...the rest is smoke

HELEN SEAR

In Conversation Helen Sear & Stuart Cameron

Stuart:
So Helen lets just start by looking at the work that you're making for Venice, and the context of Venice, and in particular the piece of work that references the painting by Mantegna of Saint Sebastian which can be seen in the Ca' d'Oro. Can you tell me a little bit about why you were interested in that particularly?

Helen
That's been a really interesting development since our original proposal for Wales in Venice, and a product of looking at the source locations here in Wales and trying to relate those to the site in Venice, particularly Santa Maria Ausiliatrice. The story starts when I was at art school. In the first year we were asked to copy a painting at the National Gallery, and the painting I chose was Samson and Delilah by Andrea Mantegna. It's been a key image for me because I think it embodies a lot of the concerns that I have even today in relation to how I work and the things that I'm drawn to. This painting is a strange mixture of both colour and black and white and is based on the cameos that jewelers were making and many artists were interested in and collected. So the figures are painted as if they are sculptures in black and white and the background is almost as if it is a marble effect, but in colour. So a kind of trompe l'oeil, alluding to the transference of materials from one thing to another.

S
In effect, it's really an early multi-media piece.

H
Exactly. Which is what I think drew me to this painting. It has two dimensional decoration but also a three dimensional perspective. But not as a painting – as a sculptural relief. So Mantegna has always been somebody I've always looked at and been interested in. I was working with a photograph that I'd made in a field close to my village just beneath Raglan Castle. It's a field growing rape seed, and in the summer I'd been photographing this bright acid yellow field and after the field had been harvested I went back and picked out the roots that had been left. I pulled them out of the ground and put them in my studio for quite a long time. I'd been thinking about Mantegna and this piece, and the connection between these roots

which had been cut off during harvesting which looked like arrows. So I started to look at the Saint Sebastians that Mantegna had painted during his life.

S
Well he painted three and the origin of that is interesting

H
Saint Sebastian has been referenced for years by many artists, recently because of its homoerotic content and this idea of the naked man, but more interesting to me as I delved into the research is that he was the Patron Saint of the Protection against the Plague. Mantegna himself had the plague and recovered. This might be the reason why he painted three. So when I started working with these arrows from the agricultural field in Raglan, I was originally using the Saint Sebastian in the Louvre in Paris as a map, or reference point, for piercing the photograph. But then I discovered that the last Saint Sebastian that he painted is housed in the Ca' d'Oro in Venice.

S
Possibly the best of the three.

H
It was found in his studio after his death. So when we first went out to recce the site for Wales In Venice I said we have to go and see this Saint Sebastian in the flesh, and there was an amazing correlation between the site of the Santa Maria Ausiliatrice and the setting of the Mantegna.

S
Yes, because it's completely embedded in that marble architecture.

H
Exactly. And also it was life size – it's a pretty stunning piece.

S
It's bordering on the photographic in the quality of the painting.

H
That was a deciding factor which made me go back and rework this photographic piece again using the Venice Saint Sebastian as the map. So it's been through several versions. And it had already gone through three before that.

S
And more than that, I think in the process of developing the work and the exhibition as a whole the title that you've arrived at comes from an inscription on that painting *Nihil nisi divinum stabile est. Caetera fumus*.

H
Yes, there's a candle in the painting that's just been snuffed out, and around it there's this little inscription that roughly translated means "nothing is stable if not divine, the rest is smoke". The notion that perhaps our human presence on the earth is an illusion, in a way.

S
Certainly ephemeral.

H
Yes and transitory. This painting is about mortality, and he painted it fairly close to his own death. But I really liked the idea of 'the rest is smoke' and beyond the specific meaning in the painting it took me to a world of illusion and looking and perception, and that's something I've tried to embed in all the new suite of work.

S
Yes. And I think that gives it a very rich context for the work and the siting there. Thinking particularly about how the Mantegna piece is set into the architecture I think it's true to say we've tried to mirror that in the way we've gone about developing and planning the work.

