

text + work

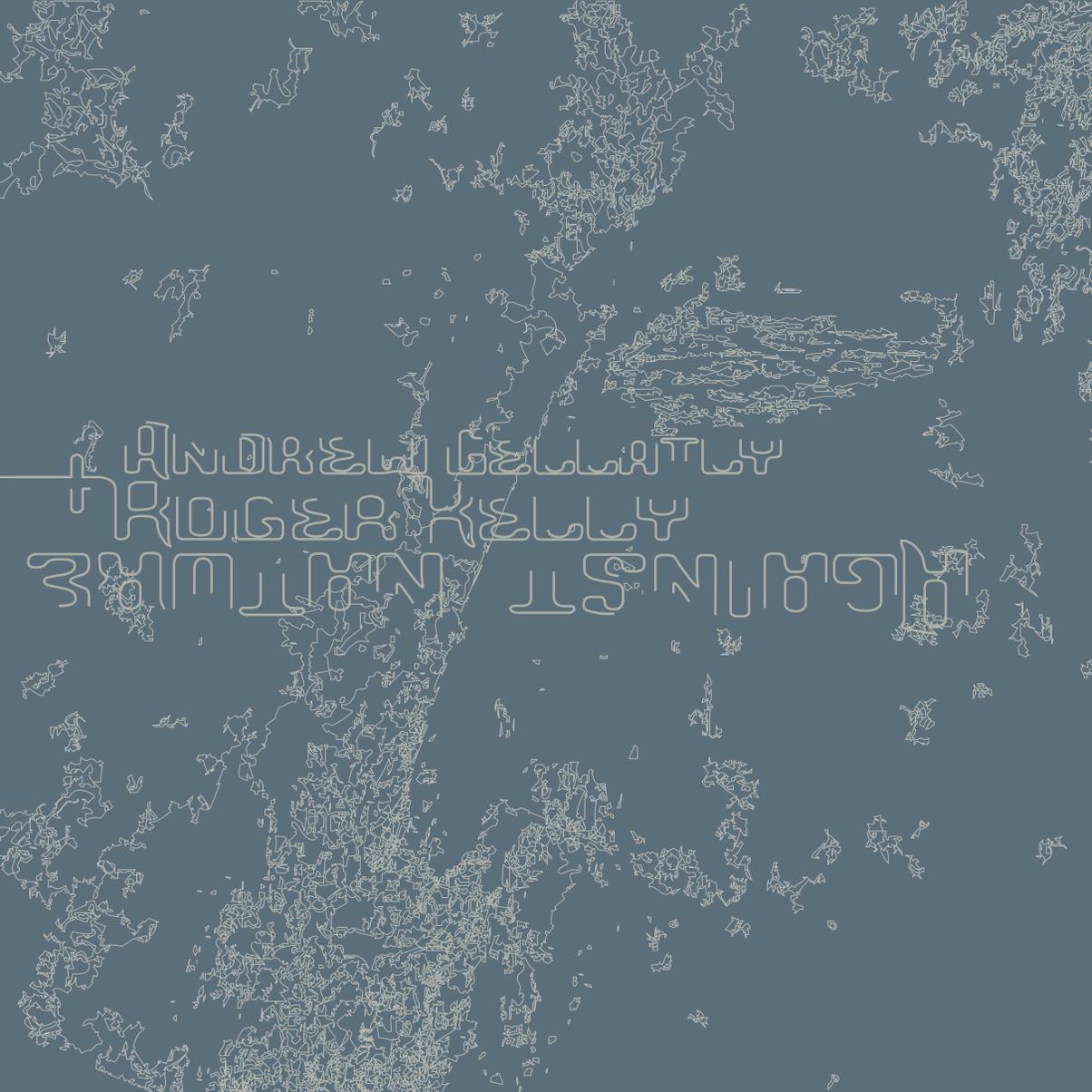
Against Nature

The relationship between man and nature is central to Roger Kelly's work. At the core of this is the relationship between experience, memory and history. Nature absorbs, erodes and engulfs mankind's tracks and histories leading to the eventual failure of permanence of purpose, event; of memory.

The process Roger employs is to create work that reflects these themes in the way that it first deconstructs a figurative composition and then partially reconstructs a revised, painted image. The process highlights the relationship between figuration and abstraction; this in turn mirrors the quiet conflict studied in the subject matter.

The compositions usually depict fictional places and subjects, being based on a number of separate actual and invented components. The use of linear drawing, printing and painting techniques alongside photography and collage has remained constant in his current practice but increasingly he is moving away from a tendency to appropriate the various elements within the work in favour of drawing almost exclusively from field trips and first person visual research.

