

INTERVIEW**Danny Fox & Kingsley Ifill*****HOLY ISLAND*****12 Feb – 26 March 2022****Interview by Charlie Mills**

**Charlie Mills: The prologue to this exhibition was a shared trip you undertook around the British Isles. What was the motivation for this journey and how planned out were the locations that you visited?**

Kingsley Ifill: Like all of the previous projects we've made together, intuition plays a large part and it's more a matter of working with what's in front of us. Or accepting the challenges proposed by ourselves to push the work in a direction not taken prior. Unfamiliar territory. See if the boat can handle the water. Float across the waves, or sink into the abyss. As we all know, Covid made travel near impossible for a while. We were both in the states when things started getting serious and by pure luck, made it onto the last flight that left LAX in March 2020, before things shut down. As a result, those of us that spend our lives running away to different parts of the world have no longer had that luxury, and have been forced to confront the terrain of the nest, or home, wherever that may be.

However, home is no longer what we once knew. At first glance it looks familiar, but there's something in the air. Dark forces? Invisible magic beyond the spectrum of human imagination? Or simply, something else? If so, what is that something else? We may not have been sure if there was anything out there, but there was one thing we did know: that if you don't sniff, you can't smell. So the tank of the van got filled up with diesel, and off we went. Simple as that.

In regards to planning, the only thing we had to take into consideration was that we were in December, at a time when days are at their shortest. And light being a major factor with taking photographs. As well as the consideration that mental fatigue might also kick in. So we got a map and roughly jotted a route up the east side of the island, then back down the west, figuring we can detour wherever else when we felt like it.

**CM: The exhibition is titled *HOLY ISLAND* — what were the reasons for the title and how does its sentiment reflect in your own practises?**

KI: When Hannah came to visit the studio, she asked how we go about discussing the work in order to make certain decisions and I can remember Danny looking at her and pausing for a moment, then replying, "We don't really talk. You have to be on a telepathic level when collaborating with someone else. That's the only way it can work."

I believe that that's a truth which is arrived at via each of our individual thoughts, feelings or interpretations, which then amounts to a whole. So with that said, if I were to step back, I'd have to answer this as an individual, which may not be true to Danny's reasons, but I can explain for myself.

A lot of the time when we were driving, detours were prompted by encountering signs containing names of places that appealed aesthetically or rolled off the tongue. “Holy Island” was one of those places. Neither of us had heard of it before, then we saw the sign and agreed to take the turn. Then all of a sudden the road led into the sea, or a river or a lake. It was hard to work out. Just like you’d see in a Road Runner cartoon. The road cut off as clean as paper with a pair of scissors. You could see the island in the distance, but you couldn’t get there. Water flowing violently by. We got out of the van and stood there for a while. It felt as though you’d reached the end of the world, or like you’d climbed to the top of a mountain, to then realise there was another peak floating in the sky with no ladder in sight. And this was right as the sun was setting, so even if we had wanted to stand there all night, we knew that soon the view would be gone, and it was fading. But the magic we all go searching for, which I mentioned above, was without doubt, there, at that time, in that moment.

It would be easy to try to formulate this incident into a metaphor, in order for both myself to understand it, as well as to translate it into a form that can be considered or relatable for the viewer, which art often demands, in order to be defined as art. But it’s much less complex. We are all searching for some form of holiness. Whether a place, a person, a state, we search, often looking out beyond and rarely down at our feet.

Danny Fox: We discussed other possible titles along the way, before settling on *HOLY ISLAND*. We talked about ‘A Cross Section of British Landscape’ or simply ‘British Landscapes’, but as Kingsley mentioned, there is a certain amount of intuition involved with making collaborative work and Holy Island appeared in front of us and we agreed it was a suitable title.

**CM: This is not the first time you have collaborated on works that combine photography, drawing and painting. What is it that draws you to this specific dialogue between mediums and how do you think their respective elements can complement or challenge one another?**

KI: Danny’s a painter. And the painting he does is all about colour. I’m not sure how to define my own practice, but when taking photos, I mainly think about form and movement. I also predominantly work in black and white. If you boil it down, colour is reliant on a variation of form, which defines itself through the intervention of movement. Then, without the light needed in photography, there is no colour. In other words, the mediums are all the same, but at a different pace. And that difference in speed is interesting when combined as one.

DF: Our first published collaborative work was a series of polaroids documenting a period of lockdown in a makeshift speakeasy in Cornwall, which is now my studio. The bar was my aesthetic creation with murals painted on the walls and floor. A night in the bar was meant to feel like being inside a painting and Kingsley captured those nights over the course of several weeks. The second project was a study of the naked human form in the setting of a rented house in the Los Angeles hills. For this group of works, Kingsley photographed the posed figures and developed the film on site, while I made drawings and eventually worked into the photographs with paint and stickers.