H
In 'the rest is smoke' the bulk of what I'm dealing with here in terms of imagery is to do with wood and woods. And there were ideas of fire and marking and inscribing and cutting – and all these things made the Mantegna painting a key piece in relation to the other pieces of work.

Going back to the idea of siting work in relation to the architecture, certainly Stack is made to measure, in a sense.

S
Stack being a meeting of photography and sculpture, or treating the photographic image as sculptural, that's probably a better way of describing it.
Comprising 32 aluminium panels on which the image is printed, they line the whole wall of one space.

H
I had already made several versions of Stack. One of which was 15m long but it didn't fit in the space. So I had to go back to find a particular wood stack. There's a very formal intention in the work, in one way, that is to restore the trees to a vertical position after they've been cut down and laid in a horizontal position, by leaning the panel sections upright against the wall.

S
But also I think you bring other associations to bear on that, some of which I think are fairly clear and immediate in the sense that those metal panels are very similar to the machine or tool used to cut down the trees in the first place. So the materials echo the history of it.

H
I think the point where and when the image and surface fuse – fuse literally and metaphorically - is important. So when you look at the image you see it very clearly because the whole picture is made up of over fifty photographs which are stitched together. That's something you don't see, you don't immediately notice. But that's how I managed to get the quality. So that when you get close up to the surface of the image you can see very clearly where the chain saw has cut, and that's the point where it sits on the metal, so there's a kind of fusion of image and material. Which is something that I've thought about a lot in most of the work. It's something that's very important to me. There are two viewing distances.

S
There are. With that piece, I've only seen it partially set up in the studio, but enough to get a good idea of it. Very surprising things happen with it physically, especially the way that light alters everything about it.

H
It alters as you physically move past it, but also it absorbs any kind of colour that's in the room because there are no whites any more, they've become a reflective surface. So any colour or light coming into the room becomes absorbed into the image. So although it's black and white it absorbs the colour of its surroundings in a way.

S
It's a surprisingly dark piece of work actually. It's almost about measuring mortality in a way. Certainly time is a strong factor.

H
Yes. I didn't really intend for that to happen but in a way I suppose you can't help that because you're looking at the rings inside the tree, you're looking horizontally at something that has aged.

S
And also how the panels are laid out.

H
One of the important things for me is actually when I was taking the photographs, when I was there at the original site, was the question how do I take a photograph of

this without standing in one place and creating a panorama. So I systematically moved the camera along the length of the stack taking the photographs. It's not like a panoramic eye. I'm actually physically walking along photographing each section .

S
Yes and you said earlier that you didn't think that was necessarily very apparent. But actually what you've described mirrors what the viewer has to do. Whether you realise it or not, you have to look at it that way.

H
I was very conscious of the way I had to photograph it. Front on, absolutely front on, to each section. So it is a different experience.

S
Going back to how we've tried to relate the work to that particular context and site, really the first piece of work that people will see when they come in to the exhibition is the new moving image piece *Company of Trees* which is quite a large scale projection and it's almost made for that space which also contains an altar piece painting. How do you feel about putting those pieces side by side?

H
I wasn't so interested in the altar piece, although it's hard to ignore. But more in the columns within the space, the columns that are either side of the altar piece and holding up the balcony and the architecture, and the relationship of trees with columns and measurement in the John Berger quote.

"The company they offer is spatial, and it is a way of measuring, of counting.
Long before any numerals or mathematics, when human language was first naming the world, trees offered their measures - of distance, of height, of space… From them was born the idea of the pillar, the column…" John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, London: Granta Books (1992).

S
Yes and how trees create the idea for a column

H
Yes. And beech woods are also known as the cathedrals of the forest, which I read in Richard Mabey's book. That's really interesting, and they're associated with the feminine, as opposed to the oak tree, which is masculine.
Going back to how I was thinking about how I was going to make this piece of work. I'd already identified a site in Wales where I'd been filming even before Venice. I'd already been making work there and it was a site I'd been back to more than twice a week for the whole of the past year, taking photographs, collecting moving image

material, and getting to know this very small beech wood. There are two things we're talking about here, the location that I found and then the siting in Venice.