His most recent work has begun to investigate objects sourced from forgotten military and memorial sites – anonymous sculptural objects reminiscent of bunkers, fortifications and gravestones, abandoned and being assimilated by the landscape that surrounds them, their histories or purpose becoming gradually lost or changed as they are engulfed. The work also investigates the notion that the landscape in this context can be interpreted as a malevolent, rather than passive, force, and is based in part on various visits to the South East England coastal areas.



ქართული ენის დაცვა
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Start with the most disturbing of Roger Kelly's works for this exhibition island – four rafts of almost buried concrete stretch away into a birch wood, but the vista is halted by a mound of dirt inexplicably heaped over them. Something about this unsettles: birch woods are the silent middle European places of atrocity – the tracks heading into them suggest unspeakable events, but instead of excavation here is a mounding, an inundation. A good set on which to remake a horror movie.

These concrete underpinnings are not in a remote forest, just a nature reserve not far from Kelly's childhood home. They are the remnants of coal workings in Lount, Leicestershire, not so much fallen into ruin as rising into ruin. They are the opposite of a ruined romantic site – they bring to mind the ice age, not the golden age.

Roger Kelly's new landscapes could be passed over as the work of a mildly twisted hobbyist, a bunker nut, a cement fabulist, but hobbyists tend to create idealised landscapes, ones that verge on the picturesque, under the thumb of human control. Kelly is exalted by the surrender of human control: this series of paintings are the vestiges of military and industrial adventure submerged in a guilty litter tray of soil and vegetation.

There are precedents for the uncomfortable feeling we get here, Robert Smithson's Partially Buried Woodshed, (1970) originally intended for Kent State University, the final act in Glyndebourne's recent production of Don Giovanni where the Don is trapped in a silted up room.

Mike Nelson's recent exhibition at Modern Art Oxford, Triple Bluff Canyon (May 2004), offered a politicised rereading of Smithson's already politicised woodshed perhaps suggesting a zeitgeist movement towards inundation.

Roger Kelly nods to Robert Smithson's huge scale land art projects such as Spiral Jetty (1970) and Amarillo Ramp (1973), but this sequence shares more in approach to Smithson's series "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey" (1967), where, in the dead light and bland heat of a September afternoon Smithson monumentalises drainpipes, outfalls and waste pipes, transforming them into gorges and mountain peaks. A child's sandbox becomes a model desert of disintegration or an open grave in which the children play happily. Like Smithson, Kelly is articulating a world seen from the perspective of geological time instead of historical time. Huge – energy draining forces are at work. The siting of Kelly's bunkers and earthworks recalls the magic rules of the past that governed the disposal of monuments – directions of the equinox, the stopping of time.

As Smithson notes, "when a thing is seen through the consciousness of temporality, it is changed into something that is nothing." This all-engulfing sense provides the mental ground for the object, so that it ceases being a mere object and becomes art.

As a part of his research for this project Roger Kelly visited the sound mirrors on the Kent coast that were built in the 1920's and 1930's in anticipation of air or sea attack. The parabolic concrete reflectors point out into the English Channel gathering atmospheric noise and relaying it to an operator seated in the base of the mirror. They were quickly overtaken by Radar and like all fortifications fell victim to their own ambition. The filmmaker Tacita Dean also attempted a project based around the sound mirrors in Hythe, Kent: a black and white 16mm film titled Sound Mirrors (1999). She observes: "When they were built nothing stood between them and the sea; and between them and France. Now the ground where they stand has been flooded and turned into a gravel pit. The mirrors have begun to erode and subside into the mud; their demise now inevitable." Tacita Dean: Location. Exhibition catalogue, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel, 2000. p.40.

Roger Kelly has a flexible view of the past. The bunkers in Kelly's paintings lie outside of time, though they are recognisable sites.

Concrete

Frequently Kelly's concrete has deep grooves like a sheet of corrugated paper. The effect in some of the pictures is like a wrapping. Other times it is striated, verdigrised, rarely smooth and grey.

The tank traps at Potter's Bar, eight doleful concrete blocks Reconstruction are a domesticated and overgrown take on Donald Judd's Marfa installations – but in the Texas sun they are a row of lustrous blocks; in the empty quarter of Nicholson's Greater London Street Atlas a formation of mossy concrete cubes, prehistoric blocks trapped on a forest stage of mud, a pastoral Baghdad.

