

FLOOD STORY

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FOREWORD

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Enquiring and experimental, Gerry Davies' drawings in *Flood Story* frequently cite historical references as they seek models for a contemporary representation of ecological and political challenges that confront society today. An earlier *Flood Story* series in 2003 explored themes of diasporas and emigration, and the uncontrolled movement of people as a significant contemporary challenge to regional and national security, identity and cultural values. Poignantly, these works pictured groups of fleeing people, cast adrift into the unknown with their sacred possessions on rafts, drawn floating in the otherwise unmarked space of the paper.

In this series, the ghostly silhouettes of scuba divers now occupy the only unmarked spaces of the paper, as they float amongst the deep sediment of our contemporary world. These imaginings of the familiar examine how unfamiliar they may become, and on a scale that can barely be imagined. These newly underwater spaces are seen through a lens of the future, and project back to the viewer the fragility of the environment, bringing to mind existing images of lost civilisations. These *Flood Story* drawings are a discrete and new series of works, made with a distinctive mix of graphite and varnish, their seeming liquidity and silvery reflectiveness redolent of water and mesmerising, glistening surfaces. Teased out of this slippery, sticky medium, they draw the viewer in to enjoy this new distance, in an 'out of body' experience, and a slippage of perspective from the present to becoming that of a future observer of the portentous impact of global warming and rising sea levels.

Drawing Projects UK is a resonant site for Davies' ambitious new suite of drawings. It was established in 2009 to deliver research projects in drawing and expanded to include new facilities at Bridge House in Trowbridge in 2015. This new centre for research and development of drawing and contemporary art includes a dedicated project space, studios and workspaces, meeting rooms and gallery, and forms a creative hub for the exploration of drawing through practice. A programme of exhibitions, drawing sessions, projects and seminars explore the role of drawing in creative practice and all its possibilities.

*‘The bulk of the city had long since vanished, and only the steel-supported buildings...survived the encroaching flood waters. The brick houses and single story factories had disappeared completely below the drifting tides of silt’.*¹

The drawings that make up *Flood Story* imagine environments so submerged, tangled and lost to us that they can only be visited by scuba divers. For us, today, inundation events on this scale remain in the future, yet when viewing these drawings, the sense is of looking back into history and a record of the past. Through this temporal shift they suggest we, and the divers, have been transported forward in time to look back at the remains of our folly. This speculative thinking and the topic of a post-apocalyptic flooded future resonates with J.G Ballard’s 1962 science fiction novella *Drowned World*. As a portent of a dystopian world arising from human recklessness, Ballard’s writing joins a legacy of visionary art through history and more recent modernist utopias and dystopias. Nearly 500 years before *Drowned World* Leonardo produced his tiny pen and ink drawing *Deluge of Material Possessions* (1510) and, on the morning of 8th June 1525, Albrecht Durer produced *Dream Deluge*², an extraordinary watercolour made after a nightmare of such vividness that he wrote on the drawing itself ‘*my body trembled and I could not recover for a long time*’. In the 20th Century the expressionist Ludwig Meidner foresaw, as early as 1913, the disaster of the First World War with paintings and drawings of street scenes swept up in tornados of destructive debris. More recently the *Micromegas* (1975) drawings of Daniel Libeskind blast apart conventions of space and place before recombining shape and line into graphic ‘riddles’ that he calls the ‘*architecture of endspace*’.³

Apocalyptic images are marked by excess and accumulation, and depictions of material chaos signal loss of spiritual and individual control. From the grandiose rhetoric of John Martin's paintings, such as *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1851-3), to the build-up of marks and space in the prison prints of Piranesi, 'surplus' signals loss of social order. In contemporary images, both documentary and artistic, we sense similar effects of terror and the sublime. Andreas Gursky's immersive photographs of financial institutions and digital infrastructure bring us to the edge of a precipice, where we fear a headlong fall into the totalizing maelstrom of big data, and every National Geographic photograph of swirling islands of plastic detritus represent further loosing of our ties to landscape and environment and slow immersion in a soup of trash.

The crisis of climate change is spoken of as having 'biblical' proportions and such reference is apt. In *Flood Story* the divers appear the only sign of human life, yet even they have an otherworldly appearance. Their bodies, which hover and glow, are created by making an absence to represent a presence. In some drawings their role as visitors from another realm is enhanced to include hand gestures of supplication, suggesting they may be angelic saviours. While these images are firmly in the realm of imaginative forewarnings, in a time now called the Anthropocene, in recognition of human impact on our current geological epoch, we can no longer ignore the global consequences of our actions.

