

WITHDRAWN by Luke Jerram, Leigh Woods, Bristol.

Friday 7 August 2015. Dr Sue Tate

An art historian and a statistician walk together over the suspension bridge and into Leigh woods anticipating Luke Jerram's *Withdrawn*. The former carries categories in her head – conceptual art, site specificity, land art – she knows about the artist and the particular work, can place and culturally contextualise it in terms of late 20th and 21st century trajectories. Being of a sceptical turn of mind and having been disappointed by the triteness of some recent art that makes claims to those genres, she is ready to be dismissive – *yeah yeah boats out of place in the woods, climate change, risk to the seas etc I get it*. The statistician, who enjoys art exhibitions but does not consider herself knowledgeable, is down from London for a visit and knows nothing of the piece. Strolling along the delightfully eerie quietness of woodland avenues she peers about wondering what to expect, asks if that pile of sticks there might be the work (she is not a naive observer). Or part of it? *Uh uh*.

Then, turning onto a smaller path to the left they are there – in among the 5 boats gathered in a clearing. Immediately they are both, in different ways, charmed and wander around in silence for a while, soaking up the experience. Re-gathering they share and pursue their thoughts/feelings/ideas.

It evokes a sense of the fabulous, of a fairy tale, says the statistician - miraculously these boats have been swept up and out of their working lives, gently deposited in the magic wood, to be chanced upon by the heroine of the tale. Who knows what will happen when she chooses and boards a boat – carried into the sky maybe...

It's supposed to be about the dangers of climate change and risks to the marine environment says the art historian (who has read the leaflet and website in preparation for their visit) but it doesn't feel declamatory (thank goodness, she adds mentally), doesn't provoke a sense of fear or angst of displacement – it's more a feeling of nostalgia. You really feel the history of these boats, their salty-fishy-working pasts, almost hear the sea.

Yes, says the statistician, *displaced, marooned and dreaming of the sea.*

Marooned, certainly but not alone, not dispersed and isolated in among the trees,(the photos had looked a bit like that, points out the art historian) but they are grouped here – old ladies reminiscing together, sharing the stories of their youthful, derring-doing marine lives.

Which one are you? they ask each other aware they are no longer in the first flush of youth themselves. Each choosing and identifying with a boat they riff a little on why: *mostly open to the elements – no I like the substantial cabin – I could do a Kate Winslet on the prow (ref: Titanic) with that railing at the front....*

And yet it IS also about loss, isn't it. You can't help but think of the depletion of fish stocks, the erosion of the fishing industry and the loss of a sea based cultures/communities (swamped now by tourism) which has left these boats forlorn, abandoned and available for Jerram's current gig.

...yes, and think of places like Rye and Langport which used to be busy, lucrative ports. Now they are inland. But if we think of 'climate change' currently, surely that's about melting ice caps and rising, not receding, seas– what narrative leaves these boats so high above sea level?

Perhaps they are like those dinosaur 'sea monster' fossils, along with fossil shells reminding us of the enormity of planetary time, that all around (Dorset for example) was once under the sea. This art work could be read as a forward projection. "Long, long ago the seas came right up here, the boats, now high and dry, are revealed as the remains of a distant geological age – the anthropocene" (said the art historian, helpfully adding a wikipedia link <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropocene>)

Seen in that vast timescale the anthropocene (time of the dominance of humans) is just another blip on the face of Gaia – the earth as a system. Perhaps it's ok if humans pass away as a species and a new order emerges, as it did after the dinosaurs.

A man climbs into one of the boats (*against the rules proclaimed in a notice nearby – tut!*) and starts to mend the wobbly steering wheel. *Ahh haa – it's the artist himself....* They approach to say how much they like the work, ask about his intentions and share their thoughts. The concept was the easy bit, he points out – the realisation, the logistics have been gruelling. But now it's done and he talks, with evident pleasure and satisfaction, of the events that have taken place here (choral evenings, discussions, a performance of *The Tempest*) – it's become a venue that opens up further meanings/experiences/interactions. He tells them he bought the redundant boats on ebay for just a couple of hundred pounds and he's pleased that he is enabling a further afterlife: one will go to a school, another is going to be a cocktail bar – cut in half lengthways and opened out. They all agree that the work evokes layered and miscellaneous meanings and responses (those of the art historian and the statistician part of a swirl of heterogeneous thoughts and experiences flowing round the work).

And climate change? Is that the main thrust of the piece? The artist veers away from the question – he actually thinks it's too late (*We're stuffed*) and bewails the loss of animals and habitats that his children will never see. They all agree the period of loss will be desperate, wonder if it is too late, start to talk of Naomi Klein, the Pope's recent encyclical, the Paris global climate conference in November (should one go and demonstrate)...another whole debate is broached ...in the woods, among the silent, crusty boats.

No time to pursue it now, Jerram has an interview to conduct with a Portuguese journalist. The art historian and the statistician stroll away – still talking, imagining – charmed and stimulated – savouring the effectiveness of site specificity, concept and logistical realisation and agreeing on the appropriateness of *The Tempest* at this site:

*Nothing of [it] that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.*

Dr Sue Tate is a Research Fellow at the University of the West of England, freelance art historian and author of *Pauline Boty: Pop Artist and Woman*.