S
Both of which are important because we bring those together.

H
On one level this piece seemed very appropriate even at the beginning stages of Venice because you realize Venice is built on stacks of wood. These things you start to notice. Up in Peckett Stone near Trellech where I often walk with the dogs, I found this beech wood hidden a little way from the road and I noticed it had been branded with foresters' numbers for the purpose of felling. I'd seen this at other sites, and I was intrigued. They number both sides of the tree, but I think what made this place resonate for me was there were 83 trees numbered 1 – 83. At the time that was the age of my mother and I was just thinking about time and ideas about the wood and moving image. I suppose I'd always wanted to develop from my previous work such as Inside the View and Beyond the View - still image work where I'd tried to collapse the distance between the viewer and view through the laborious process of erasing one image to partially reveal the other image. I'd always wanted to take that into a time based project and this seemed like the ideal thing to do, to be talking about marking trees, marking time, cutting as in the trees being cut and cutting as in editing.

S
So there's a very strong relationship between the two pieces of work Stack and Company of Trees that might not be immediately apparent.

H
It's not immediately apparent in its resolution and I think that's something that's really important – I'm not in the business of doing everything in the same style to form a cohesive narrative.

S
You've actually spoken about trying to disrupt a sense of narrative in Company of Trees and that the edit is partially designed to do that.

H
Well, yes. It's definitely not a film. When I was thinking about making this work I was thinking OK, I want to be able when I see the light or weather in a certain way to get a tripod and camera and go. I don't want to have to phone a film crew. It's just me and my camera. That gives me the freedom to go back on numerous occasions.

S
And it's your eye.

H
What I've been looking at in the still image work is the immersion in something. An image that's became critical to and crucial in this work is by Max Ernst, that of a Zoetrope. It's one of the collages in the book. "Rêve D'Une Petite Fille Qui Voulut Entrer Au Carmel". Rosalind Krauss writes about this image in "The Optical Unconscious" in relation to being simultaneously inside and outside of a zoetropic field. In other words you are using your hand/body to activate the zoetrope whilst simultaneously immersed in the illusion. This was a key image in the formation of Company of Trees, the young woman in the dress and the flight of the birds which plays out in the next space of the exhibition in the work Altar, the turning mechanism of the zoetrope replaced by the girl circumnavigating the tree.

I was looking at this film on two levels. Throughout the projected work there is a countdown from 83 to 1 progressing through the film, referencing Peter Greenaway's *Drowning by Numbers* when it goes from 1 to 100 throughout the duration of the film. So there are references in that sense to a leader film, the actual physical materiality of analogue film that goes through the gate as 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, here we go. I chose very specifically to crop the figure, the female figure, at the neck and just below the knee. The figure is cropped so that the orange dress, which is the same colour as the numbers on the trees reads as a female figure, but because of the scale of the projection it becomes like a curtain, a cinema curtain that goes across the screen and back behind the tree. So the whole of the piece is a circular piece in a sense. Like a circular saw.

S
The movement is cyclical and is read quite easily. It may be less apparent when it's projected at a large scale because it will be pretty immersive then and the scale affects it quite a lot. Also because of the sound there too, the presence of birds, the audio. What's extraordinary about the sound is that you can identify it as one thing, but as you listen to it, the less it becomes that, because there are harmonics.

H
I sourced the sound from the woods, chainsaws and birds, and had a rough idea of what I wanted. Then I needed someone who understood how sound works in space to put it together. I'd already had a shot at it. I'd already started slowing it down so the chainsaws began to sound like church bells, and Matthew Lovett has really run with that and created a real sound space and powerful soundtrack. He can talk about that more.

S
That's kind of the equivalent of a visual edit.

