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words Robert Leeming

The Recent Findings of Simon Faithfull

Escape

Melancholy can be such fun can't it?



• **Lying** in a bedraggled heap listening to Mahler, reading Keats and then nipping downstairs for a quick coffee and a nosey at what's on the telly.

Wordsworth said melancholy is the “luxurious gloom of choice”, which has it right on the nose. It's not like it's much more serious and really rather boring older brother “depression”, which can have someone on the bridge at midnight, looking down into the icy waters below. No, melancholy is more of a fashion statement, something that can be switched on and off at a whim, the Oscar Wilde of mental conditions.

Simon Faithfull's work has more than a whiff of the melancholic about it. The digital artist, who is about to open a new show at the Harris Museum in Preston premiering some of his recent work, is perhaps best known for his 'Escape Vehicles' - domestic chairs tethered to balloons - a suburban attempt at an easy escape. They are particularly English too, in the way that their aim is doomed to certain failure, but there is a plucky resistance about them nonetheless. Faithfull says, “The chair just allows the viewer to imagine themselves sitting and going from this mundane landscape, our normal realm, to the edge of space.”

Escaping the mundane is a theme that runs throughout Simon's work. He has a restless character, splitting his time between London and Berlin, when not travelling to far flung destinations for the sake of his craft. His companion on these ventures is always a Palm Pilot, a hand held computer from which he can make simple, spur of the moment drawings that he can then email to anywhere in the world. It was a notion that dawned on him while completing a residency on the top floor of the World Trade Centre a year or so before its untimely destruction. He describes his digitally etched emails as, “almost like a pirate radio station in a way. Little messages in a bottle I could just chuck out into the world, without much context.” This of course was in the days when receiving an email was still something quite special, not the daily ritual of spam and worries it has become. →



Cleethorpe, South Humberside, N:53°32'25 E:0°00'00"



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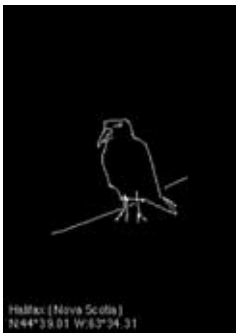
The email pictures from afar represent Simon's wish to "activate his absence," to consider the void he leaves behind, in the fabric of a town or city when he is absent from it. It's kind of like leaving a footprint in wet sand; you watch and the sand slowly retakes its original form, any human traces wiped from its ancient features. Think about the sand as a city. Walk away from your carved out groove, and how long does it take for your dint in the masses of people to melt away? The email interactions are a way of seeing if his world still exists when he is not there. His original 'Escape Vehicle' had the same effect and involved attaching a camera to a weather balloon and then letting it float up into the ether, so he could watch himself disappear into the landscape, "become a dot", witness himself within his own suburban hole, a study in the transience of existence.

His project for the Liverpool Biennial involved travelling on a container ship from Liverpool (UK) to Liverpool (Nova Scotia) again with his ever trusty Palm Pilot at his side. He completed 181 drawings, some of which will appear carved in stone and glass at Liverpool's Lime Street station. He also took a copy of the Liverpool phone book with him on the trip and turned the 181 drawings, into 181 post cards, sending them back home to random strangers, from one Liverpool to another in what he calls a "strange collapsing of space." The back of the cards were simply marked "From Simon Faithfull, wish you were here". He decided purposely not leave any point of contact for the recipient to get back in touch, an example of the way Simon wants to engage with his audience, but only to a limited degree. "I guess it all comes back to my use of the Palm Pilot," he says. "I could take pictures with the most digitally advanced camera, but the drawings I do often work on the basis of what they leave out rather than what they put in. If there is a lot of space then there is an impression made, the audience fill in the gaps in their own creative manner."

The use of the Palm Pilot is also related to his interest in the concept of the drawn line. He was first introduced to the device at art school, where its use was part of a technique to create a more direct link between the eye and the hand. This obsession with the straight line is reflected particularly in his work '0° 00 Navigation', which sees the artist traverse the entire landmass of Britain following the exact path of the Greenwich Meridian with the aid of GPS. Again the project has streaks of melancholy - the absurdity of a mad-cap venture. He travelled wherever the line went, even if that meant scrambling through a hedge row or crawling through the odd boudoir window. You can imagine it becoming beautifully farcical, with Simon passing through the middle of a church during a funeral; "Excuse me I'm just following the Greenwich Meridian," and then perhaps meeting someone else doing exactly the same thing, but the other way round. The farce is part of the work, the idea of something so regal, something as imperial as the Greenwich Meridian passing through someone's larder or their downstairs lav.

Simon is not in any regards seduced by technology though. He is not some computer obsessed nerd, upholding hand held technology as the one and only future for the art world. No, he is simply accepting of technology because it is a dominating factor in our lives, whether we like it or not. "I'm not really excited or infatuated by technology," he says. "I only use it because it is around us every day and it would seem strange not to use it." It is a refreshing take, in a world that goes into raptures whenever Steve Jobs mounts his stage in Cupertino, California to announce his latest "iwhatever". I use technology, but I am not in love with it.

Simon Faithfull 'Recent Findings' is at the Harris Art Museum, Preston from 27 March to 5 June. www.harrismuseum.org.uk



Halifax, Nova Scotia, N:44°39'01 W:83°04'31"

