

## “EDGE OF DARK”

*Curating under Covid.*

*Reflections on the Group Show in actuality, virtually, in the rural ‘Provinces’, and how BLM counts everywhere.*



Sandra Boreham, *The Requiem. Business as Usual*, Wood, acrylic, steel and plaster 6' 3"

What follows is an exploration of ways that art can clarify the interrelation between some of the broader issues of our time: political and social fragmentation, artistic activity beyond the great acknowledged centres, and aspects of the impact of the virtual on the visual arts. Covid-19 is a part of this, not a separate phenomenon.

At the same time, this exploration is a conversational tour with the guest curator round a group show entitled *Edge of Dark* at Tremeneheere Gallery, part of Tremeneheere Sculpture Gardens in the far West of the UK, approximately 10 miles from Land's End. The show includes artworks in a wide variety of media and forms, including short films, digital poetry and installations, painting, sculpture, ceramics, and artist's books. They were selected from submissions offered by the some of the 85 professional artists who are members of the Newlyn Society of Artists by Jesse Leroy Smith<sup>1</sup>, who is himself an artist. Jesse is the latest in a series of distinguished guest curators invited by the NSA.

The title of the show, like almost all NSA group shows, was sent to the membership well in advance, so not only will the works have been submitted with this in mind, they might also have been painted in response to the call. Commenting on the choice of *Edge of Dark*, the curator said he found it well balanced between the specific and the generic: too much one way, and you can limit artistic freedom; too much the other, and you lose coherence.

When it achieves this poise between the exactitude and wide relevance, art can address matters very clearly without being constrained by dominant ways of thinking; it can think outside. This is not in opposition to science. It would be absurd to imply that science can't think beyond convention. But perhaps science needs clarity in the questions asked, while, as Jesse emphasises, “art requires being comfortable about not knowing. That's so important”.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-st-ives/exhibition/art-now-cornwall/art-now-cornwall-artists/art-now-cornwall-19>  
<https://www.newlynartschool.co.uk/tutors/jesse-leroy-smith/>

If you have heard of the NSA, it is most likely because you are either a fan of the Newlyn School of *plein air* painters or a nineteenth/early twentieth century specialist. But like art in Cornwall overall and in other non-Metropolitan centres such as Gateshead or Margate, the NSA is alive and thriving<sup>2</sup>

When the NSA was founded in 1896, the members necessarily looked to the Capital as the indispensable centre, as did all artists and groups: at this time, for example, Gauguin could not escape Paris or the old world entirely, but had to send his paintings back from Tahiti for sale. This necessity has become less and less intractable, and although the major cities retain their essential role housing historic and contemporary collections, their function is arguably less all-encompassing: they are more of a barometer than the weather itself.

Artists as individuals and groups can now look anywhere in the world for exposure and/or inspiration or to strike up conversations. Conversely major galleries have established significant presences in comparatively remote locations such as Tate St Ives, Cornwall, a national institution, or Hauser & Wirth, a global commercial gallery, in Bruton, Somerset. The presence of these actual galleries is directly related to the virtual world. Indeed, Tate St Ives first opened in 1993, coinciding with the initial exponential growth of the internet in the 1990s.

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<sup>2</sup> I have to declare an interest right away as a member of the NSA, one who is delighted to have a short film and a digital poem in *Edge of Dark*. Other significant artistic organisations in West Cornwall, UK include: Porthmeor Studios; the St Ives & the Newlyn Schools of Art; CAST studios & Arts Centre, Helston; Cultivator at Krowji, Redruth, and many more.



Dan Pyne, *The Death of Extraordinary Change*, Ceramic, Pencil, Ash, Digital Video.



Rachael Reeve Edwards *And the Water Prevailed upon the Land*, Oil & Acrylic on Board.

