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**'Cultivating dead trees': the legacy of Paul Nash as an artist of trauma, wilderness and recovery**

**Paul Gough**

**Gardens and the mnemonic impetus**

Gardens and arboreta have long been regarded as a 'palliative for melancholy' and a congenial environment for solitary contemplation. (Coffin 1994: 17) In Christian teaching the garden is a place for spiritual reflection, a space designed to stimulate meditation, introspection and the easing of the imagination. (Hunt 1976) To this end, gardens can be thought of as liminal enclaves, withdrawn from the customary disruption of urbanization, where precious objects, memorials and other sculpted forms can be placed under the open sky 'in the eye of God'.

In their multifarious forms gardens and arboreta are closely associated with memory systems, whereby themes, ideas, and classical references can be referenced in statuary, fountains, and diverse formal objects. Carefully arranged, these *objets de jardin* act as a sequence of code that might be 'strung together into an iconographical programme or narrative.' (Hunt 2001: 20-22) However, here the garden-as-mnemonic-text is at its most vulnerable, as over time cultural references will be lost or displaced, and a 'proper' reading will be at the mercy of the linguistic sophistication and foreknowledge of subsequent generations. In addition, growth, decay and replacement will muddle the narrative intent. Those who design arboreta, in particular, rely on a parallel narrative of naming, using captions and texts to provide a running commentary on the origins, associations and mnemonic function of particular trees, shrubs or plantings.

As 'theatres of memory', the mnemonic structure of a designed garden is perfectly matched to the task of memorialisation. (Mosser and Nys 1994) Doris Francis has argued that the seasonal cycle of nature 'confronts men

and women with their own changes and mortality' concentrating the mind on the brevity of life and swift passage of time. (Francis et al 1999: 122) As a manner of 'dramaturgical' space, the staged setting of the garden can represent both physical vulnerability and transience, and is thus suggestive of both decay and renewal. This effect is exactly matched to the diction of commemoration, indeed garden-memorials have perhaps the unique capacity – of all art forms - to evoke poignant analogies between human existence, the fragility of nature and consolations of cyclic regeneration. (Miller 1993) These modes of signification are emphasized by the knowledge that many gardens and arboreta will not achieve their intended design until long after their designers have passed away. Trees, shrubs, and flowers are a pivotal trope in the design of gardens. Here, the role of the gardener is crucial: a skilful gardener can appear to deny death and disorder by, planting maintaining, and caring for plants within the walled domain. As Francis observes, a well-tended garden is a 'symbolic bulwark' against disorder, decay and the occasional randomness of death. (Francis et al: 122) Indeed, a skilled gardener can appear to postpone, even eradicate, death by judicious and diligent plant management. Miller (1993) draws important analogies between the natural cycle of plant life and the course of human development: in that they both put down roots, blossom, flower, come to fruition, and unfold. As 'materialised memory' flowers are often used aesthetically, as acceptable means of 'visualizing the process of physical decay' unleashed by death (Hallam and Hockey 2001:133). Their gradual decay stands as an approved reminder of the fate of all flesh; the antithesis of 'identity, system, order' that is the character of the living body. (Kristeva 1982: 4)

However, elaborate and carefully designed gardens and arboreta pose particular challenges for painters and artists. The overt formality of many classical gardens allows limited room for interpretation, particularly for those artists who embrace the English ideal of the 'picturesque', with its artful arrangement of orchestrated disorder, textural variety and random shifts of colour, light and shadow. In British cultural debate, the Picturesque inclination has tended towards irregular lines, prefabricated ruins, and an air of poetic dishevelment. Romanticism placed a heavy premise on '*genius loci*', the

distinctive atmosphere of certain locations, the intelligent spirit or magical power that resides in a place, which became the talisman of such British painters as Samuel Palmer in the early nineteenth century. (Andrews 1989) His rendition of the Kent countryside as a mysterious and visionary demi-paradise found a frequent reprise in British painting, spawning a neo-Romantic legacy in the work of such 20<sup>th</sup> century English painters as Graham Sutherland, John Minton and Eric Ravilious who – for much of their working careers - rejected the devices of modernism in favour of an English vision of rustic mysticism and poetic imaginings. (Yorke 1988)

