

# SWAMP AND MEADOW

DOUG COCKER



HOUSE FOR AN ART LOVER



## SWAMP AND MEADOW

Here is an intriguing title, 'Swamp and Meadow'. It conjures notions of something antediluvian, even primeval and fetid. And it offers a release from this suffocating morass with the prospect of a meadow. That sense of a flowering pasture awash with colour, light and air. It is a contrast that recalls every kind of association and opposition. The extremes of environment and terrain, the potentials of landscape and nature, and the deeper, more human prospect of darkness and light. In this last configuration it speaks not to the natural world but to the subjective and emotional spaces of the imagination. And so it evokes a correspondence in human experience. One that is intangible, and allusive, and poignant.

But this exhibition is so much more than a title. Doug Cocker is an eminent sculptor, and these works are objects. They exist as material, most usually wood but also metal, leather, hessian and twine. They are materials that are cut and sawn, shaped and crafted, and assembled as individual objects and as groups of objects. Their materiality is paramount for the physical and the haptic nature of these works is

Above: Swamp

Cover: Swamp (detail)

their defining feature. They emerge by virtue of the sculptor's hand and so they complete that magical transformation from thought to thing. And it is as things, as objects, that these works provoke disquiet and fascination.

Fundamentally, of course, these sculptures endure as form. And, in this case, these forms are three-dimensional reliefs. They relate to the wall, and to the objects that are contiguous. They present open and closed structures, positive and negative spaces. Often, they are painted. In this way they are pictorial but the elements of substance and weight throw the works back to sculptural presentations. And so they hold an alliance to the cubist object of the early twentieth century. Likewise, the variety of shapes recalls these seminal sculptural works. The rounded shapes juxtaposed with jagged geometries, the combinations of mass and plane, the vigorous linearity. All of this conjoins to generate an intense energy, a visceral excitement that is released by the formal dynamics of the works.

For all that these sculptures exist as idea, as material and as object they also embody meaning, and perhaps even a subtle narrative. Doug Cocker has long been associated with a lexicon of works that reference nature. His signature material, wood, is a paean to nature and to natural process. And, the core works in 'Swamp and Meadow' evidently relate to nature as an emblematic and even spiritual force. Fast Landscape, for example, in its various iterations, connects to the dynamics of a panoramic scene glimpsed in a moment of change. Crafted and assembled from the wood of the ash tree its armature of blocked forms is fractured by cantilevered straps of arching wood. All of this is overlain with rounded and contoured shapes, for all the world like scudding clouds casting shadows on a hillside. The sculpture is remarkable for it presents as a static assembly of forms and structures, but reads as a kinetic experience. It is replete with energy and potential, all carried by the internal dynamics, the dramatic rhythm, of its composite parts.

Some reprise of this extraordinary sense of a kinetic landscape is presented in Big Rain. Again worked in ash the rhythm of this work accents the vertical. Arced and curved sheets of wood connote the notion of an incessant downwards flow to the piece. Rounded, cloud-like forms disturb this pattern and an arching strap of thin ash stretches across the assemblage as if describing a rainbow.

Two thoughts emerge from viewing these singular pieces. As sculptures they seem to present something that is more familiar in the field of painting, they appear to be 'weatherscapes'. In this sense they may recall the magnificent cloud studies of John Constable, or even the scenes of tempest and torrent in the work of JMW Turner. Perhaps a more appropriate example would be the seascapes, awash with every kind of weather system, as painted by William McTaggart. But they do achieve the unique feat of presenting this idea in three dimensions and as fixed form. Moreover, they insist on their fundamental nature as sculptural objects. This is embodied in the raw presentation of the ash wood, evidently pinned and fastened together and so existing as, *prima facie*, constructed sculpture.

