

...Out of a Morass

Giles Bailey



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STATEMENT

Out of a Morass explored how to represent landscape as a changing and culturally contingent phenomenon, focusing on new ways of interpreting and visualising landscapes that had been designed by the 18th century landscape architect Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. It was made in response to the 'lost' Brown landscape of Stapleton Park in West Yorkshire, once an aristocratic seat, now demolished and used for agriculture.

It was a commission as part of 'The Follies of Youth' project, marking the bicentenary of Brown's birth, initiated by Pavilion, a visual arts organisation in Leeds that produces and presents contemporary art and supports the development of artists and arts professionals in and around the local area. Their projects often lead them to work outside formal art institutions and engage with wider culture and society. Bailey collaborated with a group of seven young producers (who were supporting artists commissioned by Pavilion to realise their projects) on performance workshops. Using time-based media practices, particularly performance and video, Out of a Morass proposed a way to see Stapleton's history anew by looking at how Arcadian landscapes inhabit the popular consciousness that informed Brown, through 17th century painting, for example, and exists today by way of contemporary commodities and heritage sites. In so doing, the project proposes broader questions for audiences to consider about the ways in which representations of landscape are culturally constructed and ideological, and explored how artists might present new ways to engage with this history.

Out of a Morass was presented as part of the exhibition 'Follies of Youth' at the Hepworth, Wakefield (2 April – 31 May 2015). The installation comprised two video works, sculptural objects developed in response to historical reference material about Brown, and costumes worn by performers during the performance experiments, presented on wooden armatures.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project's core questions are:

- How can collective performance practices propose new ways of thinking about and representing landscape that acknowledged the vectors of natural change and manmade control?
- What new knowledge can be produced by responding creatively to the narrative space left by the absent Stapleton Park?
- If the 'ideal' landscape is a cultural construction, how, as artists, can we participate critically in this building process?

The Aims of the project are:

- To questions how mass markets and a shifting image culture shape our understandings of the precarious status of 'productive' rural landscapes while offering a critical framework to evaluate these themes.
- To propose alternative readings of Brown's legacy and the influence of culture on our visions of landscape. In so doing it frames broader questions for audiences to consider about the ways in which representations of landscape are culturally constructed and ideological.
- To identify how the unique attributes of time-based practice and especially performance might present new ways to represent landscape as a changing and culturally contingent phenomenon.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the project:

- To develop a body of work to respond to the 'lost' landscape of Stapleton Park in West Yorkshire. Stapleton Park was an 18th Century estate which is thought to have been designed by landscape architect Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. This work would be presented for audiences as an installation of sculpture and moving image as a means to invite questions about how an 'ideal' landscape might be constructed.
- To work collaboratively with a group of seven young producers who were supporting the artists to realise their projects commissioned by Pavilion to author a collective reimagining of the landscape of Stapleton Park using performance.
- To build upon collaging principle that was developed through my research project *I Bought a Little City* by including several voices and opening the process to others through a series of workshops. The outcomes of this work would then be configured as an installation combining costumes, sculptural props and performance work documented on video.



The project installed at The Hepworth Wakefield



The project installed at The Hepworth Wakefield

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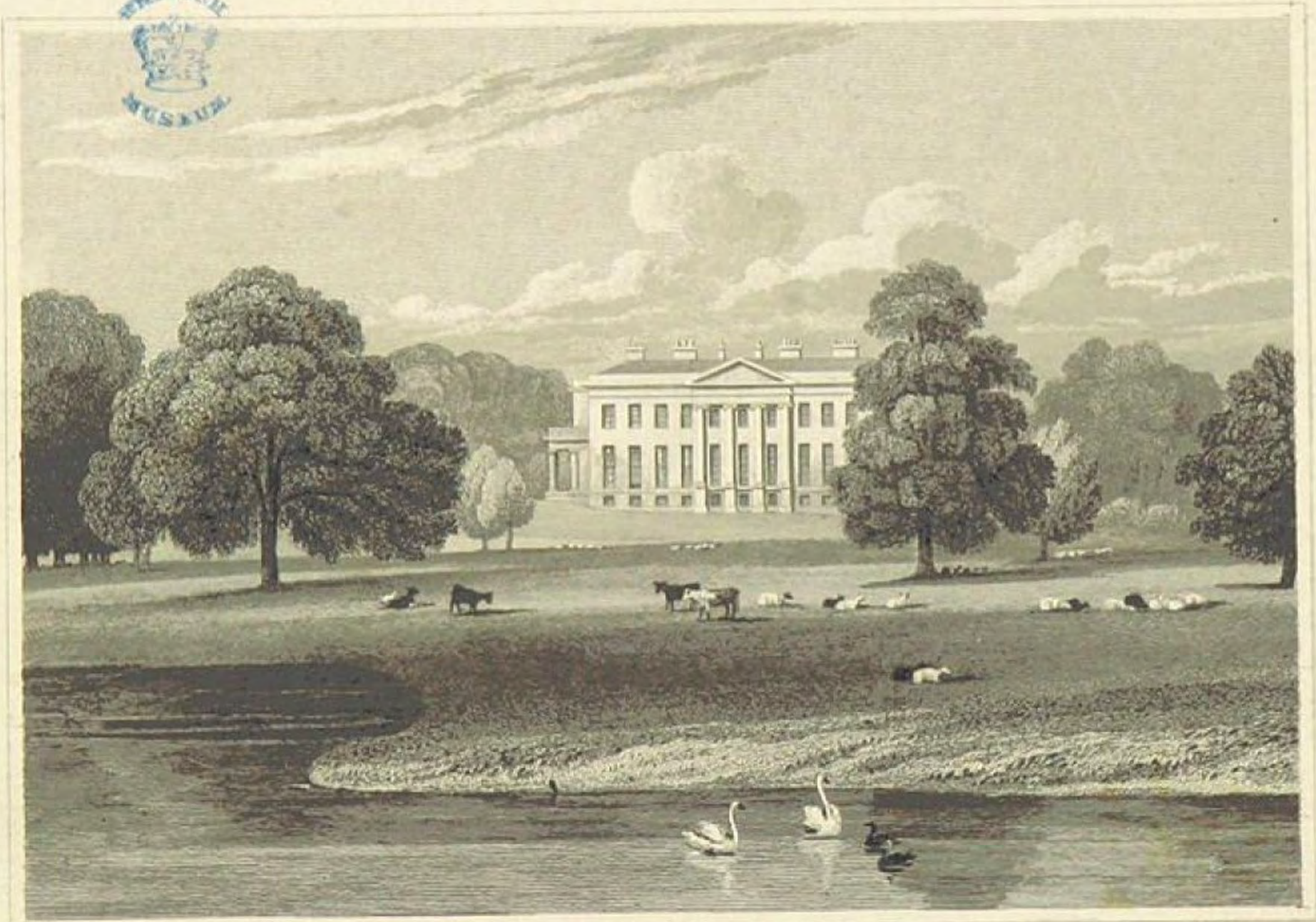
Out of a Morass... (2015) was a commission as part of The Follies of Youth project initiated by Pavilion, a visual arts organisation that produces and presents contemporary art and supports the development of artists and arts professionals in and around Leeds. Their projects often lead them to work outside the institutions of art and engage with wider culture and society.