In gardening, as in painting, pursuit of the Gothic took many curious turns. The English landscape garden movement of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century swept away the formal regime of the symmetrical *garden a la Francais* of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, replacing it with irregular pools of water, rolling lawns, ruins, bridges and tracts of carefully contrived wilderness. Landscape designers such as William Kent and Charles Bridgeman were not above planting dead trees in their gardens so as to augment their Romantic aspect. (Mowl 2006) Appropriately, dead trees have recently been ‘planted’ in the National Memorial Arboretum in Alrewas, Staffordshire, a fine example of a nascent English garden that unites formal design with tracts of wilderness, a place for reflection and reverie that combines thematic iconography with commemorative imperatives. (Gough 2004) In the heart of the vast memory-scape at Alrewas, six dead tree trunks surround a memorial marking the 1915 military campaign in the Dardanelles, Turkey. They draw attention to the desecration of the peninsula during the ten months of fierce fighting between the Turkish and German defenders and the Allied Forces pinned down on the beach-head. Here, in the National Memorial Arboretum, the screen of dead trees is a powerful mnemonic for the business of commemoration and it acts as a singular and necessary reminder of nature blighted by armed conflict. Elsewhere in Britain dead trees have stirred more uncomfortable comparisons. In the late 1980s, at the height of sensitivities over the use of nuclear power the *Guardian* newspaper ran a brief report:

A small but significant bit of image-adjustment is about to take place at the Trawsfynydd nuclear power station in Wales. A clump of dead trees which invariably features doomily in TV shots of the place is going to

be put to the chain saw. The suggestion came not from the CEGB's public relations squad but from David Williams, a local undertaker who sits on the community liaison committee. It's not clear if he's going to claim the wood. (*The Guardian*, n.d.)

Tongue-in-cheek as it may be, the incident reflects widespread concerns about invisible menace and its irreversible impact on natural forms. Dead, inert trees, ashen grey and stripped of leaves, strike at the very principle of seasonal recovery and the annual cycles of regeneration. (Cloke, Jones 2004) With these concerns in mind, and taking as its theme the mnemonic role of trees – living, dying and dead – this paper examines how two contemporary artists – Julian Perry and Gail Ritchie - have explored issues of danger, devastation and death through the iconic representation of trees, woods and woodlands. Each of the artists has a keen understanding of the totemic monumentality of trees, both within and outside garden and arboreta settings, and both Perry and Ritchie reference the work of the British painter Paul Nash, an official war artist in both wars of the twentieth century and a seminal figure in any appreciation of a land- or memory-scape touched by war and recovered through peace. His understanding of decay and regeneration, and the cyclic concept of death and life through nature – both formalized and informal - will be the connective tissue throughout this paper, and links the major themes of representation, recovery and design that are at the heart of the National Memorial project at Alrewas. (Causey 1970)

### **Paul Nash: 'this tree sense'**

Of all British artists of the last century, Paul Nash is perhaps the one most readily associated with the sanctity and loveliness of trees. Absorbing the 'pathetic fallacy' into his very being he regarded them as an extension of his own body. (Gough 2010) Enthusing about their properties in 1912, he wrote:

I have tried ... to paint trees as tho' they were human beings...because I sincerely love & worship trees & know they *are* people & wonderfully beautiful people – much more lovely than the majority of people one meets.' (Abbot and Bertram 1955, 42)

As a visionary painter, Nash also understood their metaphysical potential, sensing how trees linked the underworld, the earth's surface and the skies. (King 1987)

His early work as a student at the Slade School of Art in London gave little inkling of the artist he was to become: his drawings displayed a strong attachment to the Pre-Raphaelites, especially to Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his fresh-faced visions of romantic death. Faces soon vanished from his work (though an often-invisible human presence never did) to be replaced with strange moon-lit landscapes, which fused ancient landmarks with anthropomorphized natural forms. (Bertram 1955) All this would change when warfare overwhelmed the natural order in Northern France and Belgium and Nash was drawn into the maelstrom of the war. Across the verdant plains of Flanders, Artois and Picardy, trees offered vantage and protection, they provided raw materials and nourishment, they lay in thick forests as well as neat copses. Their decimation was remembered by all who witnessed it:

I never lost this tree sense: to me half the war is a memory of trees; fallen and tortured trees; trees untouched in summer moonlight, torn and shattered winter trees, trees green and brown, grey and white, living and dead. They gave their names to roads and trenches, strong points and areas. Beneath their branches I found the best and the worst of war. (Talbot Kelly 1980, 5)

Amidst the devastation, human relationships with Nature, and with trees especially, were forced to change. 'Wood, leaves, roots and branches took on new symbolic meanings and sensorial qualities.' (Saunders 2009) Camouflage mimicked their elegant patterns, fake trees concealed snipers and observers, copses hid batteries of artillery, subterranean dugouts were filled with the smell of freshly-hewn wood, and ancient willows were bent into shape as revetments for front-line trenches. Woodlands were transformed into strongholds that were fiercely fought over by both sides. Single, isolated trees became a registration point for enemy artillery. Soldiers soon learned to avoid such places:

