



TOPOPHOBIA:

Fear of Place in Contemporary Art

at the [Bluecoat](#) , Liverpool

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) April 2012

It is generally accepted that phobias arise from a combination of external events (i.e. traumatic events) and internal predispositions (i.e. heredity or genetics). Many specific phobias can be traced back to a specific triggering event, usually a traumatic experience at an early age. Social phobias and agoraphobia have more complex causes that are not entirely known at this time.

The **Bluecoat Gallery** in Liverpool has become a place to discover the best that the art world has to offer today. Whilst the **Tate** can prove to be interesting, the Bluecoat consistently presents exhibitions which provoke.

TOPOPHOBIA

certainly does that. It takes the form of a group exhibition and was conceived and curated by Anne Eggebert and Polly Gould. TOPOPHOBIA is the product of their long-term collaboration as artists and curators. The exhibition features the work of ten UK and international artists.

Matthias Einhoff's *Branche Berlin* (2006), is a video that uses the camera to great effect. Pivoting around and tracking from the ground. The accompanying music sounds like radio jingles and is tailored to the movements on the screen. Set at the border between East and West Berlin we do have to ask ourselves if the once very real fear, especially for those from the East, is still there in the wasteland that is captured on this piece. Whilst the video has the feeling of threat, it is ingenious that it is captured during daylight, and there could be many interpretations, not least the fear of *das Ossi* and questioning how real that fear is. Einhoff's world is not one we can easily enter. The quick cutting from one shot to the next and the speed of the tracking, becomes a Berlin Wall between the viewer and the work, almost as if we should not examine this place too closely.



Almut Rink's instalments looks at how we can create our own, virtual, worlds. The use of headphones and portable seating creates a feeling of being cut off from the rest of the real world, but a definite feeling of engagement with the works. ***Foamywater - Ground***

Moving Makes the Sea Look Deeper

presents us with a dichotomy: the creation of a natural phenomenon using unnatural means. We are taken through the instructions of how to create a picture of nature using computer software. There is something comforting about this installation, that seems to say so much about human control over the natural environment, which then denaturalises that environment by giving it order.

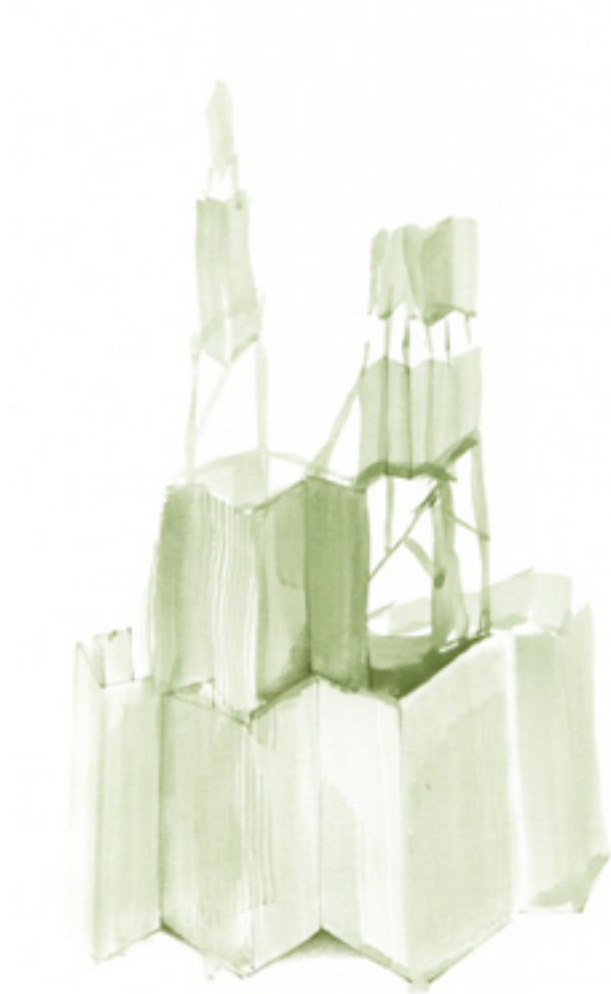
In ***Solidgrowth*** Rink uses a similar method to create individual plant life. There is an almost Baroque approach to the building of a tree using blocks of pixels rather like bricks. This representation of the natural world may not please everyone, especially those who see the beauty of nature in its chaos. But the installations do raise the question of just how much human input there is in the *natural* world. Some might well be put off by the clinical approach to representation, but I found that the pieces also suggested that how science, using the building blocks of DNA, has a similar approach.

In **Abigail Reynold's** work, time and place are torn apart, and yet the illustrations and texts from 'found' books, which she uses in assemblages and collages, gives her works a very reassuring feel.

Louise K Wilson's "*Everything begins and ends at exactly the right time and place*" (signal/noise cut), is named after a line from the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Here, the sequential montage of the first part of the film, includes scenes from the morning of the picnic, the journey to Hanging Rock, the picnic itself, the walk the four girls take up the Rock and to the final shot where they disappear. Speeded up dramatically, and with the images of the Rock digitally manipulated (pixelated), the 3 minute sequence is repeated over a longer timeframe soundtrack, itself appropriated from the film, to present a haunting yet ambient background where the only 'voices' are sighs, laughs and so on.

