

# Foreword

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Infinite Longing*, which is a collaboration between ABC Gallery and Hotel Antelope and is a satellite event of Art Moscow 2006. This project has come about as a result of Hotel Antelope's *Peripheral Visions*, an exhibition at Chapter, Cardiff in 2005, in which ABC Group presented work. An energetic discourse sprung up between ABC and Hotel Antelope, born out of shared experiences and ambitions as artist-curators. This discourse sowed the seeds for the current exhibition.

The title of the exhibition is taken from E.T.A. Hoffman's identification of the essence of Romanticism as an 'infinite longing'. The term offers a broad theme within which to frame a number of concerns and approaches shared by a generation of artists working today. The exhibition presents the work of eight artists from Wales - Edward Adams & Sara Fletcher, Michael Cousin, Kim Fielding, Meriel Herbert, Paul Hurley, Sara Rees and Anthony Shapland - all of whom are beginning to emerge on the international stage. While their practices traverse a range of media (video, film, photography, performance and installation) each artist touches upon something that could be described as a new Romantic sensibility.

In the Romantic era 'infinite longing' was expressed in a variety of ways by artists, composers, thinkers and writers of the time. These longings ranged from the revolutionary to the reactionary, from utopianism to the politics of everyday life. However, in a contemporary context of a conflict-ridden global environment, and the information overload by telematic media, do such Romantic tendencies exhibit a desire for escapism, a wilful naivete, or rather do they become absolutely pertinent and essential? In the face of a slick, electronically mediated reality and the resultant decrepitude of the real world by comparison, is the Romantic gesture an attempt to hold on to something under threat or to rescue something already lost?

Despite the problems caused by globalisation and increased air traffic, the democratisation of world travel has given rise to a culture of reciprocity and exchange. It is to this context that Hotel Antelope has responded. Committed to the creation of international networks and to increasing cultural dialogue between Wales and other countries, Hotel Antelope flourishes as a transitory space, one that responds to the desire of artists to roam. Founded and run by artists, our strategy of collaboration goes hand in hand with a dedication to supporting the development of new work. Thus the work that Hotel Antelope presents is always experimental and innovative.

panoramic image that suggests a writhing planet. The technological re-creation of nature and beauty is has captured the spirit of place, if not the place itself; revealing a truth beyond the visual surface.

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, --  
that is all/Ye know on earth,  
and all ye need to know.' - Keats

The border seen within Cousin's *Luminous Fluxus* is between the real and the interpreted, the actual landscape and its potential effect on us and to stir an emotion and a longing. Into this emotional space, Sara Rees steps. From landscape painting, to photography, to moving image in *Infinite Longing*, Rees' installation creates an actual sense of place within the exhibition space and brings theatricality to bear on the idea of creating a *tirlun* or landscape. She stirs the emotion itself in the viewer; her work is to be experienced, not viewed. We feel longing. We are confronted by memories that are carried in objects and spaces. We are re-connected with our own memories of those universal feelings and the places with which we associate them. Her interest in creating environments and identifying with the viewer's senses is seen in all her work, for example her site-ations named *Sense of Place* in Riga, Latvia in April 2005.

*Hiraeth* and *Infinite Longing* are intensely personal emotions that defy all reason. In Rees' recent piece, she uses the viewer's notion of self. We bring to the work, our own deepest fears, our childhood nightmares and memories. Discarded objects in the cupboard take on a gothic frightfulness. Spirits can inhabit natural or inanimate objects. The artist provides the viewer with personal space and stillness to contemplate (as one would do in nature); the power of the imagination takes over and the installation enables the viewer to tip into the realm of the irrational, resistant to control and order.

'Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, such shaping fantasies, that apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends. The lunatic, the lover, and the poet are imagination all compact.'

(*Midsummer Night's Dream*, W Shakespeare Act 5 Scene 1)

If the lover and poet/artist, are linked by emotion and imagination; the role of love and passion in *hiraeth* and longing must not be forgotten. Paul Hurley's *Moscow Love Songs*, performed on the streets of Moscow, will be a reflection on personal identity; the relationship between longing and belonging, heart and place. His performances investigate love, sexuality and desire and in this instance will reflect the specific site in which he finds himself: 'this big strange city'.

The way in which a person experiences love or longing depends on their own identity. Hurley explores the body as a map, or a site of knowledge. Through his own imagination and sense of desire, he re-frames the context in which we are accustomed to viewing the male body, and sexuality. Through his desire, the audience is forced to re-interpret their own. Hurley references the artistic tradition from which he comes, by calling his performances a series of virtual 'framings.' He does this quite literally when taking Polaroid photographs which are framed in a thick white border, but he also brings focus to the conventions of art: the relationship between representing and viewing, and offers a re-establishment an emotional commitment between the two.