For all this it is tempting to explore the collection of works titled Swamp as an extension of this thread of thought that relates to nature, landscape and weather. The 'fast landscape' and the 'big rain' seem to offer those dank conditions that reveal themselves in Swamp. But Swamp, a mixed media assemblage of over thirty sculptural works, is a dark and powerful artwork. The component elements exist as autonomous pieces. And so it is possible to isolate objects emerging from block forms that give all the appearance of animal tusks. Serrated and notched lengths of wood that resemble spinal columns. Swathes of twine, loose or braided, that fall from wooden supports and approximate some unknown mammal's mane, or pelt and fur. And, a host of pieces that connote mysterious body parts and fetish objects, some encased in frames, some unfettered and singular.

In Swamp each piece is evidently an exceptional sculpture. The works are carved, assembled, constructed, and combined. They are also often painted or stained in a rough patina, with a palette that is black, white and grey. This is a monochrome landscape. Some elements, a white chalice in a black box with



Slow Years



Fast Landscape No.5

a broken branch atop, are extraordinarily poetic. Some, a piece that resembles a broken tooth or bone in a black casing, are sinister. As a totality the work is ominous and menacing, for truly these are primal things. And, in this condition, they offer an association with the 'surrealist object' in that they, independently and combined, touch the most elemental aspects of human experience.

Having journeyed in the formidable world of Swamp it is a relief to return to the sunny uplands of Slow Years. As an assemblage of small, low relief, sculptures Slow Years is both more rational and more relaxed than Swamp. It is rational in that it is composed of a grid of sixteen, near regular, works set in a pattern four-square and wall-mounted. Each individual piece is constructed from a shallow wooden block that is dressed with further additions of squares, ovoids and linear elements. In turn these are overlain with leaf shapes, crosses, and abstract forms in a spare and satisfying arrangement. All the works are painted in a palette that evokes spring, summer and autumn. There is a harmony here, and a joy. One that recalls Henri Matisse, both for his mastery of sensual colour and in the patterns of his late 'cut-outs'. It is a beautiful and a satisfying sculptural assemblage; something like a meadow.

The suggestion of narrative, however, like the associations with the world of art, must remain moot. For Doug Cocker is a sculptor whose primary relationship is with his materials. His is a world of making and constructing. This is a place where the stubborn resistance of wood is countered by the saw, the chisel, the plane and the sculptor's craft. It is the site where the innate nature of the material must be recognised and conceded. But it is also the arena where the creative imagination triumphs in a transformation from raw nature to artwork. Surely, this is a world of swamps and meadows.

#### TOM NORMAND

St Andrews © 2016



Fast Landscape No.2 (2002)



Bouteilles De Danse



## ON MAKING NEW WORK

The seven sculptures, or bodies of sculpture, in this exhibition have never been shown before. They are assembled as a representation of some of the new directions my work has been taking over the past four or five years : particularly an increasing interest in embracing colour as an integral element of sculpture. Also the seeking of a means of reaching conclusions with a technical directness.

SWAMP was a work begun with this latter thought in mind. It has occupied a studio wall for almost four years but has consistently moved forward throughout that time. This is an installation which, in the making, quickly came to develop its own language dynamic as the component parts grew in number : each element or combination of elements suggesting the next possible step in terms of form, configuration or materials.

SLOW YEARS similarly occupied its own wall space over a number of years, partially abandoned, though always scrutinised, for most of that time. Its comparative simplicity and regularity of composition was probably a reaction against the rococo elaborations of the several JOOB JOOB STYX which I was developing around the same time.

Curiosity and speculation are usually, in my case, the principal driving forces behind embarking on new works. Consequently I have never before re-addressed the ideas behind a previously completed sculpture. But both BIG RAIN and FAST LANDSCAPE NO.5 are new versions of earlier works. Around 2002 I had made a suite of six, smallish, boxed constructions titled LANDSONGS. One of these was a work called RAIN, made in beech wood and mounted behind glass with a black background. For some time I have been keen to see how well this composition would function on a bigger scale and free of the constraints of the frame. BIG RAIN was the outcome.