Bunkers and failure

Why should bunkers be so suitable for colliding time and landscape? It intrigued me that Roger shares an interest both in Robert Smithson and in WG Sebald. Sebald, who taught German literature at the University of East Anglia, has been ever more widely read since his death in 2001. He was the possessor of the saddest face ever, a melancholy walker and landscape fabulist. In one of Sebald's best-known semi-fictional works Austerlitz he writes of the Belgian fort at Breendonk outside of Brussels. During the Second World War it was a German reception and penal camp and since 1947 it has been preserved as a national memorial and museum, but in Sebald's acute perception it is a bottomless sinkhole of loss.

“When I look back at the crab – like plan of Breendonk... the darkness does not lift but becomes heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is,

as it were, draining itself in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described, or passed on.”

WG Sebald Austerlitz penguin Books 2001 pp30-31

Breendonk and all the thirty miles of fortifications around it had proved utterly useless and always insufficient for the defence of the city and the country. This is, says Sebald’s character Austerlitz, the usual result of resorting to measures of fortification – you drew attention to your weakest point practically inviting the enemy to attack it. The bunker, the half-buried cancerous concrete block, is simply an evocation – as I read it – of failure, with all of the complex emotional, sociological and political dimensions failure suggests. Failure experienced as a memory and so given a pattern in the now.

Kelly’s walk through the stranded bunkers of the British coastline and woodland is a way of winding the clock back, of finding objects both cemented in time and outside of it. Each of Roger Kelly’s paintings is a headstone marking a memory. Each of the paintings unhinge their original content (bunkers, concrete) from their final appearance which is not indexical but highly contingent on the density of pattern that he allows to saturate the picture plane.

The beginnings of western landscape painting and photography called for a Cartesian subject who in turn could legitimate the picture of “cultured” nature. This knowing and seeing (but not being seen) had an ideological function, positioning man as a coherent source of visual knowledge. Kelly’s pictures, which at first seem to represent something vaguely identifiable, (a hut, a retreat) confound us and our desire for coherence. Domestic buildings of less than normal size – a cottage

in the fields, the lodge, the pavilion for viewing the landscape – are those that usually offer us the semblance of peace, but these small buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction, and are designed from the first with a nagging knowledge of their existence as ruins.

Repression

What happened yesterday coexists with what happened fifty years ago – in Kelly's work it coexists in the same mental and physical space. Things here are withheld and repressed – what remains must carry all the meaning.

While the unbleached linen base is always there, so too is a jigsawed framework bleeding through like a stain chemically revealing itself.

Ulrich Loock's observed that the works of the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans are "authentic fakes" – that their means and handling are not the result of some inner compulsion or romantic vision, but of considered choice. With Kelly there is fakery too, manifest in a considered swerve away from the romantic.

Bunkers and the Ocean

In his first book, titled *Bunker Archeology*, Paul Virilio, the French theoretician of "grey ecology" and information theory, chose to write about the coastal fortifications of France. The Atlantic wall has never been as hot a topic for concrete junkies as the Maginot or Siegfried line, but in less than 4 years this system of fortification came to be made up of 15,000 separate concrete constructions. In the aftermath of the war Virilio started the research of this defence system

from a new point of view – a combination of the objectivity of the documentary maker and historian as well as the hard-bitten chronicler of deterritorialization. He recognised the anachronistic state of these batteries and bunkers, their already decaying state so close to the water.

“Seeing the oceanic horizon” says Virilio, “is indeed anything but a secondary experience, it is in fact an event in consciousness of underestimated consequences.”

Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology* (1975) Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton NJ 1996.

For Virilio, as for Kelly, bunkers offer a place that can be experienced intuitively. They throw up an echo of Henri Bergson in the way that the primordial functions as a lived time and space. In the late nineteenth century the philosopher Bergson theorised our relationship with the world as an extended intersection of memory and matter.

The simple act of observing a sunset may, for example, reconnect us directly with ancient events. Perception involves duration, not simply in the time taken to observe but in the sense of “an effect of memory which prolongs one into another plurality of movements”. There is no perception “which is not full of memories” and, consequently, of desire.

Henri Bergson *Matter and Memory* (1896/1908; New York Doubleday and Company 1959) Amelia Jones notes that Bergson’s acceptance of the radical contingency of what we believe to be real on our own perception parallels both phenomenology and post-structuralism.

There is in Kelly’s work, like that of Virilio, an uneasy recuperation of the natural world, an ongoing tension between this world and the one created by modernism’s idealising influences.