The 'Lone Tree' was the assembly point for the wounded, and all around on the grass there were dozens of wounded on stretchers waiting to be taken down by the ambulance column. This tree was a favourite for the German artillery and I could never understand why the wounded, transport, cookers and ambulances were allowed to congregate in this area. Apparently, somebody later recognised the danger and the tree was felled. (Stuart Dolden 1980, 39)

Surely this was one of the cruelest ironies of that terrible war? A once attractive, free-standing tree has now to be feared, regarded as a point of maximum danger. What was once an icon of nature to be cherished as a place of refuge and shade had become horribly inverted by the chaos of war. During the course of the fighting, trees, and especially small woods, were to become notorious death traps. Mansel Copse, Inverness Wood, Thiepval Forest, and dozen of others, some no larger than a hockey pitch, were to become infamous killing grounds, sites of extraordinary mayhem fought over for months. (Gough 2004a, 237-8) On trench maps, the very words - 'copse', 'wood', even 'forest' - soon became irrelevant as trees were felled by artillery shells, reduced to splinters, charred by fire, and felled for military use. So systematic was the destruction and so ruthless the cutting it was estimated that it would take half a century for many areas to be able to produce decent timber again. Indeed, French horticulturalists coined the term 'forest trauma'. (Clout 1996, 30-34) Today a few ancient trees remain: a hornbeam that miraculously survived the utter devastation in Delville Wood, its trunk still speckled with fragments of metal; another rooted in a barrel of cement marks the point in No-Mans-Land where hundreds of inexperienced soldiers from the Newfoundland Regiment collected in search of a gathering-point, only to meet a sudden, bloody and unnecessary end in the first forty minutes of the first day of the Battle of the Somme. It stands today, an ashen stalk once promising succour, but delivering only pain and death.

Nash saw all this. In the Ypres Salient he was aghast at the sight of splintered copses and dismembered trees, seeing in their shattered limbs an equivalent for the human carnage that lay all around or even hung in shreds

from the eviscerated treetops. In so many of his war pictures, the trees remain inert and gaunt, failing to respond to the shafts of sunlight; their branches dangle lifelessly 'like melancholy tresses of hair', mourning the death of the world and its values that Nash held so dear. (Cork 1994, 201)

Was Nash aware that a century earlier, another young British painter had devised an extraordinary image of an equally poisoned and murderous landscape? At its centre was the notorious 'Upas Tree'.

This fabulous tree was said to grow on the island of Java, in the midst of a desert formed by its own pestiferous exhalations. These destroyed all vegetable life in the immediate neighbourhood of the tree, and all animal life that approached it. Its poison was considered precious, and was to be obtained by piercing the bark, when it flowed forth from the wound. So hopeless, however, and so perilous was the endeavour to obtain it, that only criminals sentenced to death could be induced to make the attempt, and as numbers of them perished, the place became a valley of the shadow of death, a charnel-field of bones. (Regrave 1886, 483)

The fable of the dreaded *Upas Tree* is based on the tale of the poisonous anchar tree, first revealed by the 18th century botanist Erasmus Darwin. During the Romantic era it became a familiar and potent image adopted by such poets as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, occurring in Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and in Robert Southey's epic poem *Thalaba*. But probably the most significant evocation of this bizarre plant is in the vast canvas painted by the Bristol-based painter Francis Danby. He painted *The Upas, or Poison Tree, in the Island of Java* in 1819, when he was just 26; a year later it heralded his triumphal arrival on the London art scene. By the standards of its time it is not a huge painting – some 5 feet by 7 - but its sense of scale is striking. A cowering figure is dwarfed by the landscape, the tree – little but a vertical stalk - dominates the surrounding terrain; and the rocky valley - said to have been modelled on the Avon Gorge - is a hazardous, leafless place of crags and fissures, surrounded by the wasted corpses of fated men. (Greenacre 1988, 89-91)

The painting was equally doomed. After mixed reviews it sold for £150, but the fee went straight to a host of creditors, Danby having worked up an impressive debt during his stay in Bristol. Within years the picture had declined in quality: sloppy technique and thick varnish had rendered the image almost unreadable. By 1857 the picture was barely visible: it was as if the poisonous exhalations of the motif had spread to the very paint surface. Extensive cleaning and removal of layers of dark varnish have since revived the painting, but even after laborious conservation it still catches the light and is difficult to see. Like the eponymous tree itself one approaches the vast canvas with squinting eyes and a cautious tread.