I always felt like the collaborations should be a trilogy, each with a book, so this had to be something really different from both our individual practice and our previous collaborations. I

think these landscapes are initially about the way two artists interpret the same subject matter, but ultimately about what conversation comes from that experiment when the results are placed next to each other. For example, for the most part the images were in one of two camps, what we called ‘brick or bush’. I tended to paint a seascape or some trees beside a photograph of a building or a road—of course to balance the image naturally but also to reflect that everywhere you go in Britain the same juxtaposition occurs: woodlands beyond housing estates, besides motorways along mountain ranges, past industrial wastelands and sandy beaches.

**CM: The show evokes an uncanny tension between urban and rural British landscapes. What for you are the key points of connection and difference between these scenes?**

KI: After a few days, everything started to look the same. As if someone thought up a formula that worked in one place, which they then applied all over. As humans we’re of the impression that we’re significant or the dominating force. Especially within the conversation of global warming. And I’d agree, anyone would be ignorant to propose that our influence on this planet isn’t to great effect. But after travelling intensely through the variation of landscapes, you quickly become acquainted with a harsh reality that nature doesn’t judge and it’s far greater than we like to assume is within its simplicity.

What I’m trying to say is, is that you all of a sudden realise our grand man-made cities of stone and steel, quickly seem like they could appear as small blips on the timeline for what has been before and what will be. I’m a big fan of the British painter Edward Burra. I’m particularly fond of his late landscape paintings inspired by the motorways that he noted as being built towards the end of his life, as if they were giant asphalt intrusions slashing their way across Mother Nature’s bare skin. Burra was a man of few words and rarely spoke about his work, but there’s a belief amongst his critics and fans that he made these landscapes as he accepted his final fate in death, in which his body would be returned to the land it was spawned from. I’ve thought about cities and human alterations to the land in the same way. We can scratch away as much as we like, but our wounds at some point will heal and all will be restored—in one way or another, as nature does not care whether it is ice, dry dirt or molten lava. Her consciousness is deep and far beyond our comprehension.

**CM: The relationship between these environments is not only physical but temporal. Both exist in the present but together appear as though searching for an undefined past or future — highlighted, for instance, in references to empty seashores or industrial and civic architecture. Is a sense of time important to you when making the works?**

KI: There’s no pause button. Everything is always merging into something else. By the time that you’ve understood something in the landscape, it seems like it’s already something else. We noticed that football stadiums were geographically situated in similar areas. They always seemed to be on the edges of cities or towns. Like fortresses smack bang in the middle of streets lined with working class housing. Big walls built around what you can easily imagine being just a patch of grass not so long ago. The glue holding the people together, like cement between the bricks.

This made me remember something I learnt about Saint Francis of Assisi. Apparently, he introduced the idea of building churches on the outskirts of towns, promoting and introducing

faith amongst the poor and weak. Giving the people something to believe in. Something to work for. But what's next, who knows. Maybe the stadiums will be bought by Amazon and used as distribution hubs for drones to fly in and out of. Or maybe once every inch of nature has been commoditized and the green of the forests has been converted to the grey of our cities, the grass of the pitches will be worshipped as a near-extinct God. Tens of thousands making pilgrimages to worship the last blades of grass from the old world.

**CM: Mythology appears as a central allusion made in the exhibition — not only in its proximity to landscape and its traditions, but also broader ideas of the nation, home and belonging. The images you have chosen suggest a fondness and comfort with what is seen, but also evoke a land that is not entirely at home with itself. How do you both view ideas of mythology in relation to your work?**

KI: The aim was to stay within the realm of reality. To show what is there, as a matter of fact, to be perceived, in whatever way was true to the contents origin. Whether it makes sense right at this moment wasn't and isn't important. Going back to what I mentioned about searching for something that could possibly currently be in a position of being unseen to us, it felt like we just needed to collect evidence and then join up the dots later on. Or as if sometime in the future there may be more advanced technology to read the film of the photographs or information we'd collected, and someone else can make sense of it.

With everything in flux, it's hard to imagine any land at home with itself. Purely down to the fact that with everything constantly changing, it's almost impossible to feel at home, when you don't know what the new state of home may be. It's hard to make any solid conclusions, but through the project I seem to have arrived at a place of optimism. As if humans were demanding more and more, when really we needed less. Tracing back to a time as a child, when simply climbing trees and kicking a ball around after school felt like pure bliss.

When you start to look at the world with appreciation, all of a sudden a brick-paved floor in the middle of a housing estate in Grimsby, somehow starts to look beautiful. Not in a romantic or poetic sense. In the general sense. In the same way a pretty person catches your eye during golden hour on the street towards the end of a summer's day. A smear of purple in a painting where it seems like it shouldn't belong, but it does. And you're there, in front of it, noticing it and wondering if the painter put it there just for you but also every other person that came before you and will come after.

