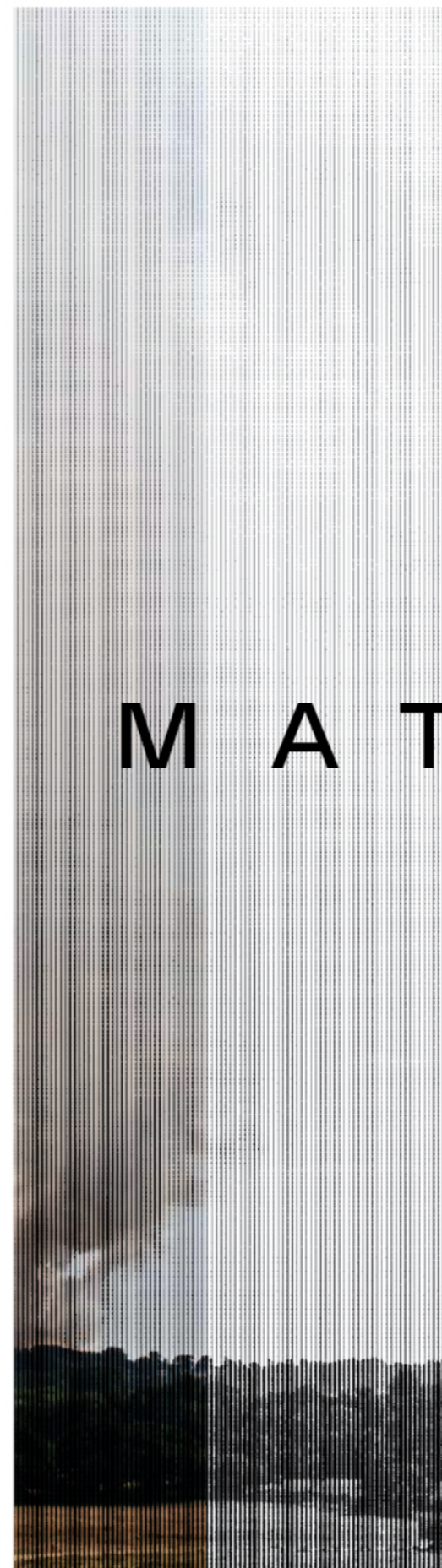




R E S I S T A N T



M A T E R I A L S

THE
BLACKWATER
POLYTECHNIC

The Blackwater Polytechnic is a visual art organisation operated by Freddie Robins and Ben Coode-Adams as an umbrella for their events and curatorial projects. They are based on their family's blackcurrant farm in rural Essex in a barn which they have converted into a live/work space.

We have a small seasonal gallery. We are fortunate to have been able to work with many generous and professional artists who have enabled us to host some magnificent exhibitions.

For us the idea of local is central to what we do. Living where we live 'local' is made up of people, culture and landscape - although Freddie and I have different ideas about all those things.

For me, the concept of a broader international art context that is somehow better than a local one because it is international I don't accept. The further idea that engaging with an international context is somehow more politically progressive I think is fundamentally erroneous. To my mind the motors of art production and innovation (if there is such a thing) have always literally been located in a place. From cave paintings, through Renaissance church painting, to Kurt Schwitters working in Cologne - these are all art that has been produced from and because of a specific and urgent geographic circumstance. I think that aesthetic geographic specificity often remains but it is masked by the ubiquity of globalised markets and institutions. I yearn for particularity, specificity and peculiarity in art production.

Aside from what I see in front of me, it is my mistranslation of art works and ideas across time, place, and material that is the catalyst for my own work to change and what I find endlessly fascinating. When I look at, for example Japanese prints, how can I make any headway beyond purely aesthetic appreciation? A profound visual misunderstanding is the foundation of a cracking awkwardness that can be rocket fuel for creativity. By embracing our unique flawed local selves, we shed superficial aspirations to belong and be the same as everyone else. Consequently, it is possible to be local anywhere.

Living and working in this rural area there is a tremendous weight of 'local' both as parochial, i.e. small minded (not an undeserved description) but also as banding together with a shared sense of identity. Essex is generally derided within the UK as being culture-less and uncouth. But I think there is more truth and beauty in uncouth yokel-ism than in an identikit dandified pretended internationalism. You just have to work a bit harder to go beyond your own preconceptions and comfortable echo-chamber identity politics to grasp it. We, here in Essex, must do this all the time. That is the work of not living and working in the centre.

Freddie Robins writes: "Many people have an idealised view of living in the countryside. They desire cheaper and larger housing, a garden, to have more children or a dog, (usually both), better schools, less crime and greater personal safety. A move to the countryside is for many a dream, a dream which, although I do live in the countryside, I do not share. Their dream is my reality.

The countryside is undoubtedly beautiful. At times it is downright breath-taking, but what do you do with all that beauty? It does not move, or inspire me, creatively. Where is the 'grit' or the 'rub' that I found in my urban life that gave me the impetus to be an artist? Unlike Alice Walker 'I do not want horses in my landscape. I want people, and lots of them, not just walkers who have lost their way. It is people and our very human predicament that I respond to. However, I want my work to have a relationship to my experiences. I want it to relate to the locality in which I live and in which it was made. My practice is essentially autoethnographic. The American scholar and researcher, Carolyn Ellis, defines this as "research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political"². In my practice 'making' predominantly replaces 'writing'.

