

IMAGINING ISLANDS

ARTISTS AND ESCAPE

Organised by the students of the
MA Curating the Art Museum:

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Introduction

Creating an exhibition in six months, with eleven other budding (more like bursting) co-curators, is a rather like being on an island. Marooned together, we've been forced to seek creative and pragmatic solutions to survive and thrive. *Imagining Islands: Artists and Escape* is the record of our journey, our discoveries and our investigations – together in a new land.

We were given an enviable brief: to respond to the works of Paul Gauguin or, more specifically, the display *Collecting Gauguin: Samuel Courtauld in the '20s*, running concurrently in the adjacent gallery. What opportunity, what possibility... so many places we could go. Our given starting points – the illustrious collections of The Courtauld Gallery, and the broad, more contemporary terrain of the Arts Council Collection – gave us a good steer. Spanning the medieval to the modernist period, the Courtauld collections offered a historical counterpoint to the Arts Council's, which dates from the post-war period to the present; a thematic and trans-historical exhibition seemed to offer us the best course.

As a group, we were all most interested in Gauguin's journey to Tahiti in search of paradise and solace away from Western civilisation.

Gauguin's experiences led us to various themes, from travelling artists to dislocation to dreams and nightmares, and the idea of the journey quickly began to take on physical, psychological, spiritual, and imaginary connotations. As we delved deeper, these narratives naturally merged and metamorphosed into the notion of 'the island', begging the question: *what is it that pulls the dreamers, the adventurers, the wanderers, the misfits – the artists – to the island?* What do they seek and what do they find? Do they discover what they are looking for, or do they, like Gauguin, only come to realise that the search is never over?

Myths, stories, and dreams of islands – the insatiable fantasy of flight – provided us with a defined yet infinite terrain. These spaces, insular yet expansive, were the perfect place to test the limits of the possible, the known and the unknowable. On the island, the artist becomes explorer. But we found ourselves asking, does the artist always go to the island, or do they sometimes take a step back, observe and record another's odyssey? Can the artist witness and document the island without being lured into the search for utopia?

Are there, perhaps, even limits to what can be considered an island? We have seen islands, like mirages, where none exist. We have entered into the thrall of the island; this exhibition charts our progress.

MA Curating the Art Museum students 2012-2013



John Everett Millais, *The Parting of Ulysses* (c. 1862)
The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Islands on the Mind: A Brief Etymology and History of Ideas

Sophie Partarrieu

Characterising the concept of the island has always been a difficult task. Etymology can only go so far, yet it is a fascinating place to begin. The word island originally derives from the indo-European *akwā*, meaning ‘water’, and later evolved into *iland* from Germanic influences, first appearing in Old English in 888 AD. The addition of the ‘s’ in our current *island* stems from the French word *isle*, arising from the Latin *insula* (which is also the root of *peninsula*, meaning ‘almost land’). Thus, two different language groups – English and French – created two very different words, which, over time, have coalesced into a single concept.

Although today we think of islands as precise geographic entities, for medieval cosmographers *iland*, *ysland*, and *insula* could be used to describe any remote or mysterious place, whether landlocked or surrounded by water. It was not until the 16th century that the term came to define only the latter, and a clear distinction was made between islands and continental landmasses. Ancient cosmographers were fascinated with islands, seeing them as proof of the Fall of Man; they conveyed both the chaotic and shattered nature of the profane world as well as the figment of a paradise lost. Yet when Europeans began to conquer and chart the known world in the 15th century, islands were pushed to the margins. It was at this time that the notion of the island lost much of its versatility, becoming cast largely as a ‘desert’ onto which the Western imagination could project its fantasies.

It is from this angle that many artists, including Gauguin, have approached the island: envisioned as either a flourishing paradise or a blank slate upon which to project one's ideals and desires.