Finally, these drawings are didactic, they aspire to be aesthetic and instructive. This is a rather unfashionable idea: that artists may act as a conduit for shared public concerns; that they might sense and crystalize a prescient moment

and speak, not principally for themselves, but on behalf of others and in a common language. The problems with this approach are numerous. But for me, to shy from the possibility of ‘applying’ drawing, if only through creative propositions, would fail to realise drawing’s potential for ‘plain speech’ and the strong undercurrent in drawing today toward communication and engagement in shared issues and debates. Philip Rawson reminds us of drawing’s capacity to bridge between artist and viewer and how they are able to stir in the viewer reactions inaccessible through other forms:

Drawings act as meeting-places between artists’ dynamic experience and our own. Without drawings to awaken them, those kinetic responses would lie sleeping in our memories. This is how, under the stimulus of a good drawing, we are able to retake possession of those areas of our own real experience which normally lie unused and forgotten, and so see the forms of realities that nothing else can tell us.⁴

NOTES

- 1 Ballard, J.G (1965) *Drowned World*, Penguin Books, Middlesex: England, p. 12.
- 2 In the collection of the Kunst Historisches Museum, Vienna, Austria
- 3 Libeskind, Daniel (2001) *The Space of Encounter*, London: Thames & Hudson, p. 84.
- 4 Rawson, Philip (1979) *Seeing through Drawing*, London: BBC publications, p. 26.

Many of us have dreamt of visiting another planet. We may well get the chance. Or rather, if we stay put and stick to our current trajectory, a new and different planet will sooner or later be visited upon us. Summing up recent developments in the Earth sciences, palaeobiologist and Anthropocene Working Group chair Jan Zalasiewicz puts it like this: 'The Earth seems to be less one planet, rather a number of different Earths that have succeeded each other in time, each with very different chemical, physical and biological states'.¹ Through the concept of abrupt climate change and the more general thesis of a new 'Anthropocene' geological epoch, Earth scientists have been warning us about the imminent possibility of pushing the Earth system into a novel and unfamiliar operating state.

If every one of the 196 nations who signed up to the 2015 COP 21 Paris Agreement delivers the reduced carbon emissions they have promised, predicted global warming will still reach some 2.7 °C by 2100. Recent research points to an eventual sea level rise of around 2.3 meters for each degree of warming, though there is also growing fear of much greater inundation should climate change trigger the break-up of the polar ice caps. Especially if the faster option occurs, a great many coastal cities would succumb to rising seas. 'Our drowned cities . . . would begin to be covered by sand, silt, and mud, and take the first steps towards becoming geology', intones Zalasiewicz. 'The process of fossilization will begin'.²

How are we to live on the threshold of this new and strange Earth? What does it mean to face a future that seems to be receding rather than opening up, one in which the familiar fabric and contours of our physical existence look

increasingly likely to be sedimented into the Earth's geological strata? How on Earth do we 'represent' the very processes of disappearance - the fossilization of the present?

Artists have often depicted, indeed revelled in, disaster. The cataclysmic event has served the arts well, at once an opportunity for prophesy, a chance to orchestrate a thrilling spectacle, and an opening to step up with the creative talent to resurrect the ruined world. If Gerry Davies' postdiluvian visions pay homage to earlier catastrophic genres, they also refuse to luxuriate in the aesthetics of disaster, and decline the privilege of the artist to conjure sense out of the collapse of sensible worlds. Instead, the *Flood Story* series offers us the paradox of depicting of a vanishing lifeworld and of identifying a reliable witness to this passing - an ambivalence inscribed not only in the content of these images but in the processes by which they have been formed. Instead of wiping the slate clean and rebirthing the world, Davies asks how we – or our successors – might apprehend and inhabit these ruins, how we might find some way of negotiating between the Earth just passed and whatever state of the planet comes next.

There are no toppled temples or shattered statuary here. The debris of this drowned world is the mundane, structural stuff of modernity – girders and masonry, water tanks and oil drums, satellite dishes and sundry vehicles. Just as an extreme event throws a profusion of disparate forms and objects together, so too is each of Davies' flood scenes a mash-up of pre-existing materials. Each work in the series is constructed from a collage of photographs of damage inflicted by actual destructive events - sourced from newspaper, magazine and internet reports.