Ninety-nine years after Danby finished his painting, Paul Nash – also in his late twenties - was struggling with his own '*magnum opus*', the huge canvas now known as *The Menin Road*, the painters' first foray into oil paint, an act – as he put it – of 'great audacity'. (Abbot and Bertram 1955, 98) Like Danby's image it describes a blighted land - the dystopian wilderness of the Western Front, a pestilent waste of shattered trees, toxic soils and scattered bones. Perhaps here, for the first time since Danby depicted the corrupted 'poison anchar of Java', might be found the *Upas* in its modern incarnation.

In fact, Nash served for only a very short time on the front-line. In May 1917, after less than eight weeks in Flanders, he was injured in a bad fall and invalided home days before many of his fellow officers were killed in an offensive. However, what he saw in that short time had a radical impact on him and his art. Most notably, he was stunned at the perseverance of nature. (26) Although war had wreaked its havoc, nature was proving extraordinarily resilient. Nash wrote of walking through a wood, or at least what remained of it after the shelling, when it was just 'a place with an evil name, pitted and pocked with shells, the trees torn to shreds, often reeking with poison gas'. Weeks later, to his great surprise, this 'most desolate ruinous place' was drastically changed. It was now 'a vivid green':

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...(Nash 1948, 187)

Nash was both bemused and maddened by the strange absurdities all around him, unsure whether to aim his eloquent anger at the war, at nature, or at 'we poor beings [who] are double enthralled'. The war radicalized his painting. Gone were the rather sentimental and derivative ideas borrowed from his Pre-Raphaelite phase, sidelined was the chivalric idealism of his late youth, to be replaced by a tougher language that matched the novel and grim conditions he had witnessed. Never before had he been subject to circumstances and places that were so 'pitiless, cruel and malignant'. For possibly the first time Nash was seeing for *himself*, not applying the tired conventions of an art-practice or imposing the vision of others. As one astute biographer so vividly remarks: 'He saw it'. (Bertram 1955, 91) His brief service in the front-line trenches blasted him into the public eye. In July 1917 he mounted a show of eighteen small drawings at the Goupil Gallery in London, which marked a distinct shift in his style. Gone were the fluffy elms: to be replaced by splintered woods and panoramic views of the hollowed Salient. Although he knew of the Vorticists, and had recently purchased a copy of one of Nevinson's drypoints of Ypres, his drawing did not yet display the technical advancement of his contemporaries, nor did it display the scream of tragedy that would fill his later works, but it was instantly memorable. (Gough 2010, 148) As one observer noted with admiration, the work had 'an actuality, an immediacy, that brought to life everything about the front which people had read and heard, but had found themselves quite unable to visualize.' (Eates 1973, 22) One rather sensitive drawing, tellingly entitled '*Chaos Decoratif*' (1917) suggests in its very title that Nash was still enamored of the graceful curves and decorative arcs produced by the fallen boughs of once-elegant trees. Warfare is implied rather than impressed upon the viewer; the sombre tones, scored surfaces and dramatic diagonals that would manner his later war work have yet to emerge and Nash was clearly searching for a graphic language that mirrored his experiences as a soldier. His search took him in unusual directions: one particularly tense drawing made on leave in Gloucestershire depicts the serried ranks of bald orchard trees, separated from the viewer by ditches, sturdy fence posts and barbed wire, while overhead two birds appear to collide in a dispute over territorial dominance.

Nash had rarely been attracted to sites of such strict land management and may have sought refuge in its reassuring symmetry. However, the war does not seem very far away from his thoughts, and in these and subsequent war pictures – such as *The Mule Track* (1918) and *The Menin Road* (1919) - Nash proved to himself, and to a growing crowd of admirers, that he could extend his earlier experiments with the southern English landscape into new locations and be equal to its peculiar, even nihilistic, demands.

### **The legacy of Nash at war: Gail Ritchie**

Few British painters can address issues of warfare and its impact on nature without some recognition of Nash's standing as a painter of panoramic devastation. He recognized with some discomfort, like Wilfred Owen and others, that the dread fascination with the effects of war seemed to fuel his imagination, to hone his talent in ways that he might least have anticipated. Artists, poets, and writers may not have sought 'awe-full' experience but they did not shy away from its uncomfortable aesthetic, at times embracing the 'negative sublime' that was the constant accompaniment of modern warfare on a global scale. (Gough 2010, 226-227)

