

*Mortal Remains: William Arnold's photographs from Penwith , Lewis and Harris*

*What, after all, are objects and appearances but stories in disguise . Is not the most mundane of things crystallized history?*

(Kitty Hauser: *Bloody Old Britain OGS Crawford and the Archaeology of Modern Life*. Granta 2008.pp55)

If all photographs are memorials of a kind, then the images contained in William Arnold's *Sunspots* assume a rituality and reminders of our mortality. He deals in rocks and mist, skeletons, ruined cars debris and detritus as against ancient structures which mark not just the passing of time, but its immutability. On the island of Lewis off the coast of western Scotland, he finds a Volvo car mysteriously full of toilet rolls, the paper declining and fragmenting as the car inexorably becomes entwined in the landscape, a rusting ruin and sign of its times. Arnold is curious about this new place- so far away from the Cornwall he grew up in and still lives, and where his photographs have been concentrated over the last decade. *Sunspots* is a meticulously edited amalgam of photographs made in Penwith, Cornwall and the islands of Lewis and Harris over the last five years. Penwith is a familiar territory for Arnold, photographed again and again, landmarks known, terrain fully understood. In the Outer Hebrides he is an explorer in a

strange land, unaware of pitfalls, of treacherous ground and sudden danger.

These remote coastlands are important to William Arnold, not so much because they are so picturesque, though nothing can dim their ghostly beauty, but more in the ways that they have functioned. He quotes the writer Robert Macfarlane when putting forward the theory that coastal lands have an interconnectivity formed by the early sea routes which provides them with pattern and identity. British seaside resorts are still characterised by the same structures- while wilder coastal regions are still impregnated with the romanticism and escapism which has come to represent them in the British imagination. Arnold, who has lived all his life in Cornwall and is acutely aware of the politics and housing and employment which figure so large in the social landscape, both challenges and luxuriates in the immense visual spectacle of the places he photographs. An earlier project- *Suburban Herbarium* , 2020- consisted of a series of photographs made by Arnold on lunchtime walks while working at a local school as a photography technician. Writing about this work he notes that This collection of plant portraits is not bounded by an ecologist's quadrat, but by what has been gathered during the length of a regular lunchtime walk over five years. The more than one-hundred photographic specimens form an homage to Victorian botany from the rear-garden cut-through, waste-ground, marshes and still rural in character back-lanes of the City of Truro's rural-urban fringe. <https://williamarnold.net/Suburban-Herbarium>.

Through use of early photography technologies- *To make the photographs, living specimens are collected and taken to the darkroom to be projected, enlarged, identified and logged as a unique form-study in uniform 12x16" silver-gelatin prints. While the process in many ways harkens back to Victorian life-sciences and the work of English botanist and pioneering photographer Anna Atkins, this method of projection, in effect using the specimen as lantern slide, reveals a razor-sharp, almost sculptural detail.*- Arnold takes us back not just to the beginnings of photography , but also to its materiality, a unique alchemy of light, paper and chemicals

In his 2020 book *Hauntology*, writer Merlin Coverley suggests the importance of technology as a way of: *"allowing us to record and replay the past"* (*Hauntology* 2020 pp11, Oldcastle Books). *This is a process whose uncanny effects began to be felt in the nineteenth century as new forms of media such as telegraphy, photography and later cinema allowed us to capture and control time, bringing the past back to life and allowing us to revisit it at our leisure.* '(Ibid)And indeed, there is much of 19<sup>th</sup> century practice and enquiry in William Arnold's work. Throughout his photography he uses the photographic lexicon to ground the images in a multiplicity of meanings. Intense curiosity- as if this is a world first seen through the lens- an interest in minor detail and small things, in nature and ruin. Fox Talbot's calotypes of veined and tissue-like leaves, made at almost the beginning of photography, Anna Atkins' brilliant blue cyanotypes of ferns from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Roger Fenton's *Still Life with Fruit* (1860). Interested

not so much in still life but in lives that photography could make static these early 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs haunt and startle ; *'the abundance of sensory information in the compressed photographic space attracts and disturbs at the same time, injecting a disquieting and characteristically Victorian horror vacui into a centuries-old theme* "(online commentary Metropolitan Museum of Art. Metmuseum.org).

William Arnold's photographs have that same element of startle- he gazes thorough undergrowth, surprised by the gentle stare of a white horse, suddenly alert to a precipitous cliffside. There are hauntings here- standing stones erupt in everyday places, houses are secret and eyeless, history wings its way into everything, confusing, bewildering – we simply cannot make sense of this ancient-ness, can only attempt to decipher it through the lens of reference.