Cropped, resized, rotated, these found fragments are roughly composited into a rectangular plane – a substratum over which Davies lays down the semi-transparent polyester film that provides his working surface. The positive shapes in the underlying photos are then meticulously traced out. ‘Drawn’ by brush with a mix of powdered graphite and a liquid binder, the image-making process is more than just a mode of representation, for it echoes the way that particulate matter - suspended in and sorted by a fluid medium - deposits the sedimentary layers that initiate the formation of new geological strata.

If the detritus that forms the picture plane is the stuff of which a novel stratum is being formed, however, it does not seem to be a formation that some future geologist or archeologist will simply read off and tabulate. Davies makes no attempt to bring the contours and perspectives of this lithic layer into alignment. Instead there are multiple vanishing points, a rifted and crazed ground, no single viewing position to bring it all together. No hope of a unifying, omniscient gaze.

So too for our planet. For all that geoscientists attempt to provide a clear, systematic account of change in the Earth system, the emerging story offers little of the certitude we used to expect of science. If the world no longer seems to be an intelligible whole, it is not just because our understanding falls short or is subject to contention, nor even because human impacts have messed up a coherent, predictable planet. It is because, as geoscientists insist, ‘the Earth is never static and ... variability abounds at nearly all spatial and temporal scales’,³ because the very

planet now appears to be multiple, fractured, discontinuous, not at one with itself. And in this way, in the words of literary theorist Timothy Morton, geoscience confronts us with ‘an abyss whose reality becomes increasingly uncanny, not less, the more scientific instruments are able to probe it’.⁴

Then again, we in the western world began to learn this lesson a long time ago. The era of European Enlightenment was a time of maritime exploration. So too was it a period of subterranean discovery, a moment of intensifying mining, quarrying, and infrastructural works. By the late 18th century, Europeans, savants and earth-working practitioners had before them copious evidence to support the idea of a deep geological time that was embodied in the vertical layering of the Earth’s crust.

Whereas horizontal oceanic voyages helped weave the globe into a single, interconnected space, the increasing traversal of the Earth’s strata disclosed something rather more disconcerting. The accumulating fossil record told a story of living creatures that belonged to one stratum but not another: whole worlds of life that must have been annihilated in some great upheaval that marked the threshold between strata. For ‘enlightened’ minds, reaching a causal understanding of such ‘revolutions of the Earth’ emerged as a key question of the era.⁵

If new assertions of gradualism – biological evolution, human progress – helped quell fears of life-extinguishing paroxysms of the Earth yet to come, we might still ask just how deeply geological anxiety left its mark on the

trajectory of the modern west. We will probably never know the extent to which the edifice of modernity was erected to hold back geological instability - the degree to which a monolithic commitment to growth and accumulation expressed a fearful will to outrun, outweigh, outreach the paroxysms of the Earth.

Flood Story invites us into the ruins of this strategy - not only by depicting a world that finally overwhelms our constructions but by bathing us in the irony that by raging against the threat of fossilization we have hastened its arrival. But if Davies resists offering a vision of post-apocalyptic renewal, neither does he completely abandon us to our fate. For in each image there is at least one figure manifest as a negative space framed by the plane of wreckage – an enigmatic submarine presence defined as much by what they are not as what they are.

Divers – scuba, sky or springboard – are terrestrial beings who propel themselves into an unforgiving medium with the bare minimum of equipment. One early visitor to Davies’ studio viewed the diving figures as angelic, intuiting perhaps that divers and angels share a mission of navigating between incommensurate worlds. Scuba divers maintain a background faith in science, which has provided them with the microcosmic atmosphere they depend upon. Though they may not be purely ethereal beings, in Davies’ universe they are suspended between a world that is lost and one that has yet to fully materialize.