As soon as you walk into this exhibition, you are struck by the relationship between two apparently disparate works, which for the curator are key. On a panel to your right is a smallish and subtle painting by Rachael Reeve Edwards of buildings under water. Its Biblical-sounding title, *And the Water Prevailed upon the Land* leaves us in no doubt that it is about climate change, while the image itself is full of ambiguity. Perhaps this flooding that seems somehow to float the generic buildings into the sky is the calm aftermath of torrential rains. On the other hand, that low wall on the right perhaps invokes the remains of sea defences, an uncertainty reinforced by the understated handling of impossible space in the work. It is calm and storm, land and sea and sky, as the suggestive sectioning of the predominant blue-greys indicate. This is a quietly surreal nightmare, whose apocalyptic red just begins to bleed through, threatening worse to come.

A plinth obliquely ahead forms part of a beautifully constructed piece by Dan Pyne. It is fire to Reeve Edwards' water. On the top of a white pillar sits a round object that defies decision: by turns it's a bomb, it's an urn, it's a virus, it's queasily amusing, it's strangely lovely. On the front of the plinth, perfectly angled for viewing, is a simple and beautiful digital film of sheets of paper covered in white handwriting, sequentially burnt through from behind. The texts are thoughts about Covid 19 and the fugitive nature of time by a variety of people, named only with their first names. Ashes to ashes.



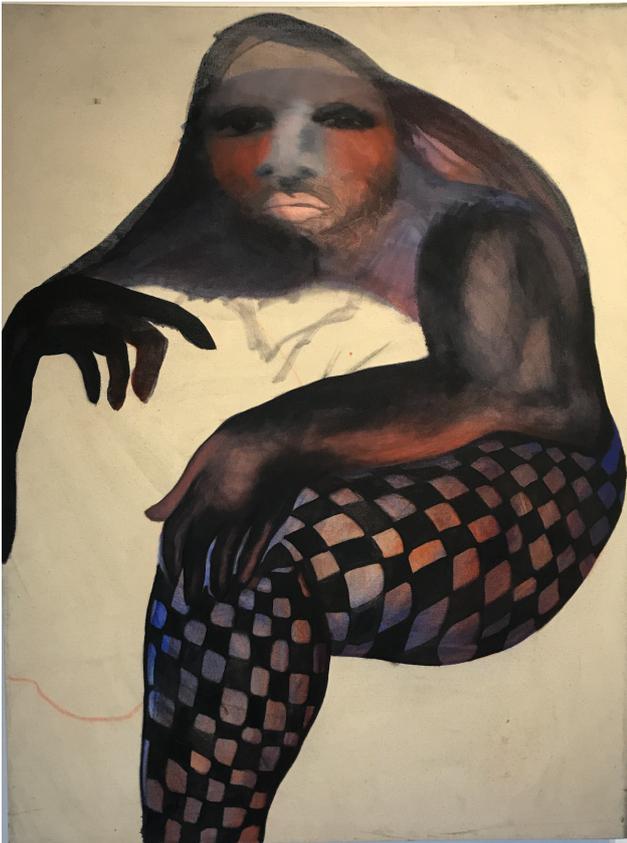
Installation view: Karen Lorenz, *They Must have Descended into the Darkness for a Reason* mid-ground & Duncan Walters *Standby* in far corner.

From there you are implicitly directed by your eye line to Karen Lorenz's delightful haptic sound piece using digital technology - an Arduino board fixed to the underside of the sturdy wooden table on which two demijohn bottles stand. Together with a sculpture of a tree and a light sensor atop a speaker, they form a variant of the theramin, responding to the movements of the visitor with sounds that made me think of Prospero's island, a fragile and threatened idyll.

A similar thought is taken up in the last element of the curated sequence. Right ahead of you in the corner is a black glass screen with a red dot of light in the centre. You watch, wondering if the screen just been turned off and is about to go blank. Perhaps Hal's voice from *2001 - A Space Odyssey* will sound in your ear, *This mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardize it.*

You now have the essence of this show: many highly individual voices in profound yet accessible conversation about what is going wrong in our times. Coronavirus is neither a unique nor an isolated phenomenon. As curator Jesse points out, the title of show was already decided some time before Covid-19 had impacted. What this makes clear is that the show diagnoses the deeper malaise of which pandemics are a symptom.