Big Rain

Also around 2002 I had made a set of four FAST LANDSCAPES, similarly constructed in beech and measuring one and a half to two metres in width. One of these pieces, whilst satisfactory and dynamic enough visually, is physically somewhat vulnerable and as a result has seldom been moved from home. The new version, shown here, is chunkier in section thickness and less fragile than its predecessor. Inevitably this new work, through use of different wood and changes of balance between space (less) and solid , acquires a distinctly new identity when compared to the original from which it derived.

Although I have managed to survive as a sculptor for more than twenty five years without the financial backing provided through teaching, the economics of making large scale outdoor speculative sculpture have remained prohibitive (undertaking public commissions is, of course, one way of working on a generous scale, but such projects invariably involve addressing a subject matter which is never entirely one's own). Nonetheless a large part of my practice involves the aspiration to design and make substantially scaled works for outdoors. Engagement with the making and seeing at least the first small scale manifestations of ideas that are self generated provides some kind of testing ground for their physical fitness for purpose.

Electric City



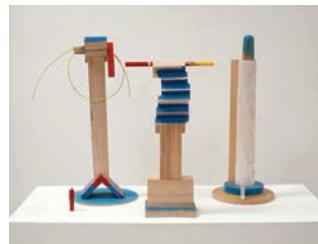
BOUTEILLES DE DANSE and ELECTRIC CITY are two such engagements. Dancing bottles is an idea that is somehow more inherently French (hence the linguistic costume of the title)...a sybaritic notion translated into implicitly kinetic drawings in space, constructed in steel in their fully realised scale.

ELECTRIC CITY, as shown here, comprises a few of the several small scale models I have been engaged with over recent months. They simultaneously explore structure and applied colour, which is used, by turn, to enhance, challenge or complement the form. In considering and making the pieces I am visualising a family of forms, bright, strong and vertical, colonising areas of a city in a way not dissimilar to the way past cultures used the column to reinforce self belief and a sense of celebration.

These are some of the thoughts, or motivations, I have on making new work. And it is the result of these most recent speculations that is to be witnessed in the gallery space.

DOUG COCKER

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## BIOGRAPHY

Doug Cocker is a sculptor and Royal Scottish Academician who, since 1970, has exhibited in UK and abroad including Chicago, Montreal, Trondheim, Japan, Hawaii and Sarajevo.

Throughout his career, Cocker's work has been shown in a number of solo and group high-profile exhibitions including the first British Art Show in 1979; Built in Scotland at Third Eye Centre, Glasgow; Views and Horizons at Yorkshire Sculpture Park; Scottish Art since 1900 at the National Galleries, Edinburgh and the Barbican in London. His more recent exhibitions include; Sculptors Drawings at Pangolin, London; and 4 Scotland at London Print Studios.

His work is included in major public and private collections at home and abroad including House for an Art Lover, the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, and Glasgow Museums.

Since 1990 he has undertaken over 40 major public art commissions including the Ben Lomond Memorial at Rowardennan, the 'Glasgow Bouquet' Quatercentenary Commemorative Sculpture, and 'Ghost' for House for an Art Lover in Bellahouston Park.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Joob Joob Styk No.2



# HOUSE FOR AN ART LOVER

STUDIO PAVILION, ARTPARK

BELLAHOUSTON PARK, 10 DUMBRECK ROAD, G41 5BW

The Studio Pavilion, situated in Bellahouston Park, opened to the public in 2014 acting as an artist's retreat in the heart of the city. The Studio Pavilion is a highly significant addition to House for an Art Lover's ARTPARK Glasgow, Centre for Arts & Heritage. The innovative design enables transformation between exhibition space and artist's studio, giving local and international artists opportunity to produce and exhibit work in a creative environment.

In addition to the Studio Pavilion, ARTPARK Glasgow comprises of a Heritage Centre, dedicated art studios and ARTsheds providing exciting opportunities for artists of all levels of ability. This includes masterclasses and workshops, public talks, events and artist residencies. Our ambition is to create a vibrant artistic community in ARTPARK Glasgow which engages with everyone from the local community to artists of international renown.

For more information on ARTPARK Glasgow's programme,  
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