Painter Gail Ritchie is aware of the contradictions in Nash's art; his fascination with the aesthetic of conflict and his abhorrence at its impact on the natural order. Ritchie grew up in a military family, her grandfather and great grandfather both serving in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the latter dying just outside Albert on the Somme during the Great War, and her upbringing in Northern Ireland was peppered with the nagging news of random violence. For many years her work has addressed the visual rhetoric of remembrance, most recently in an extensive suite of ink drawings called '*Memorial Series 2009*'. In this developmental piece, thirty-six sheets of gridded paper are arranged in a six by six display. On each sheet a drawing made in fine-tipped red ink shows a battlefield monument from a range of countries – the Newfoundland Caribou at Beaumont Hamel on the Somme, the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, the Canadian double-pylon at Vimy Ridge, others are taken from monuments of all shapes, sizes and scale in Italy, Russia, USA. (Figure One) Ritchie has drawn each memorial to the same size

on each sheet of paper, scale is irrelevant, and each monumental form is described in the same unwavering neutral outline with a modicum of finely hatched tone. As non-partisan diagrams of monumental memory Ritchie has attempted to encode the essential features of all memorial markers, to systematize them rather than identify their idiosyncrasies or their own symbolic properties. (Figure Two) She has used equality of scale to convey the equality of loss. 'It would', she writes, 'be difficult to convey accurately the scale of the Thiepval Memorial against a plinth-based unknown soldier in a town square. Both stand for the same thing - loss - and it would again be difficult to measure the weight of one person's against another. The monuments of the Great War, with regard to the name lists, gave equality to the dead and I tried to carry this through in the drawings.' (Ritchie 2010)

Thus shorn of context Ritchie has taken to display them in various ways: the choice of 36 drawings is an echo of the famous 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division in which her grandfather served. In one show they were arranged as a huge 'W', in others as a double pyramid, in another like a huge table cloth. Such decorative arrangements contest the symbolic gravity and the nationalist context of the memorials themselves and to this end the work has aroused strong responses in viewers who feel the neutral language, the singular colouration ['the colour of correcting fluid' comments the artist (Ritchie 2010)], and the deadpan presentation is improper for such icons of grief and remembrance. Diagrams, it has been argued, deny compassion and empathy.

Ritchie often work in sequences; each water-colour in her suite of *Wounded Poppies* is named after Irish and Northern Ireland soldiers who were shot at dawn during the Great War. (Ritchie 2010a) Like Nash's paintings, flowers represent human beings. Where he painted 'headless' stumps of blasted trees, Ritchie uproots this most brittle of flowers, emphasizing its frailty and transience, its rhizomatic nature, and its associations with opium, and the sleep of reason. (Figures Three and Four)

But possibly, Ritchie's most contentious recent work is her ambition to create an open-ended suite of 'tree ring' drawings. The origin of this long-term project lies in a serendipitous moment when glimpsing a log pile in Albert on the former Somme Battlefield in France at the same moment as browsing a pictorial spread in a British newspaper which carried portrait photographs of

the dozens of British servicemen who had died in the fighting in Afghanistan. 'Growth rings', also known as 'tree rings' or 'annual rings', can be seen in any horizontal cross section cut through the trunk of a tree. They indicate new growth in the vascular cambium and result from the change in growth speed through the seasons of the year. Invariably, one ring marks the passage of one year in the life of the tree. (Ritchie 2010b)

Ritchie saw a connection between dendrochronology (the scientific method of dating based on the analysis of patterns of tree-rings) and the lives of soldiers killed in action. Drawing a parallel between the passage of time marked on each tree and the abbreviated lives of dead soldiers Ritchie has created a suite of portraits that connects the two sets of stunted 'lives'. Each drawing is painstakingly executed in a hard 6H pencil, as if to inscribe each years of tree growth into the body of the paper, a softer 8B pencil is used to fill out the deeper, darker tones. Her first exploratory drawings were simply captioned 'Captain – 29', but now the rings are arranged in sobering sequences of age – a row of three x 24 year olds; a row of five x 18 year olds, and uniformly entitled as 'Larch 35', or 'Larch 23'. (Figure Five) As in the 'Memorial Studies' suite, the presentation – deadpan, unadorned, unframed – is deliberate, even provocative, and there is an outright refusal to offer more than the most economic explanation about the historic origin of the image, or the conflation of fallen (or chopped) tree and the 'fallen' of the battlefield. (Ritchie, 2010c)