The earliest work in *Imagining Islands* is by Jan Brueghel the Elder, dated from the 17th century, a period in which islands were understood as discrete units and assumed a myriad of metaphorical associations. Already in the 16th century, the philosopher Thomas More had imagined the island as a perfect setting for his *Utopia*: a microcosm that could encapsulate the entirety of the perfect world he envisaged. A century later, islands were compared to any locations or peoples seen as insular: monasteries, caves, enclosed gardens, courtyards, hermits, artists' studios... Classic stories such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), and Aldous Huxley's *The Island* (1962) have expanded upon the island setting established in Homer's *Odyssey* to imagine other worlds, where other rules apply: no longer mere backdrops, islands have become both a milieu and an active character, a living creature and a dynamic body, giving tangible form to feelings of isolation and dislocation.

Throughout centuries of creativity and imagination, islands have become an indissoluble fantasy in the Western cultural imagination surfacing when we least expect it. Today, in the face of expanding urbanization and communication, the island is becoming increasingly relevant and rich in symbolic power for artists and writers throughout the world.



Thomas Allom, *Silver Island on the Yangtse River* (c. 1845)
The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Jan Brueghel the Elder: Paradise Imagined, Paradise Lost

Meryl Feinstein and Bojana Popovic

Jan Brueghel the Elder's *Adam and Eve in Paradise* is one of the earliest works in the exhibition; it therefore acts as a gateway into the key themes explored and helps to establish more metaphorical and conceptual interpretations of the island.

The Biblical subject Brueghel renders captures Adam and Eve basking in the Garden of Eden. Here, the artist depicts the vast scope of God's creative power, presented in all its magnificence and grandeur, and an abundance of species represented with impressive accuracy. Still, while foreign and familiar animals coexist harmoniously in this fertile setting, the idyllic scene is not without a hint of foreboding: all too aware of Man's impending expulsion from the Garden, the viewer is reminded of the paradise humanity has since been denied. The Genesis narrative is one of the first examples of a story of innocence destroyed and paradise lost, and thus remains the root of the perpetual and insatiable human craving for perfection and ideals. These loaded terms – innocence, paradise, perfection – are all notions that have since become heavily embedded in our understanding of the island.

Over time, artists have turned to the idea of a perfect landscape in order to imagine freely and to invent impossible scenarios and extraordinary compositions. Born in Brussels, Jan Brueghel the Elder inherited a talent in landscape painting from his father, Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569), the most renowned Flemish painter of his time. Jan Brueghel, working in a variety of mediums, expanded upon his father's legacy and popularised what became known as the 'paradise landscape,' a sub-genre developed in the early 17th century. In *Adam and Eve in Paradise*, Brueghel elaborates upon a generic rural



Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Adam and Eve in Paradise* (1615)
The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

scene to include subtle fictional elements (such as the silhouette of a unicorn) as well as hyper-realistic Mannerist influences, creating a unique intersection between the real, artificial, and imagined.

In the mid-16th century, interest in nature – and particularly animals – rose significantly. Universities, churches, marketplaces, and artists' studios became hubs for seeking and discovering knowledge about previously unknown areas of the world. Expanding trade routes spurred this newfound fascination with natural specimens; the city of Antwerp became a nexus of these burgeoning networks and thus Brueghel was easily able to study new species. The general fervor for natural historical enquiry and direct access to its subjects explains Brueghel's precision when rendering his version of paradise¹.

Although Brueghel's engraving is inarguably a product of its time, the enduring search for utopia – and the exotic nature of this utopia – has remained constant in the human imagination and artistic vocabulary. The way in which the Western notion of paradise has evolved over time is reflected in other, more recent works included in this exhibition: Max Pechstein's *Women by the Sea* (1919) demonstrates the European colonial perspective as tourism became more widespread; Marc Quinn's *Garden*² (no. 7) (2000) offers a contemporary analysis of the desire to experience the unattainable. Ultimately, the story of Genesis reminds us that paradise, no matter the form or the time, remains a defining source of both inspiration and disillusion in the human imagination.



Marc Quinn, *Garden*² (no. 7) (2000)
Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London
© the artist, courtesy White Cube Gallery

¹ These ideas are discussed further in Arianne Kolb's *Jan Brueghel the Elder: The Entry of the Animals into Noah's Ark*, Los Angeles: Paul J. Getty Museum, 2005.