H
The idea with the sound was that, because the video in the next room is silent, it would travel through the smaller Sacristia area, and you'd get a residue of the bird sound and join things together in a subtle way.

S
Usually one's trying to separate things out, but in this case we're trying to mesh them together aren't we?

H
I think we've thought very carefully that each piece has a specific beginning and end and they can all of them exist individually as pieces of work. Each single piece can. But the job for us, and the basis of our discussion, has been to establish how this links together. Not as a one way journey through the work. But whatever point you enter the work.

S
There are several routes that you can take through it that we've plotted, possible routes, and actually it's far more interesting to have more than one route and explore that.

H
We've also tried to think about the relationship between the black and white and the colour – going back to that Mantegna and how that's punctuated throughout the piece. For instance when you get in to the room with the felled tree trunks with the banded marks of the trees and the five framed photographs, the colour palette and the colour intensity reflects directly back to the first piece with the heightened colour used in Company of Trees.

S
I've always been very interested in how you use colour. It's a strong element in your work, you can't miss it, even though there's black and white work as well, or work that doesn't use colour. I always think colour's quite a seductive thing and one's always drawn to it, quite abstractedly. And I think that operates in your work. But once you get closer it takes you into a slightly less comfortable zone somehow, because of that intensity in a way.

H
I also see colour as the enemy of conceptual pure thought. Colour is about the visceral, and it's about how we might respond to something at a pre-conscious level. David Bachelor has written about this very articulately in Chromophobia. My use of colour is also to do with a convergence of the synthetic and the natural, using

heightened colour to explore relationships between light and pigment, painting and photography.

S
I can see, for example in the brand images, the colour there, you're not sure what you're looking at, whether it's some sort of colour applied or it could be something burning. It changes the nature of the material.

H
Well it's going back to that thing I was talking about with Mantegna, it's illusion. Because the colour is originally spray painted on the trees and of course the photograph is made up of a composite of many colours. The final image is then printed by myself using high pigment inkjet dye. So it goes full circle, from paint to photograph back to a paint output as pigment. In the end – the colour - you can make out the fact that its tree bark, just about, but then it looks like there's a fire inside the wood. But then wood is made to burn. So that's what I was thinking.

S
Branding is burnt on, whether it's on to flesh or trees or whatever.
But I think that's what's interesting. You can't separate out the colour from some kind of material transformation actually. I was going to say transubstantiation. It almost is that.

H
The transference of material from one thing to another is very much tied up in the idea of magic and alchemy.

S
Well we have smoke and mirrors, don't we?

If we consider Altar, one of the other moving image pieces in the Venice exhibition, you initially think you're looking at this landscape and it turns out not to be a landscape. At least not the one you thought it was, and it's made of some other material but it's hard to get the original landscape out of your head.

H
Well I suppose with Altar, that again is piece that has developed slowly. It was a move away from my previous obsession with museum dioramas and I wanted to work with a living diorama, in a sense. So these were filmed outside of the door with a very crude set up under a tarpaulin, but the two rocks either side are important because they had fossils in them and you can see the fossils, so it's about time. And there's this rectangular brick of bird seed which gradually gets eaten down and then itself, through my filming, turns back into a rock.

S
Didn't Renaissance painters use rocks to create landscapes, but sometimes they got the scale wrong?

H
It's a little bit like the Mantegnas, actually I am thinking of "The Agony in the Garden".

S
There's a theme running through your work, and there always has been, in terms of our relation to animals and natural worlds and its like you're watching something behavioural which we project ourselves onto.

H
But also there's a different speed and there's something quite interesting about the birds - although I've played around with the speed of things a little bit. There's something about this idea of peripheral vision. And the heartbeat and the speed of the birds as living creatures is outside of our knowledge, because they're existing in a different universe. And this has always been something I've tried to make people look at, this amazing world outside the confines of our own physical bodies.

S
It's a form of anthropomorphism.