Fifteen tree rings were shown in Paris in 2009 and aroused an array of responses and readings from visitors, some choosing to see faces, brain scans, targets, or even bullets embedded in the outer carapace of the tree's cross-section. Many were clearly shocked at the simple, but telling parallel between annual growth and sudden termination. As Ritchie notes, the project has no end-point, it is open-ended, predicated on the duration of the war in Afghanistan and an unknown number of British dead. (Figure Six) Far from being provocative she sees these artworks as reconciliatory, a joining of natural forces with lost lives, but she recognizes the parallels with premature logging, the felling of immature organisms by violent means. In Northern Ireland, notes Ritchie, such artworks are inevitably seen through the prism of 'The Troubles', especially when many of the *Poppy* watercolours have local

names – John, Shaun, Patrick - and the tree rings draw harsh attention to numbers, age, and the duration of conflict. (Ritchie 2010) Felled trees as surrogates for corpses appeared often in Paul Nash's post-war work. He used the motif of log-piles many times, neatly piled in *Landscape at Iden* (1929) and again in the funeral pyre of wood for his illustrations in *Urne Buriale* (1932). Here, in both Nash and Ritchie, we see echoes of the tension between formalised spaces – parks, arboreta, plantations – and the informal, outwardly chaotic appearance of untrammelled nature.

In her most recent drawings of ancient gnarled trees, standing sentinel in the Northern Ireland landscape, Ritchie has become enthralled by how they function as repositories of local and collective memory. She has been visiting and drawing one specimen veteran that has over the years been impregnated with votive offerings, studded with nails, coins, and political logos and strewn with paraphernalia. Under siege from those who wish to preserve it and those who want it burned down, this tree epitomizes for Ritchie the uncomfortable issues of violation, despoliation and political division, which run invisibly through the social and topographical sub-strata of Northern Ireland. Ritchie's forensic drawings of these ancient wizened stumps brings us back to Paul Nash and the 'Poison Tree of Java', as an icon of dread fascination that both lures and repels. There is also a parallel between Ritchie's drawings of stunted lives and felled saplings, and the emergence at Alrewas of the Ulster Ash Grove, the 1,000 trees planted to commemorate each member of the security forces killed on active service between 1969 and 2000. In a reversal of Ritchie's images of truncated growth, the Ash Grove proposes enduring memory through strategic planting and numerical design.

### **Julian Perry: creating places of enchantment**

Describing him as 'one of the most intelligent of the British modernist painters' Julian Perry has also made explicit references to the impact of Paul Nash on his own writing and painting. Perry recognizes how Nash fused the innovations of European Surrealism with the British Romantic tradition, how he oscillated between informal and formalised renditions of the natural order, and is keenly aware of how Nash's career shifted from the borrowed language of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood through the emotional crisis of the First

World War into the spiritual mysticism of the vernal equinox series. Through catalogue essays and in interviews (Perry 2004; Perry 2010) Perry writes about their common approach to nature, and in particular to trees, their joint understanding of them as 'potential emblems of nihilism', and a shared use of motifs, designs and compositional devices.

A landscape painter with a long record of exhibitions and commissions, Perry's exhibition 'Testament' (2004) exemplifies his rapport with Nash and draws interesting comparisons between the painter's fascination with carefully chosen tracts of southern England in the 1920s and 30s, and Perry's recent expeditions on the imperiled coast of Suffolk, along London's Lea Valley (site of the 2012 Olympics) and particularly in Epping Forest during 2003-04. (Perry 2007; Perry 2009)

Perry was attracted to Epping Forest for both its geographic and historical character. Secured in 1882 by the Corporation of London and bounded by the M11, M25, the A112, and the North Circular Road, the forest functions as an invaluable, if slightly choked, lung for east London and harbours some of its most memorable historical venues, not least the site of highwayman Dick Turpin's 'cave' tucked into the side of the two-thousand-year old ditch surrounding Loughton Camp. It is, as Perry notes 'one of the few surviving examples of medieval woodland management [in England]; a complex system of cyclical harvesting, based on the paradox that trees grow faster, produce different leaves and live longer, if you drastically cut them back at intervals of approximately twenty years.' (Perry 2004, 24) Intensively and skillfully managed the forest has, for over a thousand years, been a vital source of food for people and animals, yielding food, fuel (charcoal and kindling) and timber (from fencing poles to building materials).

Perry brings his deep understanding of the historical and biological rhythms of the forest to his paintings, but his motifs are often drawn from more mundane sights: 'I saw this' (2004) depicts a vehicle hubcap trapped in the branches of a small tree, the detritus of urbanism litters the forests' glades and clearings, offstage the sound of cars is omnipresent. (Figure Seven) Perry exhibited seven large canvases and twelve smaller works at the Guildhall Art Gallery (in association with Austin Desmond Fine Art) in Autumn 2004. One of the most memorable pieces was a large oil painting showing

what appears to be a circular pond under ice surrounded by thin, spare saplings, their shadows black across the frozen veneer of the pond, the surrounding woodland heavily covered in piled snow. (Figure Eight) However, this is no ordinary pond. From September 1944 to March 1945 a number of V-2 rockets fell on Epping Forest. Launched from northern Europe in the dying months of the war they fell harmlessly in the woods creating sizeable craters, war wounds now rendered civic amenity. (Feaver, in Perry 2004, 8)