I was invited to respond to the 'lost' landscape of Stapleton Park in West Yorkshire. Stapleton Park was an 18th Century estate which is thought to have been designed by landscape architect Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. It is now agricultural land after the estate's demolition in the 1920s. The Follies of Youth project was devised on the occasion of the bicentenary of Brown's birth.

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown was celebrated for codifying the English landscape style. He worked at over 250 sites translating the Arcadian idealised landscapes popularised in

17th century painting into a reality by manoeuvring earth and constructing sweeping 'naturalistic' vistas. His work marked a move away from the structured formality of previously popular French garden design. The title for the project comes from a tribute to Brown by the 6th Earl of Coventry at his estate Croome.

"To the Memory of Lancelot Brown. Who by the powers of his inimitable and creative genius formed this garden scene out of a morass."



Engraved by T. Barber.

Stapleton, historic view by JP Neale, published 1818
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STAPLETON PARK.
YORKSHIRE.



Stapleton Park today



Nicolas Poussin's painting *Landscape with a man killed by a snake* (probably 1648)

Giles Bailey ...*Out of a Morass*

1: Generation, selection and Synthesis

The project began with a process of gathering material. A site visit was undertaken and we discovered that Stapleton Park was now rather unremarkable farmland. The context was fascinating because it prompted me to begin a body of research into how the idea of an 'ideal' landscape is a cultural construct. What is generally understood and reiterated as this is something we have inherited from a 17th century Arcadian vision through painters such as Nicolas Poussin. It is this vision that Lancelot 'Capability' Brown is translating into 'reality' through his landscape architecture. Other visual reference points that represented landscape in similar terms were sought. We went back to the 17th century origins of the ideal landscape and a source that we identified as particularly helpful was the painting 'Landscape with a man killed by a snake' by Nicolas Poussin. which is held at the National Gallery. It depicts a landscape but it is filled with narrative mysteries. We were really interested in this strangeness while being a cultural progenitor of the landscape of Stapleton Park. We also identified a more prosaic reproduction of these Arcadian landscapes in the graphic design of jars of Pesto sold in supermarkets as a contemporary counterpoint to Poussin's painting.

2: Analysis and Articulation

I devised a series of workshops that explored intuitive and experimental responses to images and references through writing and movement. We tried a number of approaches to represent this landscape in new ways and translate those with our bodies. This enabled us to work as a group and critically analyse this source material. From these workshops which examined the sources we developed an installation based on the Poussin painting and Stapleton Park landscapes. This was then inhabited and activated by a cast of characters that we performed together and documented. The research brought together a broad skillset and diverse perspectives on the material that we synthesised into a new form. Our performance incorporated songs with lyrics drawn from the texts we had written in response to the gathered source material. We constructed costumes and props. The work translated the two dimensional representational space of the Poussin painting into a spatial environment that audiences could occupy and engage with our sculptural and video material.

3: Presentation, participation and critical reflections

The research was presented as an exhibition at presented as part of the exhibition 'Follies of Youth' at the Hepworth, Wakefield from 2 April – 31 May 2015. The installation consisted of:

- Two video works — one depicting the characters from the Poussin painting as a tableau vivant performing texts and another in which the characters enacted a series of movement exercises and interactions. Both the texts and movement sequences were devised collectively during the earlier workshops.
- Sculptural objects interpreted from the reference material representing a snake, rock and landscape formations.
- Costumes presented on wooden armatures that were worn by performers during the performance experiments documented on video.

By collectively resolving the project in this form we were able to conclude that our experimental process did make a unique representation of 'constructed' landscape possible. It shared our collaborative process while inviting audiences to navigate the material on their own terms. The spatial configuration of the material provided an opportunity for visitors to inhabit the formal composition of the Poussin painting as a framing device to explore the research questions spatially.



Stills of the workshops from which the project was developed

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Modelling the installation from research material



Portrait series developed from the performance re-staging the Nicolas Poussin's painting *Landscape with a man killed by a snake*

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[Click here to view video extracts from the work](#)