# Infinite Longing : A Perspective

by Siân Melangell Dafydd

In one word, the Welsh word *hiraeth* embraces innumerable meanings; the essence of longing, of desire, hope, and of homesickness; the intangible emotional power tying one person to another, or to a particular place. Hiraeth is a passion; it is felt with love; it is, loosely translated: *infinite longing*.

The notion of artists feeling the indefinable attraction to be in the Welsh landscape, and to be inspired by it, is by no means new. This impulse is what drove the painter John Dickson Innes to persuade painter and friend Augustus John to return with him and work and paint in Snowdonia, North Wales, in 1910. The same compulsion to return to a loved location is embedded in Meriel Herbert's *Olwen Returns*. The reverberating image shot on 16mm black and white film shows her understanding of the physical and emotional pull of land and of sea;

'A need to have my bones  
near the hill's bare stone.'

('Inheritance' - after R S Thomas - by Owen Sheers)

Meriel Herbert's *hiraeth* or longing leads her back to locations of personal relevance in her video; to Wales where she was born and brought up, and the comparable mountainous landscape of the English Peak District where she has since settled. She depicts the lie of the land: landscape meaning the geographical *tirwedd* in Welsh; but also embodies another Welsh word for landscape, *tirlun* meaning the picture of the land and the way it is looked at, not the way the land looks. *Tirlun*: the image of the land has been explored in landscape painting, in photography and now the moving image.

To create her work, Meriel Herbert also returns to a cultural heritage, placing the love-seeking heroine Olwen, from the legend *Culhwch and Olwen*, at the centre of her work. In *Infinite Longing*, locations are humanized, always seen in relation to the emotional impact on people. There is stillness and meditation in the artists' work; giving the viewer time and space to notice the significance of their surroundings.

'Times come when it is proper to still yourself and go down into the profound interplay of consciousness where common humanity, human history, and something beyond both of those inform each other... It happened here, and so much else besides. The distillation of these events is the spirit of the place.'

('Spirits of Place' by Jim Perrin)

Even the absence of people in *Infinite Longing*; a small cottage on Herbert's hillside, Sara Rees' discarded objects inside the cupboard, Edward Adam and Sara Fletcher's fading dancers, Kim Fielding blurred figures, Anthony Shapland's detritus, Michael Cousin's shadows, and Paul Hurley's mementos, all demonstrate that landscapes carry the lives and hearts of people. The artists in this exhibition see beyond what the visual image can communicate, they see the multiple paths to places past or unborn. The romantic sensibility of nature's connection to past and future is, in *Infinite Longing*, extended to urban and industrial places.

'Land' as portrayed by Anthony Shapland is the border territory between city and rural landscape; where one takes over from the other, opening the potential for dramatic conflict or interactions, but in fact leaves an abandoned landscape where passers by are oblivious to the camera. Shapland imbues significance to what seems insignificant. He questions the trace of people in places, how they are viewed and remembered there, through his voyeuristic video. A discarded Christmas tree - an image loaded with nostalgic connotations - bursts into flames and is destroyed without any intervention. On a day to day basis we are not aware of our surroundings. We cannot be preoccupied by a sense of longing unless we allow ourselves Jim Perrin's 'still yourself', or if we are forced to stop by a moment of surprise interrupting our expectations. The conflict set up by Anthony Shapland is less between locations than between the people experiencing it; the unmoved passers by and the startled viewer.

In recording his intervention, Shapland searches for meaning in everyday life, creating a narrative, in the tradition of the Welsh *Cyfarwyddion*: medieval storytellers who originally told the legend of *Culhwch and Olwen*, the legend from which Herbert takes her inspiration. The artists of *Infinite Longing* are the narrators of our time, recording our stories. Much of Michael Cousin's work employs a documentary style within urban settings to record actual personal accounts and stories, or slices of life. His *Luminous Fluxus* seems like a departure towards a less naturalistic and more spiritual, unearthly vision; however the video feeds directly from a meticulous observation of nature and reality. The feeding patterns of pigeons form a

panoramic image that suggests a writhing planet. The technological re-creation of nature and beauty is captured the spirit of place, if not the place itself; revealing a truth beyond the visual surface.

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Marks of himself are taken and left in different locations, as though they were physical manifestations of his memories and identity; that which is not tangible in the feeling of *hiraeth* and longing, in the other artists' work, is here made tangible.