This pond did not exist until early in 1945 ... [T]he rocket, launched from Belgium 6 minutes earlier, was over 40 ft tall and had travelled at more than three times the speed of sound. The explosion could have been heard more than twenty miles away; a double boom, first the explosion and then the sonic shock wave. In the 1960s the pond was surveyed and found to be home to four species of fish; it now has two Corporation of London "No Fishing" signs. (Perry 2004, 24)

There is something in Perry's image that is reminiscent of Paul Nash's extraordinary painting 'Totes Meer' (the German words for 'dead sea') which was inspired by the sight of a dump of wrecked aircraft at Cowley in Oxfordshire. Nash described the weird sight thus: 'The thing looked to me suddenly, like a great inundating sea ... the breakers rearing up and crashing on the plain. And then, no: nothing moves, it is not water or even ice, it is something static and dead.' (Grant 2004) Unlike Nash's writhing and jagged shards, Perry's militarized pond is actually frozen over, catching 'long blue shadows in snow the colour of silence', the noisy cataclysm of its origination long blown away in the westerly winds. But Perry has a knack of finding and describing places that are latent with the potential for sudden noises and unexpected violences. His most recent project has been along the vulnerable eastern shoreline of Lincolnshire where the soft land is being irreversibly eaten away by a voracious sea. Just north of Dunwich, says Perry, the countryside appears to continue eastward and then literally stops dead at precipitous recent cliff edges. On the newly laid beach healthy, recently growing trees are sticking out in the sand. (Perry 2010)

Just as Nash was drawn to such landscapes, Perry has ‘a feel for in between zones, for places where boundaries waver and enclaves are created.’ (Feaver, in Perry 2004, 8) He has a natural affinity for in-between, or liminal, places in the Southern English landscape, places that are ostensibly empty, but full of latent energy and unexpectedness. These phenomena found their most extreme form in the disputed territories of ‘No Man’s Land’ on the Western Front. Painters, poets and writers developed a morbid obsession with its phantasmagoric terrain. Welsh poet David Jones describing its strange 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. (Jones 1937, x)

Perry makes explicit reference to a parallel land of trenches, duckboards and liminality in a number of paintings, most notably in a series called ‘Viewing Point’ (2000), which was painted at a tract of woodland near Waltham Abbey. Working alongside forest rangers, Perry came to understand that many of the non-indigenous tree types were actually invasive foreigners that had to be eradicated, sometimes by adopting rather extreme measures. Other parts of the forest had to be made accessible by laying raised wooden walkways that could penetrate the interior of the woods especially those thicker patches of foliage that were the preferred habitat of rare birds and shy species. His new ‘interior’ knowledge permeates the canvases. In ‘Coppicing for Nightingales’ (2000) (Figure Nine) a wooded causeway zig-zags into the thickets evoking, as one critic 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.’ (Feaver, in Perry 2004, 8)

Perry actually feels the links are much less tenuous. He recognizes the parallels between his use of duckboard tracking through ‘nature rambles’ and Nash’s war paintings ‘*The Mule Track*’ (1918) and ‘*The Menin Road*’ (1919). He speaks of them as seminal paintings in recent European art history, which

explore how fragile, temporary routes can tease a way across violated land. He is also aware in these large paintings of the subtle pictorial parallels made between brambles and barbed wire, between large puddles and shell craters. (Perry 2010)

In equally large canvases, such as *'Long Running'* (2004) Perry depicts a suite of fragmented and isolated silver birch trees, which have over time encroached on the open space, threatening to destroy its unique character. (Figure Ten) Not only is the central tree reminiscent of those fake periscope trees that were erected by the Royal Engineers on key parts of the Western Front, but it is surrounded by a deep trench of newly dug earth. The reason is simple, if somewhat surprising: one of the few effective ways of ridding a tract of rhizomatic silver birches is to dig out its roots, exposing them through perimeter entrenchment, or as a last resort to blow them up with explosives. Here again, there are oblique references to landscapes of war, to places suffused with tension and expectation, those outwardly becalmed and settled tracts that are in reality potent places of sudden noise, disturbance and even danger.