The failures in democratic leadership that have become so terribly apparent in the UK and elsewhere have degraded the environment and fractured the social. It is now up to what is left of the society in which former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher notoriously did not believe to convince us of what is wrong. In other words, people outside the Establishment have to speak with and to our whole being, hearts and minds, as with Black Lives Matter or #MeToo.



Manon Dowse, *Checkered Out*, Oil on Canvas 90x120cm

Painting can address such issues every bit as effectively as other forms of social expression or protest, without being polemical or educational in aim - witness the wealth of BAME talent finally becoming visible. A show can do this implicitly, as here, where Jesse's almost 'hands off' approach allows a multiplicity of voices to speak.

"[The exhibition] is not really curated. I've just selected work that's here. [...] I don't believe in shows being over-curated. Sometimes they are an extension of the curator's agenda. You have to let the artists speak."<sup>3</sup> He has approached the task by selecting a number of key works, placing them and then designing the hang in response.

*Checkered Out*, by Manon Dowse is another of these key works, and it puts race politics at centre stage of a piece whose focus is yet, in the artist's own words, "on the emotions that the figure invokes." The boldness of composition on largely bare canvas belies its subtlety: the figure is strangely articulated so that the prominent arm and leg on the right attach to a smaller shoulder and flank,

while the hand on the left suggests both that it belongs to the same figure and to another. "Distortion of perspective is a recurrent feature in my work", the artist points out. Together with the facial expression and veiled reddish-grey arc that moves the eye round the work in a broken circle, the sensation is that of unease and of the kind of melancholy that Freud associated with grief<sup>4</sup>. For Manon, this painting is special, "because it is the one piece during lockdown that kept pushing [...] that I kept coming back to." I notice that again the word "relationship" recurs, as she says "you build up a relationship, almost like a friendship, very intimate, yea, very much linked to the time."

Pivotal to how the show is hung, the placement of such key works directing the visitor around is thoroughly painterly. Your eye is led, as just described in the Dowse, or again in the Reeve

<sup>3</sup> The BAME community in SW Britain is relatively small, but growing, and there are excellent initiatives, such as the Black History through Music educational project, led by Dr Angeline Morrison, and recent programming at Tate St Ives. Jesse comments, "Although Black Lives Matter is less foregrounded in the show because we're in Cornwall, it's resonant [because it involves us all in change, and] everything's changing."

<sup>4</sup> See especially *Mourning and Melancholia*, (1917). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916), 237-258.

Edwards above, where the reds of the house in the middle connect via the pale lines of what I think of as the factory farm to that fearful red; wherever you look, your eye keeps flickering back and forth to the tension between them.



A similar tension between works in a show is one of the main reasons why virtual shows are quite distinct from actual, both in terms of curation and of experience. You can't walk around a piece such as Andrew Swan's beautifully observed and compassionate *Form a Queue*, made of discarded metal packaging strips. Its figures are at once movingly visible and invisible as they invoke the wait at a soup kitchen or socially distanced shopping.



Andrew Swan, *Form a Queue*, Metal Plate 350x200cm (2 details & side view)

Online, work is of course accessible to anyone anywhere with access to a smartphone, and it goes without saying how much this can matter to artists working beyond the confines of the major cities. But the kind of journey under discussion is changed. You can't gradually see relations between paintings emerge, or suddenly find a sculpture, or even the whole gallery reframed by the installation.

Nor can you stand in the middle of a virtual gallery, turn slowly round and allow the hang to direct you. Personally speaking, this is a significant frustration, since doing this is something of a ritual for me, developed largely unconsciously over many years. Not that being responsive to the hang in this way is easy in chronological blockbuster shows, when you have to fight your way round with apologetic determination. But it is possible. Of course, it's not the only way, and different shows will affect the visitor in distinct ways, as indeed will other visitors. I remember an excited group of school children sitting on the floor and shouting to their teacher their responses to a genre painting that I would otherwise have wrongly ignored. Or the woman who stood absorbed in a single piece for all the time I was in the room. Or any chance encounter, when complete strangers catch each others eye, whether or not they speak.