H
Of course it is, it's like the last supper in a way.

S
But it's interesting how we can't stop ourselves doing it.

H
In the end it goes back to something really primal, and it just happens to be displayed on a LED screen. It goes to the basic idea of landscape. There are two rocks. It rains. There are rocks, there's water, there's food. It's beautiful. What might have made a landscape beautiful is that if you looked over the horizon and saw that you could survive and live in it, at a very primitive level, that would have been beautiful. Mightn't it?

S
It might. Yes.

Thinking a bit more about the landscape, which has always been there in your work. In much of your work you're looking and identifying a landscape space and then it

becomes less certain. It's not a literal landscape. It's more of an atmospheric or psychological landscape.

H
Sometimes I've used the body as a landscape. When I've used the backs of the animals and with the skies in previous work. I think what's interesting for me on a formal level is the idea of figure and ground. If we're figures how do we connect with that. Can we go beyond limitations? How can we understand what is other to ourselves. And that's a real wonder to me and I've just wanted to articulate that poetically.

S
In previous work you've enmeshed the figure – how we conventionally think about figure against ground ceases to exist because they're completely meshed together. Sometimes that's also been a process of your hand layering through some kind of drawing to uncover.

H
I think it's the opposite of layering.

S
Excavating?

H
That's what computer software does. It's built up in layers so you can drag things through the layers, so in a way it is a little bit like an archaeological exploration. But I've always enjoyed using that sort of software in ways it's not supposed to be used. So I might be using something that's supposed to be invisible and making it visible on the surface. For instance, I'm using auto-colour correct, which usually normalises something across the whole surface of an image. But using it in a different way it actually heightens things rather than making it invisible. That I find very exciting. Also where I've done a lot of hand erasing, it is very deliberately a labour of the hand that goes back to the idea of the body not just the eye being the dominant sense. It's extending the photographic moment.

S
Yes. The drawn and the touch indicate the presence.

H
Yes. Even though I'm touching a computer tablet with a pen I still have wrist ache hours later. It's a physical activity.

S

The other screen-based piece in the exhibition – The Beginning and End of Everything – also relates very strongly to the architectural space in that you're looking down on the screen and it seems you're looking into a pool of some kind but actually you're looking upwards. Can you explain where that piece came from?

H
The original site of the piece is also in this beech wood up in Trellech in Monmouthshire, so while I was filming Company of Trees I was making a series of moving images pointing the camera directly from the ground up to the crown of trees, at various times during that year. Echoing the ellipse shape of Altar, as the piece is showing in the same room, I've used an effect over the whole piece that makes the image appear to flow like the surface of water. So this is obviously referring directly to Venice itself, floating on the water and being supported by trees. In a way it's like reversing the ground we're standing on, upending the position of the viewer. The camera was looking upwards into the sky, but the viewer is looking down into what appears to be a pool of water, with the trees reflected in it.

S
That also echoes previous work – I'm thinking of Spot – where you're showing photographs of the birds but also the conventional space is disrupted by a similar upward looking into the tree. This device is carried forward into the Venice work.

H
It just forms a different kind of perspective. Like a pool of light situated under the window in the Sacrista, so in a way there's a real reference to that window as well.

S
Colour is also important in that piece, the intensity of colour as we have said already.

H
In this piece I've deliberately worked with the idea of the synthetic nature of colours and post-production effects available within the editing software, but I've worked with them to give a sense of depth and movement to the image. This idea of the synthetic and the natural converge in this piece. On one level it can almost be read abstractly, a little bit like the changing light in a lava lamp where the image morphs and changes and moves and flows from one colour into another. The elements of the screen and the image start to take on an organic form, of something that could almost be a living creature. An amoebic feel. Where the beginning and the end of the figure and the ground, or in this case of the tree trunk and the sky, begin to merge, a little bit like Flaubert's Temptation of St Anthony where at the end there is this wonderful vision he has where rocks become merged with animal forms, and become merged and fused together.