Kim Fielding also works with the male body as a means of expressing love in longing, and notions of masculine identity. Like Hurley, he frames or sheds light on a sexual and identity stereotype and pushes the boundaries and possibilities of that identity to its limits, to be erotic, tragic, sometimes euphoric and surreal. In *Cord of Death*, the man draped in material and hanging in a sunlit room takes on a surreal and dark appearance and re-emerges, making a connection between man and nature by looking like a wrapped moth. *Cord of Death* also encompasses various artistic traditions by presenting the work paired in diptychs and presenting a photograph of a man as though he were a living sculpture. There is a sense of belonging to a tradition here, as well as a self.

When looking at his *Fallen Angel*, it is impossible not to connect this close detail of a man's body covered in rock-climbing chalk appearing as though he were a rocky crag himself, with the rocky haven of Herbert's Wales and Derbyshire. Between the work of the two artists, a silent and surprising connection re-affirms Owen Sheer's 'need to have my bones / near the hill's bare stone.'

The physical vulnerability of Fielding's men reflects the very same quality in Sara Fletcher and Edward Adam's *Trickfilms*. Even the edges of the forms appear and disappear into their environments. They explore performance as a means of expression, employing a similar sense of sepia and worn film as Herbert in her film. In *A phantom treat exposed*, ironically the female figure goes through a striptease in reverse, dressing and not undressing as the image of her deteriorates, exposing truth by concealment and not undressing. This film has hint of filmic voyeurism (in contrast to Cousin's documentary voyeurism), reminiscent of Bettie Page photographs of sexual enticement of the 1950s; commenting on confinement and concealment of personal identity. The feeling of loss that ensues is given a physical presence in the fragility and vanishing of the figure.

Towards the end of *A phantom treat exposed* it becomes clear that the film is projected unevenly on the back of a door, paint peeling and bubbling under the image of the film. This rough reminder of paint and of painterly tradition brings us back to the notion of landscape painting and the lineage of tirlun. In this work, the occasional absence of humanity draws our attention to the traces of human life in our landscape surroundings, but also the figures' apparent existence in an over-lit vacuum makes us question the traces of place which we as viewer are being denied. The presence of bubbling paint showing through the image makes us aware that there is always a landscape in which to view things, always a context, always an emotional undercurrent, always a connection to something else that has been before, if we stop to notice it. The bubbling paint provides a

painterly metaphor for what lies beneath the entire exhibition: *hiraeth* and ***infinite longing.***

# Meriel Herbert

*Olwen Returns*, 16mm film, 7 minutes, 2005

## Born

Cardiff, Wales, 1974.

## Education

Distinction

M.A. Fine Art

Sept. 1997 - June 2000

Sheffield Hallam University

2:1

B.A.(Hons) Fine Art

Sept. 1993 - June 1996

Southampton Institute of Higher  
Education

Merit

Foundation Art & Design

Sept. 1992 - June 1993

Cardiff Institute of Higher  
Education

## Exhibitions

'Trajectory'

30 Jan. - 19 March 2006

Leeds Town Hall, U.K.

'37 seconds'

11 - 16 March and 24 Feb. - 5 March 2006

BBC Big Screen, Liverpool City Centre, U.K.

'Flourish'

25 Nov. 2005 - 26 Feb. 2006

The Moravian Gallery, Brno, The Czech Republic.

'Video London'

11 Nov. - 10 Dec. 2005

Espai Ubu, Placa Prim 2, 08005, Barcelona,  
Spain.

'The space is empty and waiting' (Solo Show)

8 - 23 Oct. 2005

BLOCspace, Sheffield, U.K.

'Over & Over, Again & Again',

21 Jan. - 13 March 2005

Centre of Contemporary Art, Vilnius, Lithuania.

## Artist Statement

The idea for this work began when I read about 'The Wind', a silent 35mm. film by Seastrom (1928). Originally I intended to re-make this using myself as the actress, but this developed into a broader investigation of how human emotions are depicted through forces of nature in literature (e.g. 'Wuthering Heights' by Bronte, 1847) and film (e.g. 'Rebecca' by Hitchcock, 1940). 'Olwen Returns' attempts to make reference to 'big themes' from art history- the landscape, romanticism and beauty. It is concerned with the value of human emotion: my practice has always tried to create an immediate psychological impact on the audience and is not just concerned with an intellectual enquiry.

'Olwen Returns' encourages the viewer to create their own narrative. There is no concrete story, instead the piece offers up endless 'clues' and reference points. For instance, the name in the title translates from Welsh as 'Blessed Footprints' and is also a heroine from the Welsh legend 'The Mabinogion'. The locations in the film were chosen because of their over-familiarity. We are already aware of several of the sites through their use in small and large screen film productions, most recently in 'Pride and Prejudice' (Joe Wright, 2005). In addition they are sites of personal significance, I was born and brought up in Wales and currently live close to the Peak District.