The point is that visiting a gallery in person is a social experience.

Then there is the material presentness of art, especially strong when a show reveals originality or masterpieces. When you paint or construct, you move around the work constantly - and when

you don't, you know from experience that it is telling you something. Making art is an embodied experience, not just a visual one, and not primarily intellectual - as gnomically put by Manet, it is "an eye, a hand". We could add, a distance from head to toe or the span of your arms.<sup>5</sup>



Tremeneheere Gallery, Upper floor, installation view looking South. Foreground Phil Booth, *Medusa's Fate (X+Y)*, Bronze, Wood, Metals & Perspex.

Virtual presentations of actual shows are not without their advantages, of course, but most I have so those both Jesse I have so far seen could do with evolving to find ways to exploit the advantages of the virtual as a specific medium. For example, zooming in could be made more intuitive. Or the visitor might be invited to move pieces round, to curate their own show, even including adding works or leaving some out. The floor plan, lighting and dimensions of the walls could be specified.



Tremeneheere Gallery, Lower floor, installation view looking North.

Actual galleries are not without their disadvantages. Tremeneheere Gallery, for example, presents a curator with two particular challenges: first, it is very beautiful in itself, with its own rhythm of exposed wooden beams dividing long, somewhat ecclesiastical spaces; and second, you have to go outside to pass between upper and lower galleries. This is not entirely disadvantageous: it means that everyone has to join wheelchair users in going slightly out of their way, punctuating the experience of the show; and the curator who wishes to create a conversation between works has to think creatively round pre-ordained rectangles and niches.

<sup>5</sup> I guess that exponents of the Art and Language movement or some conceptual artists might disagree with parts of this generalisation, but I think it broadly holds good.

It suits Jesse well, as we see from this anecdote about his time as a handler at the Royal Academy in London (where he completed his postgrad). The then organisers at the RA mainly worked with chronology as their basis for curation. But Director Norman Rosenthal would come in and mix it all up, ignoring protests of “you can’t put that with that” because he had seen a relationship, and that was what interested him. As Jesse observes, “You might want to make an academic point, but things visually have to have a tension. You don’t put works together so that they harmonise - you need to create a certain degree of tension.”



(From Top clockwise L-R): Rachael Reeve Edwards, *Edge of Dark & Night Watch* (diptych), oil & acrylic on board, 30 cm x 30 cm; Angie Munro; *Ancestral Line*, toned cyanotype, 60 x40cm; Paula Bolton, *Illuminating Beyond Space*, offset litho, 73 x102 cm; Pete Ward, *Shelter Beneath a Cornish Elm (Skovva yn dann a Kernewek Elowen)*, Cornish earth pigments on canvas in salvaged frame, 29 x29cm; Heather McAlpine, *Offshore Squall*, 28x33cm & *Dark Horizons*, 33x43cm, acrylic on canvas; Catherine J Harvey, *Night Watch - English Channel*, etching (framed),77x57cm.

This is evident, for example, in both the selection and arrangement of the section above of the upper gallery, which takes full advantage of the way the walls are divided and of the tension between both the works and the interior-external balance of their placement and content. It is also an example of how - as he laughingly admits - he breaks the overall principle in hanging *Edge of Dark*, which was to place more psychological and inward-looking works downstairs, with more airy, landscape-oriented pieces upstairs.