But as much as Arnold 's photography reinforces the haunting presence of the ancient, he also and emphatically views it through a contemporary lens of socio-political thinking. Both Penwith in Cornwall and the West Hebridean Island of Lewis and Harris, (which he visited in a six-month residency, are difficult places to live. Penwith is low on home ownership, high on divorce, many of its homes lack central heating and car ownership is below the national norm. Though an increasingly popular tourist destination and with a slowly growing population, Lewis and Harris are isolated, the weather is severe and

the economy dependent on visitors and incomers. The romance of the ghostly and the ancient are considered in parallel with the hardship which is stitched into every fibre of these places. Both have been colonised by tourism and by people fleeing the city. Lewis and Harris suffered from the Clearances and subsequent famine, and much of its population emigrated. But they are places of pilgrimage none the less. In 1967, the folksinger Vashti Bunyan travelled to Berneray in the Outer Hebrides via the island of Skye (where her friend singer songwriter Donovan was preparing to start a commune) in a horse drawn gypsy carriage. Surrounded by suspicious neighbours yet intent on becoming part of the community and its culture, Bunyan's position as an outsider in the remote regions of Britain has many parallels- Martin Parr and the isolated chapel communities of Hebden Bridge in the 1970s, Paul Nash and Eileen Agar in 1930s Dorset, DH Lawrence in Cornwall during World War 1, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath in Devon in the 1960s. The uneasy relationship between those who come to get away, and those who cannot leave is a constant thread through British culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. William Arnold is completely aware of this- insider in Penwith, outsider in the Hebrides, the dichotomies of his situation are known, and form the fabric of the work he produces. The fascination with the naive, the 'real' has permeates the thinking of many artists and writers, particularly when the encroachment of modernity threatens the perceived idyll. Looking at tourist websites for both the Lewis and

Harris nowhere are the inhabitants mentioned – the emphasis is on scenery, quietness, and escape. Arnold is aware of the part that landscape photography plays in this enticement- he remarks how photographers Fay Godwin and Keith Arnatt ‘sit on his shoulder’. Fay Godwin’s *Our Forbidden Land* (1990), made during her time as an activist within the Ramblers Association went far beyond the narrow sphere of the photo book and became *cri de guerre* for those who opposed the closing off of parts of the British countryside.

The incursion of modern detritus, the ruins in the landscape is clear too in Keith Arnatt’s *ANOB Areas of Outstanding Beauty* (1982-4) , in Jane and Louise Wilson’s *Azeville* (2006) and in Nash’s photo studies for *Totes Meer* (1940-41), all featured in the landmark Tate Britain exhibition *Ruin Lust* in 2014. In his research, Arnold had come across the remarkable films of Jonathan Meades, whose 2009 *Off Kilter, Isle of Rust* took Meades to Harris and Lewis. Exploring what he called the ‘shackscape’ of the islands, squat buildings with corrugated iron roofs Meades explored the art born of artlessness, sheds, corrugated iron, half a caravan, decaying tractors, broken cars , a ‘. *He talks of the scrap cult ‘and the viscous nature of this built landscape as ‘scar tissue, decaying meat, disease of the skin.’ A thrilling environment.*’ He cites the work of American photographers Arthur Tress and Joel Peter Witkin, uber masters of the fantastical and the ruined. Both Meades and Arnold are concerned with the lost traces of an abundant, pre-

clearance population, Meades finds the Destitution Roads made in the famine, Arnold photographs traces of ruined domesticity. For both, the standing stones which populate the islands are a lodestone , a reassuring rationality in a landscape littered with deprivation hardship and emigration- where , what Meades calls 'the germ of what would become science'

In the 1950s and 60s, in northern Sweden, photographer Sune Jonsson was also documenting traces- of the city settlers carving out homes from the hard Swedish rock, of subsistence farmers, isolation and a dying future in the Artic Circle region of Västerbotten. Like Arnold, he was fascinated by the very texture of the land, its bare tolerance of the men and women who scraped a living on its rocky surface. The most humane of photographers, Jonsson preserved and conserved, making a visual archive of a present sliding into history. Arnold in his time spent in Penwith and the Outer Hebrides, has explored a more ancient past, where it is more difficult to recover the facts. He quotes travel writer and Cornwall resident Philip Marsden: '*...all the ages are rolled into one, a postmodern bundle of residual beliefs, reinterpreted customs , hazy site myths, ancient stones, recollections and folk tales*' . And it is perhaps the mysticism of the national imagination that Arnold confronts in *Sunspots*, as he strives to bring a contemporary consciousness to a perceived ancientness. He challenges antiquity by attempting a typology of stones and rock, dispensing with legend and folklore, insisting on the

status of the photograph as a self-sufficient visual entity, emphasising the position of these ancient remains and landscapes within a modern context. There is none of the mysticism here that the artist John Piper brought to Britain's relics as he offered up the landscape as a vector to the sublime to the new explorers of the motor car age in the photographs which he made for the Shell Guides in the post-WW2 years. In fundamental ways, Arnold both insists on the antiquity of the places he photographs yet at the same time insisting that the signs and symbols of ancientness become contemporary, and as one with the objects that exist beside the standing stones and ancient configurations of land. It is very much, he seems to insist, a question of meaning- the sentience which we give the inanimate signs of history around us, whether an abandoned tractor, a battered car, or a relic of antiquity. The landscape, William Arnold acknowledges is infused with histories, both ancient and modern, that no-one fully understands. Photography acts as an identifier, sometimes an interlocuter, creates an expose of riddles, facts that we stumble upon in the distracting mists of time.