like texture of the silver birch in the audacious *Top Lit Tree (2017)* or the suffusion of Indian yellow in the water-line of the foreshore paintings. Few British painters working today are capable of such subtlety, an ability to accurately describe the saturated density of recently eroded earth as it is fresh-stirred by each new watery wave. Perry has learned his craft by careful study of other Eastern England painters: he has determined that Constable created his distinctive painterliness by applying white pigment to one side of his brush and, say, burnt umber, to the other side, rolling and rotating his brush across the surface to create the remarkable effect of sparkling light. In many paintings, the *Benacre Birch* suite, for example, or the *Cherry Leaves* canvases – he achieves equivalent effects, conjuring up the vivacious surface textures of Thomas Gainsborough or Jacob van Ruisdael. Indeed, the work of the great seventeenth century Dutch landscape masters spring to mind when savouring Perry’s oeuvre: his command of cumulus cloud formations owes a great deal to their example.

¹¹ Julian Perry, ‘A Common Treasury’, was the painter’s response to the arrival of the London 2012 Olympics in East London. The exhibition featured ‘The Sheds Lost to the Olympiad’. Austin Desmond Fine Art, London, 2007.

Whereas they gazed across a flattened landscape reclaimed from the sea, in Perry's we have a landscape that is being re-seized and flattened by the same waters.

Recently, Perry has embraced an aesthetic less picturesque than a decade ago. Matching the gravity of our times, there is a bleaker, more ominous sensibility, derived from northern European and German painting. With an eye firmly on Grunewald and Durer, he has become fascinated by the taut terror of the Isenheim Altarpiece and the savage pity embodied in the post-Great War paintings of Otto Dix.

The triptych format offers him a means of conveying multiple and complementary narratives, one space juxtaposed with another, one passage of time co-existing with its parallel. His boxed and painted constructions require active engagement in looking and understanding. As with a triptych, these small Perspex cubes are episodic interventions that protrude from a wall and invite our closest scrutiny. In such constructions as the *North Sea Still Life* works from 2020, each cube encloses a single panel painted on both sides, reflected in a mirror to create a disquieting optical effect that frustrates the viewer, delays instant gratification, and requires deliberate and prolonged attention. It is a masterful notion, ideally suited to the gravity of the subject.

Equally masterful is the disembodied, interred limb that inhabits the predella in Perry's vast and ambitious *Altarpiece to The Assumption of Co2*, one of the painter's most crucial – and urgent - works to date. With the singularity of a Zurbaran still-life and the disquieting anthropomorphism of early Francis Bacon, there is little like it in our contemporary art scene. Entombed and yet not becalmed, painted with the porcelain finish perhaps more appropriate for board room portraits, it chimes with those startling war paintings made by Otto Dix which have so clearly impacted upon Perry. Bodies emerging from the battered trenches became a familiar trope in film and visual arts after the Armistice. Compare the haunted spectres of the walking dead in Abel Gance's 1919 film 'J'Accuse', with the soldiers in Stanley Spencer's great resurrection murals at Burghclere, who emerge from the torn earth intact, unsullied and calm, almost beatific.¹² How very different from the homunculi embedded in the Flanders mud as devised by Otto Dix. In his apocalyptic canvas, *Flanders*, the dawn may be epic, but the demise of the platoon of soldiers is tawdry and banal, their bodies enmeshed in a thicket of webbing, wire and waste. Far from emerging from the glutinous mud, the figures, tree stumps and other detritus are immersed in the land, becoming a part of its subsoil, embedded in their *totendlandschaft* – the dead landscape - where there may indeed be

¹² For Stanley Spencer, see Paul Gough, *Journey to Burghclere*, 2006, and for Otto Dix, see Matthias Eberle, *The Weimar Artists*, 1985.

biological metamorphosis, but there is absolutely no hope of resurrection. Despite the healing harmonics of Hildegard von Bingen, playing in the darkened gallery that houses Perry's *magnum opus*, these are images of a near-dystopia, 'a bitter truth' revealed by an artist in full voice.

75 words

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115 words

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A painter, broadcaster and author he has exhibited internationally and is represented in the permanent collection of the Imperial War Museum, London, the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, and the National War Memorial, New Zealand. Along with leading roles in international higher education and global research assessment, his research into the representation war and peace has been presented to audiences throughout the world. He has published nine books, including monographs on the British painter Stanley Spencer, Paul and John Nash and several comprehensive studies of art from both world wars. He worked in television for ten years and is currently writing his second book about the street artist, Banksy.