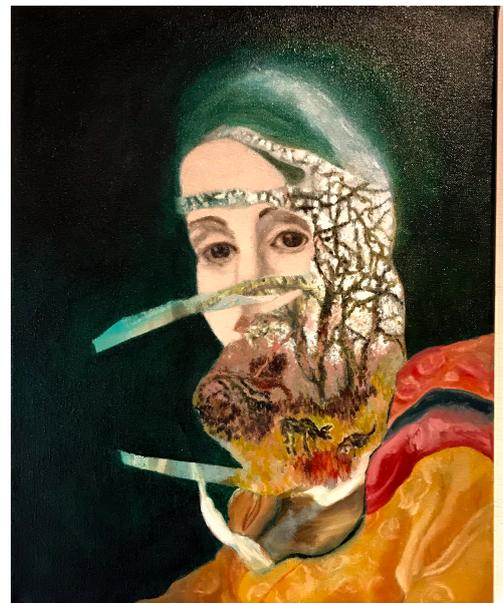
David Symonds *All the Days of My Life*, Pen on paper, triptych, 79x59cm x3.

“In the upper gallery”, says Jesse, “it feels like people have been out in the landscape, they’re not painting the landscape, but they’ve been out in it.” Pointing out David Symonds’ triptych, *All the Days of My Life*, (above) he says, “This is a key work here, by someone who spends a lot of time in the landscape, experiencing the elements, by looking at Nature, [it becomes about] the idea of time, the duration it takes with pen and paper.” I thought of Merleau-Ponty on Cézanne: “The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness.”

Cézanne’s discovery of landscape thinking itself in him brought to mind Una D’Aragona’s piece *Running with the Pack* in the downstairs gallery, which further illustrates what the tension between disparate artworks can bring out. Though comparatively small, D’Aragona’s unsettling yet serene painting occupies a section to itself. It’s impossible to tell whether the collage-like form that floats across its middle section is a sweeping scarf or is actually a landscape, creating further tension with the mask-like presence of the face. (Jesse compares this with his current practice: “At the moment, I’m making paintings from collages, [which is like this piece] in that, yes, it’s a landscape, but what it is actually is a painting. It feels like Una’s (D’Aragona’s) work is a pre-existing painting, a historical painting that the artist values.

It gives some sense that it is almost sacred. What she’s honouring is the painting, not the landscape.”

For me, the painting and the simulacrum of a collage interrupt each other, suggesting at the same time a mask, a Muslim woman with head covering, part of her robe blowing across her face, and perhaps hounds at the kill (connecting with the subject of Mike Newton’s *Actaeon and Hounds* at the other end of the same gallery.) The scene of the tragedy is continuous with the orange, black and red forms that suggest a robe. The painting won’t let you decide. All the elements - space, form, colour, composition - contribute their nuances, suggestions.



Una D’Aragona, *Running with the Pack*, Oil on Canvas, 50x40cm.



Kate Walters, *The Lovers*, Oil on Canvas, 90x80cm.

On the left and at right angles to *Running with the Pack* is another oil in its own niche, Kate Walters' *The Lovers*. The placement emphasises an already strong correlation between the works of colour and composition against very dark backgrounds. But it is the difference in emotive tone that makes them speak to each other, intensifying their hold.

For Jesse, the fact that they're lovers presented in the context of the theme "Edge of Dark" reinforces the age-old ambiguity of such moments, a reminder that all love changes or transmutes.

Walters has a set of six much smaller, very different and challenging pieces in the show, *Memories of the Father, or the Male in the White Dream (therapy)* which explicitly hover between dream and

memory.<sup>6</sup> So *The Lovers* could be “a memory of love, it could be a dream of a lover. “But if you think ‘Edge of Dark’, the reason these works are next to each other is that everything passes, everything dies, love dies sometimes. Yet [in both paintings] the colour is so vital, it’s like it’s never going to die.

We lingered on colour, feeling its strength and agreeing that in *The Lovers* it hinges on the small blue area just behind their faces. Jesse adds “yea, then the blue echoes through the painting with these greys & then, if this is a painting by a woman, this quite obsessive [handling of the male figure indicates] she’s got more involved in him, in the hand.” He pauses, trying to find the words, “so what I’m trying to say, it’s a man and a woman or two lovers ... it feels like it’s coming from the man and the woman ... I’ll tell you what it is, when I look at the painting it’s like the painter is this person (the man) you know? [...] I know it’s a by a woman, but I always try to look at painting as if I don’t know anything about them.” Much more attention has indeed been paid to the male figure, whose head, for example, seems to trace several positions, in contrast to the stillness of the female.