The Forensic

It's no coincidence that all the subjects of Kelly's work are depicted dead centre of the picture. *Deserter* (2004) is a painting executed in a crime scene fashion. The forensic centred gaze is an unwavering part of the series, and Kelly's undertaking.

There is a further cinematic reference here, to the work of Stanley Kubrick whose cinematography – think of the receding corridors in *The Shining* or *2001 A Space Odyssey* – carries with it a symmetrical menace. That's the sort of deathly precision Kelly is shooting for here.

Camouflage

Camouflage is literal in Kelly's new paintings, blocks of man-made cement hide in the grass and trees. Indeed Kelly's paintings are moving further into the realm of camouflage – of disguising a problematic object in plain sight in order to hide it from someone or something.

But there is another issue that critics and curators have to deal with – how to see the work behind the camouflage, and at the same time respect the reasoned existence of the camouflage in the first place.

As in the work of Gerhard Richter, who has laid out an elaborate sequence of stylistic allusion, camouflage operates as a means of preventing people drawing obvious interpretations of the work but also to create a hiding place, a painter finding a space to work.

Last year Roger Kelly and Bob Matthews put together a large touring group show titled "Yes I am a long way from home". It comprised UK painters flirting with but ultimately rejecting the idea of the natural sublime.

As an inflection point in the careers of both artists this is fundamental. Kelly's pre-2003 landscapes had the magisterial coherence of an Albert Bierstadt painting say, but with suggestions of a casual destructiveness thrown in. There are vistas like remote meteorite crash sites where splintered and burnt forests exist under bare skies, assembled from a central casting catalogue of idealised trees and rocks.

His 2000 work including *Waiting for the Miracle* and *New Morning* depicted a series of tornados ripping through American towns – more recently they have become wastelands on an almost miniature scale.

Since "Yes! I am a long way from home." Kelly has downscaled his work and refocused on site selection. The investigation of a specific site is a matter of exposing certain associations that have remained invisible within the old framework of language.

And so the expanses of Kelly's imagined landscapes have become painterly sites to be carefully worked over, the obsolete in reverse.

Andrew Gellatly, Writer and Journalist
2004



Andrew Gellatly

Andrew Gellatly is a writer and journalist covering contemporary art, sports, technology and gambling. His writing appears in *The Financial Times*, *The Scotsman*, *frieze*, *Vogue Italia* and *Bijutsu Techo* in Japan. He has been sports and leisure editor of *frieze* magazine for a number of years, and is a regular contributor of interviews and features on artists.

He is a doctoral candidate at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London where he is completing a thesis on visual culture in Los Angeles during the 1950s and 1960s. He lived in Los Angeles for several years and visits the west coast regularly.

In addition to journalism his upcoming publications include an essay for a new book on Brian Wilson to be published later this year by Four Corners, and a book on the phenomenon of urban golf which he is writing with the photographer David Robinson.

Recently he wrote on Raymond Pettibon, Diana Thater, Meg Cranston and Richard Jackson for *Bayerisches Staatsschauspiel / Marstall*, Munich, and on the panoramic landscape photography of David Robinson for his book *Wonderland*. He now lives and works in London.

Roger Kelly

Roger Kelly was born in Nottingham in 1973. He studied at Wimbledon School of Art 1993 – 96 and at Chelsea College of Art 1996 – 97.

His recent one man shows have included Nylon Gallery, London 2000, 2002; Galleria Alessandro DeMarch, Milan, Italy, 2001, 2003; Rare Gallery, New York, 2002; 32 Elder Street, London, curated by Paul Stolper, 2004.

He has been included in various group exhibitions and competitions in England, USA and Italy, including John Moores, Liverpool, 1998 and 2000; East International, Norwich, 1999; Painting and Illustration, Luckman Gallery, Los Angeles 2002. He co-curated a touring landscape group exhibition, "Yes! I am a Long Way from Home" with the artist Bob Matthews in 2003.

After text+work his next projects will include a solo exhibition at Galleria Alessandro DeMarch, Milan, Italy, and a two person show with Adam Ross at Hales Gallery, London, in 2005.

Roger Kelly also lectures at Wimbledon School of Art, Loughborough College of Art and Design and the University of Northumbria, Newcastle.



Andrew Gellatly + Roger Kelly

04 October – 19 November 2004

The Gallery at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Opening Hours

9.00am – 8.00pm Monday – Thursday (Term Time)
9.00am – 6.00pm Monday – Thursday (Summer Time)
9.00am – 4.00pm Friday
9.00am – 1.00pm Saturday (Term Time)

Closed Bank Holidays

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