

Tim Brennan: 'The North'

Artists Talk

Tim Brennan introduces his work at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art.

“My name is Tim Brennan and I’m an artist and I’ve been making art and showing art for twenty years, in and around the world really, in this country and internationally. I am originally from Sunderland and I moved back about six years ago, so in 2000. A lot of my work has always been connected to ideas of places, environments and situations that people live in and the relationships between people and the places that they are in.

About three years ago I like many other people in the world got a new mobile phone and that mobile phone had a camera. One day I was standing in a car park and I was waiting for a lift and it had been raining. It stopped raining and the sun came out and a rainbow appeared and I think because I was waiting it suddenly dawned on me to fill the time by seeing what my mobile phone camera could do. So at this point I had no intention of making an artwork I thought what can this gadget do? So I took a photograph and I looked at it in the palm of my hand, like many of you will or have done and I thought, wow that is amazing.

Now I had already thought, wow that is amazing, when I looked at the rainbow and decided to make the photograph, but the image in my hand was quite different from the image that I had seen. The reason the image on my phone was so different is that the mobile phone camera is a very kind of, or at least mine is, a very low grade camera. What I mean by that is it is very basic. The picture is made up of little squares called pixels and the more basic the camera the less little squares there are to make up the image. So I realised that the camera had, had to make certain decisions. It had left certain things in and it had taken certain

things out in order to arrive at an image. And from that point I decided that I was going to see what this image and other mobile phone images could do.

And I was interested in what they might look like once I started to transfer them to the computer screen and then to print them out on various kinds of materials. Once I started to print these images, these photographs, I was also interested in the way they started to talk about two things, or do two things. One is that they started to talk about the places that I had been to in new kinds of ways, because they had left in bits of information and taken out bits of information. They also started to tell me things about what we all might call beautiful. They started to describe these places as beautiful places.

And I then began to make more and more images and with many of the images that I was making, I was setting out to try and find the most beautiful aspects of places, that I was finding myself in. Now instead of kind of getting tourist guides and brochures and maps and going to the places that we are usually told to go to such as the alps, or a beautiful beach in the south of Spain, or the Lake District, I started to think about, (I was thinking about those places of course), but I was also thinking about those places that were close to hand.

So for instance the title of this image is called Thorn Hill Glade and I live very near this place. It looks at first glance like it is in the middle of the countryside, right, and you know the word glade congeals up images of paintings that are of secluded or hidden away kind of woodland areas. But this is a round a bout near my house which is on a main road in Sunderland.

So the images I was making with my mobile phone were trying to find the beautiful, that which is beautiful in the everyday. So how do you make the ordinary extraordinary? Well if these work right you might only need to use a mobile phone camera or

you might need to use a pencil. But basically I think that the idea of things being beautiful is not so far away.

So that is one thing, to do with the beautiful, and the other thing is to do with where the images were taken. So this is a round about and it is close to home. Some of the other images that you'll see are a bit further away, (cut to a close up of another work in the show) but they are not too far away.

They are all in the North of Britain. Where ever the North of Britain might be. If you live in Doncaster, which is in Yorkshire the north might be Leeds. If you live in Leeds the North might be Newcastle. If you live in Newcastle the North might be Edinburgh and so you can go on. You start to come outside of England, the North in Shetland might be Iceland and the North in North Africa might be France. Where you went on holiday and which you might have thought was in the South. So the idea of the North is very much an idea. And I wanted to explore the idea of north.

Now there is an art historian called Peter Davidson who I met in the course of making all these images. He wrote a book about three years ago, coincidentally around the same time as I was starting to make these images, called 'The Idea of North'. One of the things that Peter Davison says in his book is that when we think of the idea of North in pictures, as images, we tend to think of cold grey skies, snow sleet, industrial places, rain, you know, bleak times if you like, grey territory. But it is clear to me, it might be very grey and dark in here with lights shining on the images (Tim gestures around the gallery), but outside, and here we are in September, it's been very warm, sunny, blue sky. And coming from Sunderland I know that you have to work hard to think about this, but it is true, that if you count up the days in the year there are as many days with blue skies and sunshine as there are with over cast cloud, rain, etc.