Becoming obsessive reintroduced a recurrent theme of our conversation, the inevitable context of lockdown, and people finding ways of becoming obsessive about things. It brought us full circle back to *All the Days of My Life*, which “has got an obsessive quality about how long it took, what my heartbeats were, what music was I listening to? When you look at it, you think, I couldn’t do that, but it’s fascinating, amazing, someone would want to do that!” I laughed and mentioned the brilliant Agnes Martin - “yea, I love that kind work, Agnes Martin ... I love the whole presentation, [of the triptych] it’s all about light, the black paper, writing with white. Why do we make marks on paper?<sup>7</sup> So that’s a key work and the rest of the works are all somehow elemental ...”.

We left the show in no doubt that while the Covid-19 crisis is the headline issue today, the pandemic is the tip of the iceberg: from the catastrophic vacuum in democratic leadership to climate change to social injustice to corporate and governmental theft, we are spoilt for choice of priority problem.

Art is ever more vital in these times of crisis. This need isn’t as obvious to many as it ought to be, possibly because any discussions of the value of art that occur in emergencies all too often start from abstract representatives, such as ‘countries,’ ‘governments,’ ‘leaders’ or ‘army generals’. But large-scale crises require thinking that is both embodied and plural; shared in the sense that all sorts of particular people can begin to move towards what they have in common. Think of the impact of the Sarajevo Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta on June 19th 1994, when they played Mozart’s Requiem in the shattered ruins of the Bosnian National Library. Or again of the patient work done with art therapy all over our troubled world to offer a way through the major trauma affecting survivors of many terrible conflicts: the Holocaust, all too numerous Colonial wars, and, no less deadly to the individual, unprovoked attack and rape, or in private, ‘domestic’ abuse. Just think.

And feel. The loss of intimacy is perhaps among the great deprivations for many of us that result from Covid-19, yet an absence of genuine warmth has been an issue for much longer. There is plenty of sentimentality, extrovert exclaiming and sexual opportunity, but far less genuine humanity. Loneliness is a long term social problem. For Jesse, Yolande Armstrong’s ironically

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<sup>6</sup> Group visible in the background of *Form a Queue*, page 4, top right.

<sup>7</sup> Jesse enthused, “I really recommend *The Secret History of Writing* on BBC iPlayer, which I’m watching it at the moment, this is exactly it”.

titled [*Dirty Girls 3*] *Touch my Face - Abyss*, “[...] is a great painting because of its tenderness. The intimacy between these two people in this dark, grassy field, everyone can relate to it because it’s about friendship, and friendship being blurred with sensuality [...].”



Technically, he finds, “it has great symmetry and yet takes your eye up somehow. It’s very hard to do that.” The symmetry of the mirroring of elements is indeed essential to the painting’s intangible and subtle meanings, fleeting at the edge of dark.

Together with the handling of the figures and the tilted raised perspective, I am reminded of the visionary works of Stanley Spencer.

The organic green of the dress in the foreground reinforces the closeness of the women to the grassy earth, as the vegetation overlaps their bodies like waves.

Yolande Armstrong, [*Dirty Girls 3*] *Touch my Face - Abyss*, Acrylic on Canvas,

The way art comes to be *about* something is precisely its poise at that moment on the edge of awareness, of the dark, where we approach the collective unconscious, moving beyond the ego to what we all share, what connects rather than divides us.

As Jesse comments, the long overdue surge created by Black Lives Matter has resonance far beyond the specific vital issues it addresses. Its significance isn’t confined to race explicitly, or “my work’s about this or my work’s about that.” Artists like these are concerned with what’s going on in the streets, the countryside, our heads, online, in the corridors of power. But they don’t say, “I’m going to make work about homelessness,” for example, “it just happens.”

Penny Florence October 2020.