We live just across the county line from 'Constable Country' with Flatford Mill and Willy Lott's House, the site of The Hay Wain (1821). Constable's most famous image and voted the second most popular painting in any British gallery³. I am all for the popular but I cannot agree with Constable when he wrote, "The sound of water escaping from mill dams... willows, old rotten planks, slimy posts, and brickwork. I love such things... As long as I do paint I shall never cease to paint such places.....They have always been my delight."

Unlike Constable, I do not paint. I knit. A medium idealised and derided in equal measure. An activity associated with the domestic and the parochial, a far cry from what comes to mind when we talk of internationalism. In 'Someone Else's Dream' I make use of the picture knits that were so popular when I was a teenager. In the 1980's these were regarded as highly fashionable but soon fell out of fashion and have never regained serious appreciation. I have been working with picture knits that depict pastoral scenes; farmhouses with animals, villages complete with churches, pretty streams, rolling hills, blue skies and fluffy white clouds. I have not made these jumpers but found them on eBay. Many hours of skilled labour no longer wanted or valued. Using a technique known as swiss darning, an embroidery stitch that mimics the knitted stitch, I have worked on top of the knitted countryside scenes, changing the idyllic picturesque scenes to the scenes of misery that can, and do, happen in the countryside.

Some of the scenes that I have embroidered are from personal experience, some from news stories, all have happened in the countryside. I have embroidered a car crash, a figure hanged from a tree, a house fire, a body drowned in a river, fly-tipping and a crime investigation scene complete with white tent, police DO NOT CROSS tape, police van, car and helicopter.



Willie Lott's Cottage, 2018
Photo: Ben Coode-Adams 2018



Installation shot from the exhibition Happy Days at the Blackwater Polytechnic with posters by Justin Knopp and Simon Emery

Scream if you want to go faster
Lacquer on 1960's VW Karmann Ghia Bonnet
photo: Douglas Atfield 2013

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Ben Coode-Adams
Self-Portrait with Bluebird on a Red Ground
 Watercolour on paper
 photo credit: Douglas Atfield 2018

Upon initial viewing these works have a cosy familiarity but the soft, knitted jumpers are completely at odds with the imagery. The material and form resist their stereotype. They exist as a disturbance to those dreams and a friendly reminder of reality." Freddie Robins, Essex 2018

I wrote a proposal for an exhibition at M100, an artist-run gallery in Odense, Denmark (<http://m100.dk>) back in April 2017. It is a wonderful optimistic piece of writing about utopian communities trying to make things better for themselves and those around them. And then in June 2017 it was revealed that my neighbours, even some of my friends did not share what I hope are values of tolerance and openness, values I took to be self-evidently for the good. For me this caused a profound and drawn out soul searching. I didn't want to make art, or put on events for these people.

I spent the winter disconsolately picking up litter from the verges of the roads surrounding our farm. At least I could make the little piece of land near me better. Each day a new crop of MacDonald's packaging, high strength cider and high caffeine drinks cans would appear. I had to work out a way to live with this.

I found a receipt in a MacDonald's paper sack. The local council can use this to track the person who dropped the litter and prosecute them. I was faced with a dilemma. Should I hand in the receipt, an action with unknown and potentially catastrophic consequences for the individual involved? I just put the whole package in the recycling bin. Who am I, from my super quinoa privileged, white middle kale aged home owning male over-educated well-travelled CO₂ producing position, to stand in judgement on this person? I stopped picking litter.

Ethically I feel unable to say that a world with MacDonald's litter, jet skis, high powered motorbikes, giant Porsches, and fountains of prosecco, is a worse world. To live here in Essex, I have to let go of my indignation over these things and submit to other people's right to determine their own way of living. I will not validate actions I despise by pushing back against them. My only resistance is making art which I make for myself.

Landscape and the countryside has become a central theme of my curatorial and artistic interests because the land is politicised more than ever. It is the chemical and biological battleground between the EU and the US.

The folksy countryside is the locus of much of English identity, close-knit village life, country pubs, winding lanes, thatched cottages, baking cakes, jam making and cricket. Our identity may appear to be embedded in the rural, but it is the urban, by which I mean London, that dominates.

UK farmers, who operate a precarious custodianship of the landscape, are tied, often reluctantly, to sustainable environmental policy under the terms of essential EU subsidy. Farmers rely on the free movement of people, attracting farm-skilled workers, no longer available in the UK, from the Balkans and Baltic.

The view of landscape from the city is very different from living in it. Being here in Essex there is not all that much romance. Here in this landscape it is mainly by turns muddy or dusty. It is dark. The birds are staggeringly loud. There is never quiet. A strimmer or chainsaw is always struggling to carve a clear space. This land is resistant. It bites and stings, catches at your clothes, and obstructs you at every turn.

I am interested in artists who work with stuff, actual physical things produced with skill and craft, rather than just bought and piled up.

I very much like manipulated physical material because it is uncompromisingly visual. I am naturally distrustful of text and words, of theory. I like action. The protests about our leaving the EU, against President Trump, and in support of the #metoo campaign have neatly combined text and action into potent and joyful slogans. I feel we can channel some of that imagery of resistance to mitigate against the political neutering effected by the political right in the UK. We can use words as material and image to at least raise a fist in solidarity and a middle finger to power. Swearing does make you feel better. ▣

Notes

1. Walker, Alica. (1985). *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich
2. Ellis, Carolyn. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press
3. Poll organised by BBC Radio 4's Today programme in association with The National Gallery, London. 2005



Ben Coode-Adams & Justin Knopp
Proof
 Letterpress on paper, 2018
 photo credit Ben Coode-Adams



Ben Coode-Adams
Cloud Giants
 Watercolour on paper