As an artist, Louise has been fascinated with the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* since childhood, chiming with her interest in sonic affect, haunting, disappearance and omission, and led to her visiting its location years later. I can see that Wilson doesn't allow us to contemplate the place and that the speeding up of the film gives us a sense of urgency to escape, but I think that the piece lacks depth and is the least satisfying installation in this exhibit. There is definitely something about the theme though as it remind me of a piece by the New York artist, [Miranda Lichtenstein](#)

, a few years back, that uses the same quote for the title. Whilst the speeding up also touched on the time motif of the scene, the piece said very little to me that hasn't been said before.



Liverpool artist [Emily Speed](#) provides some thought-provoking pieces including ***Star Fort***. Made from wooden shutters the piece is not so much a section of body armour but wooden clothing designed to ward off attacks. For me, this piece highlighted the theme of the exhibition perfectly as the whole defence against the fear of places is to shut out the outside world and retreat into oneself. The use of wood as a material gives the piece a sense of ambiguity; as these phobias are a particularly modern phenomena, the use of wood, suggests a retreat back to nature. I felt as though the piece was making a romantic statement about the supposed superiority of craft over mass manufacturing, and hence, the Masses.

Body/Building, a snapshot composition in which an image of the Tuscan church *Santa Maria della Pieve*

appears to be double exposed with a picture of a domestic space, a pair of legs poking out from beneath the up-turned building also touches on the vulnerability of the human body and this need for protection.

Panoply

, situated in the corridor of the Bluecoat galleries, is a space for a body on scaffold, made from painted wood. Again, as with

Star Fort,

Speed offers a solution to the fear of space and the solution requires cutting oneself off from the environment.

Whilst I hold to the belief that we can all overcome our fears by confronting our own irrationality rather than the perceived causes, I found Emily Speed's work to be an intelligent contribution to the debate about the modern world's concern of fear. That Speed calls upon the Middle ages' approaches and concepts seem to suggest that our fears belong in the past rather than the present; itself an aspect of Freudian theory. The other more disturbing feature of the work was how it seems to suggest that these irrational fears may also be tied to our contemporary period that could be seen as the new Dark Ages. It is ironic that we look to engaging in this artwork in an attempt to address our disengagement from society.

In the larger gallery you come across the works of three artists: **Anne Eggebert; Polly Gould** and

Marja Helander

. Eggebert's illustrations of places that were once familiar but are now no longer visited, draw on Googlemaps for their material. Whilst place and identity is central to Eggebert's work, the use of modern technology to illustrate those places seems to take away their subjective and objective meanings to us. Instead of being places or memory, the pieces seem to just be directions, an exercise in attempting to locate oneself and one's past. In essence the pieces are very much like the works of

Almut Rink

, in this exhibit. And bring together the role that time, as an agency, has for our sense of place.

Polly Gould's silver hand blown glass pieces, anamorphic landscapes, are some of the most approachable works of this exhibition. These glass globes and distorted horizons on painted etched-glass plates are derived from topographic watercolours by Antarctic explorer Edward Wilson. Wilson was one of the party that died with Scott on their fated attempt to be first at the South Pole in January 1912.

There is a very familiar feeling to these pieces. They reminded me, initially, of those snowstorm water globes that are common around Christmas. But the top half of the globe is cloudless sky, whilst the bottom half reflects Wilson's images, and though there are a few colours in those images, to illustrate, shadow and unevenness, we are still faced with nothingness.

Marja Helander is the most personal of the artists on show at this exhibition. Her works consist of photographs of herself dressed in traditional costume, in unlikely places. Though the works are an attempt to display her feeling of alienation in the world, I am not sure that there is very much to them. The theme is hardly a new one and the pictures remind me of LP record covers from the eighties. The self-effacement that is portrayed is a rather tired approach. Though these images have been used as the main copy for the exhibition, I found that they say nothing about the theme of the exhibition. Whereas the other artists have addressed the environment and their surroundings, Helander's concern is only with herself as the individual. Far from showing any feelings of fear or discomfort, Helander seems quite happy in her surroundings.

David Ferrando Giraut's work is interesting. In both ***Storyboard*** 1 and 2 we have three 'found' LP covers, each showing ruins of buildings and cars and it is this image of decadence that informs his video installation

Road Movie - Perpetuum Mobile

. A continuous looped film in a 360° sequence shot, where we never know where our starting point is. The figure who stands, apparently looking at the scene reminded me of Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting,

Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog,

and yet it is the camera that is surveying the scene. The sense of being trapped is quite overwhelming in this piece. It is not simply that we cannot be sure where the narrative begins and ends, but also we have no history; we just have a car crash without any explanation. It just is.

Topophobia is the fear of certain places or situations and, as such, it is hard to say if it is the place or situation, or if it is something within those environments that causes fear. As with other exhibitions, the Bluecoat, once again, gives us an event that addresses our contemporary times. Yet the very nature of fear and the difficulty in recognising its causes is a timely theme. Much of our political, social and private lives seem to be dictated by fear, whether it is a fear of a terrorist attack or the private fears about our bodies, fear reflects the insecurities of the world and ourselves. This exhibition addresses, not so much 'fear' itself, as its causes and, as such, it is an exhibition that demands to be seen.

Bluecoat Gallery, 3 March — 22 April 201, <http://topophobia.co.uk/>