### **Canvas and commemoration: some concluding remarks**

In what sense can these artists' work be considered commemorative? In 1919 the ambition to create a grand Hall of Remembrance in central London to house paintings by Nash, Nevinson, Sargent and many others, and an equally impressive scheme for the nation's war art in Ottawa Canada, was regarded as a major statement of national commemoration. (Gough 2010, 28-31) That both schemes floundered and eventually failed tells us more about the mood of post-war austerity than it does the urge to regard major artworks as appropriate icons of remembrance. These two contemporary painters are closely attuned to the complex relationship between visual representation, memory and commemoration. Both artists emphasise the complex inter-relationships in the contested traditions of places of memory and the art needed to evoke appropriate forms of commemoration. As we have seen, the iconographic coding in Ritchie's work is ever conscious of uncomfortable issues aroused by remembrance and mourning. Her work, even the choice of symbolically charged colours such as 'orange' and 'red' - are always framed

by the meta-narrative of 'The Troubles'. The discomfort expressed by many visitors negotiating, interpreting and reading the 'tree ring' drawings is evidence of the power of artifacts to incite strong responses. For his part, Perry has been drawn toward historic topographies which sport ancient commemorative structures – fieldworks, forts, pollards – as well as more recent archeological evidence such as bomb-craters and today's material culture left discarded in by-pass and lay-by. In deliberately quoting from the war art of such figures as Paul Nash, Perry acknowledges continuity and relevance. His battered and beleaguered urban woods may not outwardly be as spoilt as those that Nash witnessed on the Western Front but they are facing long-term attritional damage from the teeming metropolis through a toxic cocktail of exhaust fumes, acid rain and other downwind perils. In his work Perry pays quiet homage to war artists such as Nash, Kennington, and Strang who were ceaselessly drawn towards the totemic power of isolated trees surrounded by empty wastes, icons of both turmoil and unexpected rejuvenation and recovery. (Perry 2010)

Just as the ambition to build a grand Hall of Remembrance foundered after the Great War, so the ambition to locate a garden of national commemoration after the Second World War on the banks of the Thames came to nought. (Whittick 1946, 16-17) Indeed, the National Memorial Arboretum owes its origins to those ambitions contrived but abandoned in the late 1940s. Both of the artists' work we have examined chimes with the very fundamental debate facing those designers whose gardens are intended to commemorate distant events or to promote ideas of peace and reconciliation. In her drawings Ritchie has made uncomfortable parallels between the longevity of tree growth and the truncated lives of young servicemen; she has also drawn attention to the (at times, uncomfortable) use of 'dead trees' as a means of embellishing decorative garden designs. As we have seen, at the Arboretum (and in commemorative landscapes all over the world) dead, dying or distressed natural forms such as trees have been preserved because they are regarded as an essential component in the iconography of remembrance and an essential link to the history of a site. The *Danger Tree* on the Somme, at Beaumont Hamel, referenced by Ritchie in her drawings is now preserved

in a barrel of cement and has attained the status of a near-holy relic. (Gough 2004a, 241) A few miles north on the old Loos battlefield, remembrance groups have replanted a tree on the original spot of the 'Lone Tree', which was an essential datum point during that unfortunate battle. Even that act of remembrance and arboreal re-enactment was linked with controversy. (Gough 2007, 699) As Perry has also identified in his very recent work, planting – whether it be in the hinterland of Epping Forest, on a historic landscape in Flanders, or on a newly contrived memory-scape such as at Alrewas - is invariably a delicate, even transgressive act, in which issues of legitimacy, ownership and spatial jurisdiction are played out through the proxy of trees, shrubs and lawn.

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Captions

Figure One

Gail Ritchie, *Memorial Series*, red ink on gridded paper, 2009. Copyright, the artist.

Figure Two

Gail Ritchie, *Memorial Series (Thiepval)*, red ink on gridded paper, 2009. Copyright, the artist.

Figure Three

Gail Ritchie, *Somme Poppy, for Frank Ritchie*, watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm, 2009. Copyright, the artist.

Figure Four

Gail Ritchie, *Somme Poppy Series*, watercolour on paper, each 30 x 20 cm, 2009 Copyright, the artist.

Figure Five

Gail Ritchie, *Tree Ring Series*, pencil on paper, various dimensions, 2009. Copyright, the artist.

Figure Six

Gail Ritchie, *Ring 37*, pencil on paper, 2009. Copyright, the artist.

Figure Seven

Julian Perry, *I Saw This*, oil on panel, 122.5 x 158 cm, 2004. Copyright, the artist.

Figure Eight

Julian Perry, *Rock Crater Pond in Snow ii*, oil on panel, 122.5 x 215 cm, 2004. Copyright, the artist.

Figure Nine

Julian Perry, *Coppicing for Nightingales*, oil on panel, 122.5 x 215 cm, 2000. Copyright, the artist.

Figure Ten,

Julian Perry, *Long Running*, oil on panel, 122.5 x 158 cm, 2004. Copyright, the artist.

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