

Teachers' Resource

Imagining Islands: Artists and Escape

20 June to 21 July 2013, The Courtauld Gallery

Introduction to the Exhibition

The Courtauld Institute of Art's MA Curating the Art Museum programme presents *Imagining Islands: Artists and Escape*, its annual exhibition at The Courtauld Gallery. The exhibition responds to the Gallery's Summer Showcase, *Collecting Gauguin: Samuel Courtauld in the '20s*, and draws on works from The Courtauld Gallery and the Arts Council Collection.

In 1891 the artist Paul Gauguin travelled from Paris to the Pacific island of Tahiti in pursuit of a haven away from Western civilisation. Artists have long been drawn to the elusive ideals and tantalising fantasies that islands embody. *Imagining Islands* explores artists' fascination with other worlds, real and imagined, and the perennial search for utopia. By bringing together works from the 17th century to the present day – in a diverse range of media including video, photography and sculpture, as well as painting, drawing, watercolour and printmaking – the exhibition explores the concept of the island in poetic, evocative, and experimental ways.

Works in Focus: Looking Through Time



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



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

Edward Lear (1812-1888), though perhaps better known for his nonsense verse, was in fact a prolific landscape painter. Born in London, he spent most of his life travelling and living on the Mediterranean, and the Greek Island of Corfu was one of his favourite spots. Here, Lear uses watercolour to create a calm and idyllic impression of the Island of Corfu in the distance, bathed in a rainbow light.

Mary McIntyre is a contemporary artist who was born (1966) in Northern Ireland, where she still lives and works. Her photographs explore elements of natural phenomena, fixing the most transient conditions of the landscape, the 'elements' themselves, in representation. By photographing in very specific weathers, particularly mist and fog, she captures the intangible. Here, McIntyre gives an ethereal quality to a pair of bare and desolate trees, seemingly floating in a hazy void.

These two landscape depictions were created nearly a century apart, yet both speak to the island as both a place and an idea, and reveal something about the relationship between people and nature. Lear wanted to show the Greek Islands as a pristine wilderness, uncorrupted by human influence, whereas McIntyre draws attention to the emotive quality of the landscape – the almost cinematic immediacy of the photograph highlighting the power of nature to move people.

The small scale of Lear's delicate watercolour reminds us that the artist frequently travelled to the Greek islands (in fact he spent nearly 30 years visiting and living on Corfu), always sketching as he went. Whereas Lear packs a sweeping panorama into a small sketch book, McIntyre uses a much larger scale but a far narrower focus, giving the humble branches a dramatic impact. In these contrasting works a sense of lyrical isolation creates an evocative effect, hinting at the suggestiveness of islands as artistic subjects, associations and inspiration.

Discussion Points

- Why have islands captivated people throughout time? (think of all the stories and films that are set on islands).
- Islands have a dual nature. On the one hand they offer the promise of escape, freedom, and new beginnings; on the other hand, they can represent exile, isolation, disillusionment and despair. How do the various works in this exhibition explore these conflicting aspects?
- All the works in this exhibition are very different yet they link to a central theme. What similarities and differences can you find?
- Art enables us to imagine alternative possible futures. Artists often use their practice as a means of searching for 'something else' and encouraging others to think about how things might be different. What might you change about the world and how might you draw attention to this through art?

Suggested Activity: Historic and Contemporary Comparisons

Select two works from the exhibition; one contemporary and one made before 1900. What drew you to these two works? What are their similarities and differences?