As Kathryn Yusoff would have it, the figure of the *Anthropos* in the Anthropocene thesis raises questions not only about human positioning on the threshold of an unknowable future, but about human origins - where we came from and how we came to be geologic agents. In her words: 'the nomination of the Anthropocene as an epochal shift poses a material 'conversation' between the beginnings and ends of 'man' [sic] articulated by writings in the geologic record, in which 'future man' is posited as the fossil witness to the ends of humanity'.⁶

If Davies' frogmen and women are witness to the end of a certain state of the Earth and its corresponding human condition, so too do they offer a connection – a lifeline perhaps – between an indeterminate future and a watery, primordial past. The *Anthropos* as half angel, half amphibian. Or as Yusoff cites Friedrich Nietzsche, pioneer of a backward-glancing, archeological passage to futurity: 'What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under*'.⁷

In the meantime, quite ordinary people often seem to make extraordinary overtures when their everyday worlds go under. Strange and beautiful things can happen when flooding or other extreme events temporarily wash away social and physical structures. In a blog post titled 'the day I learned to let go of material possessions', Brisbaner Pauly Ting describes the aftermath of the devastating 2011 Queensland floods:

For the next week, all of us shut down our businesses and jobs to spend our mornings, noons and nights helping anyone in need. From the local church to a friend's business to a stranger's home we made deep friendships and strong opinions about the importance of camaraderie, generosity and humanity. We all questioned why we attach so much emotional meaning to 'things' in our lives and we all agreed that people mattered more.⁸

Similar tales surfaced around the Indian Ocean at the end of 2004, in New Orleans and Mumbai in 2005, in Christchurch in 2011, in the north west of England and South of Scotland in late 2015, and wherever the Earth withdraws its solidity and its support.

There is something about these overtures to others in need, about lightening up and recognizing that we cannot stockpile our way out of the upheavals of the Earth, about the condition of being suspended between worlds, that seems to overflow the secular reasoning of the Enlightenment. Bronislaw Szerszynski raises the possibility that, along with its shifting flows of energy and matter, 'the coming age of the Earth might involve a great acceleration of *spirit*.'⁹ Like Gerry Davies' spectral scuba divers, enabled by modern technics even as they drift into obscure, unfathomable depths, we can only wonder where such a surge will take us.

NOTES

- 1 Cited in Hamilton, Clive (2014) 'Can Humans Survive the Anthropocene?' Online at:
<http://clivehamilton.com/can-humans-survive-the-anthropocene/> (accessed 4 October, 2015), p. 6.
- 2 Zalasiewicz, Jan (2008) *The Earth after Us*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 84-5.
- 3 Steffen W, Sanderson A, Tyson P, et al. (2004) *Global Change and the Earth System: A Planet Under Pressure*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, p. 295.
- 4 Morton, Timothy (2012), 'Ecology without the present', *The Oxford Literary Review*, 34 (2): 229–238, p. 233.
- 5 Clark, Nigel (2017) Politics of Strata. *Theory, Culture & Society* (in press).
- 6 Yusoff, Kathryn (2015) Anthropogenesis: Origins and Endings in the Anthropocene. *Theory, Culture & Society* 33(2): 3–28, p. 4.
- 7 Cited in Yusoff, Anthropogenesis, p. 11.
- 8 Ting, Pauly (2011) The Day I Learned to Let Go of Material Possessions. December 9. Online at:
<https://paulyting.com/2011/12/09/the-day-i-learned-to-let-go-of-material-posessions/> (accessed 25 January 2017).
- 9 Szerszynski, Bronisław (2017) Gods of the Anthropocene: Geo-Spiritual Formations in the Earth's New Epoch. *Theory, Culture & Society* (in press).



Flood Story: World Over,
Graphite and dammar
varnish on Mylar, 2012
52 x 41 cms



Flood Story: Shanty Town,
Graphite and dammar
varnish on Mylar, 2016
52 x 41 cms



Flood Story: New Fossils,
Graphite and dammar
varnish on Mylar, 2016
52 x 41 cms



Flood Story: Silt Drift,
Graphite and dammar
varnish on Mylar, 2016
52 x 41 cms



Flood Story: Cars and Planes,
Graphite and dammar
varnish on Mylar, 2016
52 x 41 cms



Flood Story: Bike Yard,
Graphite and dammar
varnish on Mylar, 2016
52 x 41 cms



*Flood Story: After the Flood,
Version II,*
Graphite and dammar
varnish on Mylar, 2016
52 x 41 cms



Flood Story: Cityscape,
Graphite and dammar
varnish on Mylar, 2016
52 x 41 cms



Flood Story: Final Visit,
Graphite and dammar
varnish on Mylar, 2016
52 x 41 cms

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