So all of the images in the exhibition are all about a warm kind of North, where the light warms up the land. So shall we go and look at the other bit of the show very quickly. (Tim points to the back of the gallery space). So we are going to go under ground now maybe or over ground (Tim walks to the back of the gallery and to the second half of his exhibition).

Part II

Tim stands in front of his work. So there are ten large photographs in the exhibition. The mobile phone image when you blow it up it starts to become impressionistic. There is a whole school of painters over a hundred years ago called the impressionists, that you might want to look at. And you'll get the idea that it is not sharp kind of descriptions of places, they are actually quite kind of misty or some of them are kind of blurred in some way. Many of the photographs have that same quality, because when you blow up a very simply made image on a basic camera it starts to do things to that image where by it looks out of focus. If you are up close it looks out of focus, if you are far away in focus. And it is a bit like standing on the beach in Seaburn and the mist comes down its not always sharp and clear.

So I was thinking of these places that painters had traditionally made pictures of outside in the landscape and I started to think about the way in which many of those painters had used watercolours. People that you know will make watercolours, they are not all of them official artists right. Watercolours are an easy kind of set up to use outside. In a sense, it's a bit like a hundred and fifty years ago making a watercolour was an easier way of making a picture, if you like, as it might be to make one with a mobile phone now, or at least that was the idea, you know. Here you had some materials that you could easily transport and you could describe a place very quickly with the right skills that you can learn and you can take it back and

maybe you can use it as a study to make a bigger painting or maybe it is a thing in itself.

So I started to think of watercolours, but I also started to think, ok here are places that are in the history of art amazing to look at. You know, Turners, Monet's, these are amazing places that fill you with awe or amazing picture that fill you with awe. Where are those places that fill you with awe now? Are there still mountains, do they still make you feel wow that's amazing? Maybe they do but do they do it as much as they use to do it, as much as when Turner was painting a picture of a mountain in Switzerland or not.

Is it the same thing? Is it less the case now because we are bombarded with images on television and travel books. It's easier to imagine those places and because it is easier to see picture of those places are we less taken over by them. So start to try to think of places where perhaps they would fill you with awe, those places or space where you can't actually see with the naked eye. So for instance outer space we all know that somewhere out there, there are these amazing stars that have been exploded and that with the right technology we can get glimpse of what they might look like.

So I started to make little watercolour paintings of these places that we are never going to go to, well I'm never going to go to them anyway, you might I'm not. I'm never going to get there right. I looked at pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope, using the web really to find these images of Nebula, supernova. I showed these images to Peter Davidson, who I have already talked to you about and I said "in my family, on my father's side there were miners in east Durham, in Hordon." The mines are closed now they're places you can't go to, but we know that they existed and your relatives might tell you about them.

What must it have been like to be three miles under the ground, in the blackness. You know it must have been such an alien

places, as alien and I use that term on purpose, as alien as outer space, as frightening at times as outer space. And I told Peter Davidson this and I showed him the images and he said “ But they also look like the gem stones and the precious metals that the miners would have dug into.” Whilst looking for lead or looking for coal they would find other things. And these other things, these other gem stones weren't what they were looking for they were like the by products of what they were finding.

Many of the miners in West Durham would then make objects with these finds that they'd gather. So for instance here this little box is called a spar box and in it are the gems that a miner has found whilst digging for lead in West Durham and has made this little decorative box. It's a little like a cave or a landscape and in some respects it kind of relates to the ideas that I'd been thinking of, of the miners thinking of stars while they are under ground or seeing stars or being in an alien place. But an alien place that is very, very close to home. It's all around

Run Time 15.26 mins