Island Dreaming: Origin and Fracture in Gilles Deleuze's *Desert Islands*

Helen Hillyard

'Dreaming of Islands – whether in joy or in fear... – is dreaming of pulling away, of being separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone – or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew.'

– Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 1953-1974

Deleuze's essay begins with the assertion that there are two geographical types of island: *continental* and *oceanic*. Continental islands are born of disarticulation and fracture – forcibly separated from a larger landmass – whilst their oceanic counterparts are originary, bursting forth from the depths of the sea. It is this process of island dreaming, this double movement of origin and fracture, which is played out repeatedly in artistic practice over centuries, and seen here most strikingly in Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Fehmarnküste* (1912) and Charles Avery's *The Islanders* (2004-present).

Kirchner's representation of his island paradise – Fehmarn, off the east coast of Germany – speaks most closely to the idea of the continental island. Between 1912 and 1914, Kirchner would travel from Berlin to the island each summer, driven by a desire to find an isolated haven away from the mainland. In this way, it is no longer only the island that is separated from the continent, but rather humans who choose to separate themselves from the world. It is this search for oblivion that explains the lure of the 'desert island' yet, as Deleuze highlights, the journey to the desert island is never complete, as once the island

is inhabited its 'desertedness' is destroyed. The essence of the desert island is imaginary, not actual; this would continue to both propel and exasperate Kirchner. Like Gauguin, who sought increasingly remote islands that he hoped had remained untouched by civilisation, Kirchner continued to search for his ideal sanctuary, eventually moving to Davos in Switzerland, where he lived in a small log cabin in the Alps. Yet neither Kirchner nor Gauguin would ever realize the dream of the 'desert island', encountering it only from the outside.

And what of our second island type – the oceanic island? Again, the island is more than a geological phenomenon, it is a place where humans create the world anew through their interactions and communities. It is hardly surprising that concepts of origin and creation have a strong bearing on artistic practice, and these ideas are drawn together quite literally in Charles Avery's project *The Islanders*. Avery has created his own island, a microcosm inhabited by people with their own currency, religions, and individual narratives; the island acts as a tabula rasa where the artist's imagination and philosophical paradoxes are put to the test.

As Deleuze reminds us, the island – both continental and oceanic – is unstable, to be reclaimed by the sea at any moment. Humans can only live on an island by forgetting its precarious state, and only through this can the dream of the island continue.

In Time: The Ephemerality of the Island

Michael Nock

'Modernity is that which is ephemeral, fugitive, contingent upon the occasion; it is half of art, whose other half is the eternal and unchangeable.'

– Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1859-60.



Charles Avery, *View Towards the Sea of Clarity* (2008)

© The artist

Baudelaire's quote resonates with Gauguin's journey to Tahiti – a flight from modernity which, in Baudelaire's terms, entails a shift from the contingent to the eternal. As such, 'the island', considered in this exhibition as a metaphoric place of escape and isolation, carries connotations of timelessness. Yet Marc Quinn's *Garden² (no. 7)* (2000), Mariele Neudecker's *Stolen Sunsets* (1996) and Tacita Dean's *Bubble House* (1999), challenge the idea of the island as eternal and highlight time's role in determining the nature of escape.

Frozen in silicon, Quinn's arrangement of flora gathers and deliberately preserves plants that naturally blossom in different places at different times. This 'uncanny' landscape examines mortality through the manipulation of nature and intentionally undermines the artificial paradise it constructs. In contrast to Quinn's static scene, Neudecker's sculpture *Stolen Sunsets* serves as a reminder of the passing of time. Inspired by and modeled on Caspar David Friedrich's Romanticist painting *The Cross in the Mountains* (1808), it links historical and contemporary views of nature. Converting Friedrich's landscape into a sculpture, Neudecker aims to destabilise the temporal relationship in paintings between foreground (past), middle ground (present) and background (future)¹. As one circles the work, the background

¹ Mariele Neudecker, 'The Air We Breathe is Invisible', Lecture at The Glasgow School of Art (27 November 2009).

of the scene contained within the raised vitrine transforms into the foreground; what was future becomes present and then past: thus, Neudecker ties our relationship with nature to the passage of time.

