

**Dr. Frances Woodley**  
**Response to *Materials from the Garden***

*The heart of the Black Mountains had been formed by an ancient river, flowing for many millions of years from an old red continent. From the edges of volcanoes, from scree-strewn uplands, across plains of mud, the great river had meandered across a coastal plain to the sea, bringing down mud, silt and sand, coloured by hematite. It had laid these in shoal and floodbank, bed upon bed.* People of the Black Mountains, Raymond Williams.

The allotment, out of which Penny Hallas's work for *Materials from the Garden* exhibition has grown, lies upland from the River Usk and below the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal surrounded by panoramic views of the Black Mountains. Standing on her allotment, facing North East looking beyond Crickhowell on the opposite bank of the river are Pen Cerrig Calch and beyond that, Crug Mawr. It is here, in comfortable proximity to her home, and approached by two riven trees along its edge and entrance, that the artist and others tend their allotments. It's late October, so the warted gourds scramble, the cabbages threaten to go rogue, and copper-coloured turnips shoulder their way through the earth's damp crust. The allotments, some of them fortresses against rabbits and rats, are also home to idiosyncratic allotment furniture – a miniature door, a Tyrolean bird table, a serpentine-legged, pale blue metal stool and a similarly pale blue hosepipe that snakes its way around a pair of faded plastic chairs. All this, and the water system of pipes and butts that sustains the allotment's produce, takes root in the recent exhibition, (a joint venture with the artist-poet Allen Fisher).

The exhibition, an installation of drawings, paintings, video and found objects, is situated in a shopping centre in Cardiff. The empty retail outlet, a barren space, is brought to life by the artistic dialogue between Hereford-based Fisher and Crickhowell-based Hallas, a connection that also extends into their lives and landscape in the Black Mountains, through the flow of water.

Hallas' floor to ceiling drawings that line the walls are presented as a myriorama, an interchangeable and imagined panoramic landscape view, a format previously used in works exhibited in Finland and Davies Gallery here in Wales. Rendered in monochrome, with charcoal, wax crayon and wash, their viewpoint is low, making the scale of the objects they depict, huge. The viewer feels their own smallness. It is the objects, trees and vegetables that exert their agency now, not the gardener or the viewer. The myriorama draws its viewers into its singular dramas of lone objects, as they stand erect, neglected, abandoned or lost in this regulated landscape. Wateriness and mistiness envelopes them but they stand firm. Encountered up close and personal, they are nevertheless monumental. The low horizons behind them with the upper two thirds of the drawing often left empty, catch the quality of light experienced on the allotment but might also be taken for a melancholic emptiness. This, however, is offset by the myriorama's association with the eighteenth-century picturesque which effectively positions it as the inversion of the panoramic sublime.

The artist is not alone in adopting these pictorial tactics. Margaretha de Heer ((1603-c.1665) painted a huge red cabbage on a tall stalk, quite alone and towering over an imagined landscape. It speaks of an affectionate treasuring that I also see in Hallas' polished rendering of a massive young cabbage. John Crome did much the same with his painted *Study of Flints* (c.1811) in which the small and insignificant chipping is elevated in scale and significance over the landscape from which it was broken. And Tacita Dean perhaps, in her filming of the WWI sound mirrors on the Kent coast in 1999. It amounts to an inflation of the object that verges on the surreal.

But there is also unease in these drawings, a liminality at the boundary of earth and sky, dawn and day, the real and the imagined - they are so close. Something of Paul Nash's wartime painting of charred and churned up landscapes such as in *We Are Making a New World* (1918) come to mind, in which nature is painted as abandoned, left to lick its wounds and repair itself. There is a heartfelt concern expressed in this myriorama for the wellbeing and perpetuation of a landscape, its systems and the infrastructural and social networks required to feed, water, nurture and preserve it. Poetic imagination and aesthetic transformation are put to work by the artist to act on the viewer, to make them aware of the big questions facing every one of us about the world we inhabit so greedily. Images of objects, whether moving or static, made with coloured light or monochrome markings, are not simply the things they depict, they are fluid and vapourish metaphors - seductive warning signs.

The installation also has its moments of pure theatre. The water butt is brought to life as night time projection screen for frenzied branches. A video is projected across a corner so that flood water, spouting and flowing, appears to invade the drawings and animate the abandoned fragments of metal buckets that dangle in front of it. The windy watery whine of the saxophone played as live accompaniment, suggests a moaning. As Sebald speculates in *Saturn's Rings*; '... perhaps there is something else as well, something nebulous, gauze-like, through which everything one sees in a dream seems, paradoxically, much clearer. A pond becomes a lake, a breeze becomes a storm, a handful of dust is a desert, a grain of sulphur in the blood is a volcanic inferno. What manner of theatre is it, in which we are at once playwright, actor, stage manager, scene painter and audience?' Or in in this case, artist, curator and conservationist too?

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