DF: We talked about mythology before we left and thought the work might absorb more of that than it ended up doing. I think the work is actually very grounded and true to what we saw. We wanted to see for ourselves what Britain looked like on the ground and not how it is being described to us by the news.

**CM: Following from this, to what extent do you view your respective practises as autobiographical?**

KI: In the past my mind has liked to wander. Maybe as a way of being in denial and getting away from myself. Taking a break, checking out. Right now, and through this project I'm only

interested in what's sitting here in front of me. Feelings are more important than thoughts. If there's nothing to feel, it's not real. Which unfortunately is also very problematic in relation to the dynamics of relationships and life outside the four walls of the studio. If an artist can clock out at the end of the day and go home to a family and be normal, fair play. I can't or I don't want to, so my practice is as intrinsic to my existence as breathing. No work, no me.

**CM: Danny, can you speak about your choice to use nail varnish as a medium? What were the reasons for experimenting with this technique and what were the effects of doing so?**

DF: I wanted to use something that could be bought easily along the journey. At first I thought about stopping in at the local art shops as we passed through the towns, but there aren't really many art shops anymore but there is always a pharmacy or a corner shop with a few bottles of nail polish on offer.

**CM: Why do only some of the images feature written captions?**

DF: They are there mostly for the sake of the picture, in the sense that I like the way the writing looks or I think it balances something out within that particular composition. The small pictures are studies and I wanted to show that clearly, the captions are also notes to oneself that might be helpful later when using the study to make a larger painting.

**CM: The show's titular sculpture has the character of an anti-monument — in so far as it both inverts monumentality with a flat and horizontal scale, but also in its convivial and non-representational form. Can you tell us about this sculpture and how it was made?**

KI: The whole show is sculptural, with movement or direction also being a major factor. For example, the smaller works are all on a silver gelatin fibre paper that's very hard to keep flat and is generally dry mounted when framed. But we've chosen to frame in a way to keep the whole piece visible as a physical object rather than a flat print. We also chose to work horizontally with the paper in portrait, catering to both orientations, rather than the traditional landscape on landscape. This gives direction. The shine of the enamel nail varnish and gloss finish of the paper also causes what's seen by the viewer to change as they move, or prompts movement. Something similar applies for the sculpture. It's flat and horizontal from one angle, then longer and solid from another.

How it was made could depend on how far you'd like to trace back. The leather would have been grown on an animal, which was then probably slaughtered. Which was then treated, dyed and stretched as a sofa, and would have existed in a domestic setting for some time. It then got thrown out and left on the street. I happened to find it walking along at the time, and had a knife on me, so I cut off the leather and stashed it away for a rainy day. When I was packing up different materials to take down to Danny's studio in Cornwall, I ended up loading it into the van along with a load of other material.

The bird cage is made from wood and would have grown from a seed in the earth. It was then cut, carved and painted into a bird cage.

In terms of direction, the cage forces the gaze inwards, then the visible inner layer of the hide which is on show, makes me personally think about how one exposes their insides with every action or word spoken. Especially so, as an artist. The cage conceals, and the leather reveals. And there we have a balance.

It also appears physically in the shape of an island. The hide being evidence of life rather than death. Optimistic rather than pessimistic. All is good in the hood (or hide).

DF: It also looks like a pool of blood, which I think is interesting, it's like the only thing left behind. You know something happened but you don't know what you just know it was bad.

**CM: And secondly, the larger sculpture?**

KI: The shed piece takes reference from an assortment of sheds or shacks that were discovered on a South Shields allotment, which also feature as images in the works on paper. The shed could be seen as an example of man's need for some form of space or haven, intrinsic to survival or maintaining physical and mental wellbeing. Somewhere to dwell. An extension of the nest. A place of leisure, or a last resort when the shit hits the fan. We're all familiar with the term 'Man-Cave', but it's only really now that we've considered that's what these actually are. Caves, but carved out of wood from the earth, instead of rock in the cliff face. Or sometimes they're like offloading stations. Not only for the storage of physical objects, such as tools, but also the unpacking and release of unwanted energy and emotions. As if they were the therapists chair or the confession box at church, but in a simpler and purer form.

**CM: Similarly with the larger multi-media wall pieces, why the choice of materials and minimalist form?**

KI: They're all materials that were found in the back of my van at some point. And they're sewn in a way where there is a possibility of movement amongst the images as a whole rather than being still. If the wind blows, so too will the painting.

**CM: This sense of subversion or non-conformism is evident through your individual practises. Where do you feel this approach has come from and do you feel as though it is related to your experiences as self-taught artists?**

DF: The whole objective of making art is subversion and the system you're trying to overthrow is your own art.