A similar temporality is found in Dean's *Bubble House*, which records a dilapidated structure originally built as a living place that could withstand Caribbean hurricanes. The film's power lies in its juxtaposition of the abandoned house and its lively surroundings; static, prolonged sequences draw attention to the stormy skies, rolling tide and waving greenery. Framed by the swaying environment, the ruined structure gains a perverse sense of permanence, suggesting that any future we might imagine will inevitably succumb to the ever-advancing present. According to Dean, 'film is time made manifest', and as the seven-minute film loops the contrast between the vitality of the present and the permanence of the past is reinforced. The relentless march of time is the only constant.

Together, these works suggest that the metaphorical 'island' is profoundly temporal – a condition reflected in the tangible state of Dean's film installation and Neudecker's sculpture, which will each change over the course of this exhibition. The film's slow accumulation of scratches and the sculpture's mixing of chemicals that compose its internal atmosphere, hold poetic significance. Their gradual transformation mirrors the psychological journey undergone when the island's promises of paradise fall short. The cycle between imagining escape and experiencing disillusion parallels the composing and decomposing of *Bubble House* and *Stolen Sunsets* in the gallery. The entropy evident in each of these works points to the transformative power of time, which cannot, perhaps, be so vividly captured in the fixed representation of conventional painting or sculpture. These works thus encourage us to rethink the temporality of escape, and in so doing emphasize the ephemerality of ideals.



Mary McIntyre, *The Lough V* (2006)
Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London
© the artist

Enduring Vitality in Obsolescence: Tacita Dean's *Bubble House*

Charlotte Hopson

'Everything that excites me no longer functions in its own time.'

– Tacita Dean, 2006

The lure of the obsolete is a recurring feature of Tacita Dean's artistic practice, both in subject matter and in medium. Now, she is perhaps best known for her work with 16mm film, which often exposes the viewer to worlds that deteriorate over time. Dilapidated architectural ruins – an irreversible decay – frequently haunt her moving images, and do so with particular resonance in *Bubble House* (1999). Dean discovered this incomplete shell of a futuristic structure that once held so much promise in a state of disrepair on the Cayman Islands. Its deteriorated state could not be better articulated than by 16mm film, itself an obsolete medium now facing a similar inevitable fate.

While analogue film surrenders to the onslaught of digitalisation, the materiality of the medium itself is also in a perpetual state of erosion. With each turn of the film reel, the surface of the celluloid is compromised and its continuous play during the exhibition's run hastens this deterioration: the copy projected in *Imagining Islands* will last no longer than the show's duration. Thus, the process of decay plays out within the continuum of time, much like the crumbling structures captured in her films: in essence, medium and subject are in perfect union. In *Bubble House*, however, as in many of her other works, Dean seems to resist this sense of temporality by privileging the static camera and employing long, lingering shots. The anchored camera's suspension of movement seems to pause time, inviting the



Series of still images from Tacita Dean, *Bubble House* (1999)
Frith Street Gallery, London and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris
© the artist

viewer to savour each extended moment. We watch, as the horizon is overcome by an oncoming storm, the subtle changes of light and the motion of the waters. The drama that unfolds is cosmic, yet Dean's works are pervaded by a search for something that actively exists as much in the imagination as anywhere else – the ambiguous border between fact and fiction.

Dean's grainy, contemplative films are imbued with a melancholy and mourning for what once was, and there is sense of nostalgia in the structures and traces that remain. The artist invites us to remember the validity and vitality of relics that endure, conjuring in our imagination far more than the remnants of their own past.

