

Life is elsewhere *

(Taken from the publication **West Wing Making art and architecture work for health**)

The art programme for the West Wing used as a starting point the idea of presenting visitors to the Breast Care Unit with images of 'elsewhere' intended to transport them away from the here and now. The brief was developed from extensive discussions with patients and staff, whose overwhelming message was that those attending the unit and the friends and relatives who accompanied them wanted principally to be 'somewhere else'. This has been interpreted by the artists using a range of media and approaches – realist, fantastic, abstract, conceptual – loosely based on the theme of landscape. We hope their works will act as landmarks within the building, helping visitors to orientate themselves in an unfamiliar space and situation, and will offer the opportunity for those who contemplate them to forget themselves for a moment and to dream.

Julian Opie once said: "I would like to make a painting and then walk into it." His temporary piece *I dreamt I was driving my car, (country road)*, an 18 by 44 metre stretch of printed vinyl drop sheet that covered the West Wing facade during the building works, showed a lane winding off into the hills which gave the illusion one might hop into one of the cars parked in the Barts central square and drive off into the distance. Opie's work uses a simplified, almost cartoon-like language which he has likened to the pictures one sees in dreams. By paring his image down to the essentials – conveying only as much information as one might glimpse from a fast-moving car – he allows each of us to imagine where the road might lead.

James Aldridge's paintings use a similar vocabulary of two-dimensional images reminiscent of graphic art, but while Opie aspires to aesthetic directness, Aldridge is interested in the decorative and in bold optical effects. *Twilight*, which covers much of the wall space in the second-floor waiting area, is a contemporary response to the paintings created by William Hogarth to frame the staircase in the North Wing, but here Aldridge replaces Hogarth's Christian subject matter with a fantasy landscape with elements drawn from 19th-century wallpapers, Chinese landscape paintings, contemporary travel brochures and wildlife documentaries. Set in twilight, his depiction of paradise – complete with silhouettes of birds, butterflies, foliage and flowers – extends off the walls on to free-standing screens to encourage viewers to immerse themselves in the scene.

DJ Simpson's works – carved into formica-laminated plywood with an electric router – are like vast abstract paintings with tactile surfaces that appear to change in texture and tone in different light conditions. They exude energy, with the gouged line changing in depth and colour and the skid marks left by the router clearly visible.

Check, Double Check, in the ground-floor waiting room, was inspired by the lacquer-panelled parlours in the designs of German Bauhaus affiliate Oskar Schlemmer and by the watercolours of the Russian abstract artist Wassily Kandinsky. Developed through discussions with project architect Alison McLellan, it covers two walls: one panelled in white, echoing the two painted walls but with the whiteness subverted by the gouged lines, and the other in plum and pink. The white panelling is highly reflective, flashing back the outlines of the windows and the colours within the room.

David Batchelor describes the colours of his works as 'Maybelline' – chemical, electric, metallic and neon, the artificial hues of an industrial city. He uses these unnatural colours in conjunction with everyday found objects such as the carcasses of old signage, or in this case the layered history of a 250-year-old building. He describes his tools – the readymade and the monochrome – as “what trees and sky are to the landscape painter.”

In *West Wing Spectrum* Batchelor sought to create a work that would enhance rather than disrupt the West Wing stairwell, whose handsome eighteenth-century oak staircase is one of the building's most significant features. The neon frames he has inserted within the window reveals recall Claude glasses – the small tinted lenses carried by eighteenth-century painters to frame a landscape before painting it, sometimes described as an 'idealising' medium offering a modified vision of nature which the artist could then capture. Here the windows merely frame the uninspiring Robin Brook Centre opposite, but the colours that spill from Batchelor's neon tubes are reflected by surfaces within the interior space which are revealed as more worthy of notice than the views of the outside world.

Cornelia Parker sees waiting rooms as psychologically edgy places where people exist in limbo, often scanning the ceiling as they sit and wait. *Still Life with Reflection* explores the oppositions Parker returns to repeatedly in her work – light and dark, comedy and tragedy, consciousness and unconsciousness, death and resurrection, black cloud and silver lining. "I'm concerned with ambivalence, with opposites, with inhaling and exhaling, things falling and things rising, things disintegrating and coming back together... with killing things off, as if they existed in cartoon comics, and then bringing them back to life, so that one set of references is negated as a new one takes its place."

For the first-floor waiting room here she has pressed a range of silver objects – such as teapots, candlesticks and gravy boats – and suspended them with their ‘whole’ counterparts just below the level of the ceiling, placed as though on a long banqueting table. As the light changes the profiles cast different shadows across the room. Parker often works with silver artefacts, which she describes as the ‘commemorative’ objects that tend to mark the milestones in people's lives; by changing their shape she shows how their meaning too can be subject to alteration.

Shahzia Sikander's *Land-escapes* is a series of ten cibachrome landscapes created by digitally manipulating her initial hand-painted studies. Typically Sikander draws her subject matter from her studies of both Muslim (Mughal) and Hindu (Safavid/Basohli) miniature paintings often referring to the period of Akbar the Great (1542-1605), a Mogul emperor of India who was the first ruler to promote religious and racial tolerance, and to the Persian literary tradition, where landscape has a metaphorical significance. Through a layering process she fuses this history and her personal experience of living in present-day New York into an inclusive whole.

In this series, situated beside the window seats on the second floor, landscapes are stylised into fantastical scenes that transport viewers into imaginary but empty worlds. The production of miniature painting has in the past been very labour intensive, but here Sikander has combined traditional techniques with the relatively fast modern-day possibilities of digital manipulation.

Rowena Dring's work employs a different set of time-consuming processes. Having digitally reduced photographs of her travels to two-dimensional shapes, she then lays the shapes on to different coloured fabrics, cuts them out and sews the patches back together to form a complex appliqué. The subject matter for *think of paradise*, situated in the patient resource centre, derived from a competition within the Trust inviting patients and staff to send in their favourite holiday snaps. Patient groups were then involved in pattern-cutting sessions and sewing bees so as many people as possible could contribute to the textile's creation.

George Shaw's work also depicts personal landscapes, in his case the housing estate and countryside home in Tile Hill, Coventry. He says these ‘dark lurking places’ have become increasingly important to him the older he gets and the further away he goes, and his images of them tend to have a desolate and nostalgic air. Visiting Barts to see the site reminded him of going to hospital when he was a child and conjured up memories of the place where he would rather have been – home, with its familiar smells, sounds and textures. Placed beside the window seats in the first-floor corridor,

his series of Humbrol oil paintings *Home*, his first foray into interiors, is based on black-and-white photographs he took of his parent's house when he was a teenager.

Shaw cites a Philip Larkin poem entitled 'The Building' which describes the feelings many of us have on entering a hospital. He hopes his small personal paintings might evoke feelings of safety and familiarity and provide visitors with a point of identification.

Finally, photographer Phil Sayer was invited at the early stages of this project to document the building's progress. His skill at capturing the individuals who contributed to the process – including artists, architects, patients and staff – alongside the slow transformation of the building from a situation of pitiful neglect to its current splendid state is beautifully demonstrated in this publication. In documenting the artworks, the building and the people who use it and work within it, Sayer's photographs reveal that the artists' theme of 'Life is elsewhere' is perhaps inaccurate, and that on the contrary, the safeguarding and celebration of life happen very much here as well.

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