List of Works

GALLERY 14

Max Pechstein (1881-1955)
Women by the Sea, 1919
Oil on canvas, The Courtauld Gallery, London,
on loan from private collection

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938)
Coast of Fehmarn, 1912
Oil on canvas, The Courtauld Gallery, London,
on loan from private collection

Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980)
The Dreaming Youths, 1907-1917
Lithograph, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625)
Adam and Eve in Paradise, 1615
Engraving, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Thomas Allom (1804-1872)
Silver Island on the Yangtse River, c. 1845
Graphite, watercolour (brown), bodycolour
(white), The Courtauld Gallery, London

John Everett Millais (1829-1896)
The Parting of Ulysses, c. 1862
Watercolour, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Lucas van Uden (1595-1672)
Wooded Landscape with Monastery, 1640
Pen and ink and watercolour, The Courtauld
Gallery, London

Johann Zoffany (1733-1810)
*Hermit's Cave with Rocks and a Tree in
India*, 1780s
Black, red and white chalk, The Courtauld
Gallery, London

Edward Lear (1812-1888)
Corfu from Annalipsis, after 1848
Watercolour, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975)
Icon, 1957
Wood, Arts Council Collection, Southbank
Centre, London

GALLERY 13

Marc Quinn (born 1964)
Garden² (no. 7), 2000
Pigment ink-jet print with varnish, Arts Council
Collection, Southbank Centre, London

Victor Willing (1928-1988)
Place of Exile, 1976
Charcoal and pastel, Arts Council Collection,
Southbank Centre, London

Mary McIntyre (born 1966)
The Lough V, 2006
Light-jet photographic print on di-bond, Arts
Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

Mariele Neudecker (born 1965)
Stolen Sunsets, 1996
Steel, glass, dye, fibreglass, enamel, acrylic,
water, salt and varnish, Arts Council Collection,
Southbank Centre, London

Charles Avery (born 1973)
1. *Untitled (Hunter)*, 2008-2009
Pencil and ink on tracing paper, Arts Council
Collection, Southbank Centre, London

2. *View Towards the Sea of Clarity*, 2008
Ink and watercolour, Charles Avery Studio

3. *Eternal Forest*, 2005
Mixed media on board, UBS Art Collection

Tacita Dean (born 1965)
Bubble House, 1999
Duration: 7 minutes, 16mm colour film installation,
Courtesy the artist, Frith Street Gallery and
Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris

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*For additional online resources including more information about
Charles Avery's The Islanders, an audio guide, and a digital
version of this catalogue, please visit our website:*

www.courtauld.ac.uk/macuratingexhibition/

Imagining Islands: Artists and Escape

Programme of Events

Lunchtime Talks

Wednesdays 26 June, 3, 10 and 17 July, 1.15 - 1.30pm

Monday 15 July, 1.15 - 1.30pm

Curators' Talks

Sundays 23 June and 7 July, 3.00 - 3.45pm

Wednesday 10 July, 5.00 - 5.45pm

These talks will take place in the exhibition space.

Artist Talks

Spectacular Isolation: Framing Landscape

With artists Mariele Neudecker and Mary McIntyre, who will discuss their works displayed in this show.

Friday 21 June, 6.00 - 7.30pm, followed by a reception.

Kenneth Clark Lecture Theatre, The Courtauld Institute of Art.

Bouvetøya: A Cultural History of an Isolated Landmass

With artist Freddy Dewe Mathews.

Friday 5 June, 6.00 - 7.00pm, followed by a reception.

Research Forum South, The Courtauld Institute of Art.

Courtauld Late

Thursday 4 July, 6.00 - 9.00pm, The Courtauld Gallery

This summer, escape the daily routine and explore our world-famous collection after hours, as well as the display *Collecting Gauguin:*

Samuel Courtauld in the '20s and exhibition *Imagining Islands:*

Artists and Escape, through talks, music and activities.

Dress as an intrepid explorer for free admission.

All events in The Courtauld Gallery are free with a gallery ticket.

Events in The Courtauld Institute of Art are free. The Courtauld Institute of Art is in Somerset House, opposite The Courtauld Gallery, Strand, WC2R 0RN, +44 (0)20 7848 2526.

Bookings are not required for any of the events.