

Sholto Blissett

Ship of Fools

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Interview by Riccardo Pillon

Riccardo Pillon: *Ship of Fools* at Hannah Barry Gallery is an important milestone in your practice, as it marks your first solo presentation of an ambitious body of work composed of twelve paintings, which were created simultaneously over six months. How has this experience been different for you and how has it developed your approach to the work?

Sholto Blissett: I have been producing works simultaneously since studying at the Royal College of Arts (2018 – 2020), so to some degree I've been creating 'bodies of work' for a couple of years, although not showing them as such. But you're right, this body of work was different from those. I knew from the outset that these works – or rather, this collective *work* – would be seen together, so I felt differently about them. They faced me as works existing in tension between being discrete yet holistic. I wanted them to make sense shown together, yet remain individual and not insist upon a unifying narrative or 'meaning'. The show's overarching theme gave me a productive common origin for these works. *Ship of Fools* is a well-trodden but far from exhausted allegory, and as a title knits these paintings together whilst still granting scope for each to explore the theme in their own way, and for the viewer to maintain their interpretive space.

RP: The title of the exhibition, *Ship of Fools*, cites Plato's allegory from *Republic*, where systemic misgovernance, misplaced anthropocentrism and arrogance are criticised and ridiculed. This metaphor has been an enduring inspiration for many artists over the centuries: what does it symbolise to you? Is it a commentary on the human desire to express order and control over nature?

SB: The idea of the "ship of fools" crept into my work over the last year or so as the subject matter of my paintings drifted away from that which had characterised my other series, *Garden of Hubris*. Here, the ship of fools allegory connotes a false Eden and the misinterpretation of our present moment through a lack of critical distance. I'd like to stress that the 'present moment' to which my work refers is not just the climate crisis or "misplaced anthropocentrism"; I am not painting messages of warning that we are careering towards some precipice — as in Toby Ords book of that name. My use of the allegory refers to that, yes, but also and more centrally to the belief systems which past European and Western culture constructed and which we've inherited today. Those systems are the things which got us to the point of this crisis. Specifically, European Romantic conceptions of 'Nature' and 'mankind' as they were developed in and proliferated through art and literature.

RP: The term "fool" also recalls the tradition of the folly in architecture: an ornamental building with no function that captures the attention of the viewer with its striking features, but it can often reveal a metaphorical meaning. Do your architectures relate to this and, if yes, why? Does this more eccentric style support your free approach to composition, described by you as "intuitive architecture"?

SB: Yes, the buildings are follies, punning on 'folly' as foolishness/fools. This pun wasn't an immediate plan, however, and it is more a meaning which grew from my insertion of architecture into these scenes, than one which I consciously planned at the outset. Initially I included architecture in my paintings to reference power systems I wanted to critique, namely church and state; at first, I depicted actual buildings which existed, but this made my works specific and inflexible through overt references to topical and political issues. I did not want this; I did not want my paintings to be things which explicitly laid blame or directed the viewer to an interpretation or idea. I wanted them to be more detached and eerie. So, I had to detach the architecture from its specificity while retaining its poignancy. I came up with these imagined structures that were classical, yet not quite consistent with any one style, culture or purpose. Their lack of identity heightens their uselessness and their sense of futility despite their prominent position in the paintings, rendering them as follies.

RP: This body of work shares the same uncanny and ghostly atmosphere of the *capriccio* — a painting of fantastical ancient ruins that was popular in the 18th century — as well as symbolist paintings such as the *Isle of the Dead* (1880) by Arnold Böcklin. Which are your main references and inspirations for the realisation of your paintings?

SB: Growing up I was undoubtedly influenced by Claude Lorraine and Turner, followed by the German Romantics and the Hudson River School. Later, the Surrealists, and in more recent years I have been inspired by contemporary artists including Ged Quinn, George Shaw, Mat Collishaw, Kehinde Wiley, and Emma Webster. This development in my exposure to art, alongside my own reading on the Romantics and landscape during my Geography undergraduate degree, has led to an ironic shift in my use of 'influence'. Whilst at first, I was in awe of the European Romantic 'greats', I've become more ideologically critical of them, more cautious about taking their landscapes at face value and more ready to interrogate the impacts these artworks have had on the development of Western/ European conceptions of mankind and 'Nature'. Those movements remain an inspiration to me but not in a direct, emulatory manner. Their influence has been replaced by that of the Surrealists, my contemporaries and my own thoughts upon this matter.

RP: Like in Giorgio De Chirico's desolated paintings, your architecture feels familiar but obscure, almost unsettling. Human presence is perceived but hidden behind concealed windows and closed doors. Why do you choose to disguise it from the viewer?

SB: Originally, I excluded people simply because I didn't like painting them. But I quickly realised that their absence was more powerful than their presence. The people are implied rather than portrayed in the scenes through buildings and gardens, and in some work through the presence of fires or smoke. This suggestion of human presence gives the paintings a certain eeriness that allows them to appear both beautiful and unsettling. The absence of people also lends a timelessness to the scene: it could be now, the future or two hundred years in the past. This makes it slightly more universal and emphasises the state of limbo between moment and event which these works overall convey.

RP: Does the Palazzo in your paintings, with its monumental composition in alzata, its imposing central perspective and the white marble facades, become a re-interpretation of the metaphor of the ivory tower, and, if yes, how do you relate this to our current times?

SB: There is an element of the ivory tower to my work, yes, but this is welcome rather than deliberate; an effect of my chosen colour palette more than an intended reference. The lightness and coolness of this body of work heightens the sense of detachment and vacancy. It also ensures that my paintings can't be displayed and bathed in adoring sunlight. So, whilst not intentional, this literal appearance invites the metaphorical interpretation of them as 'lofty' ivory towers, suggestive of the ways in which humankind attempts to distance ourselves from the rest of nature.

RP: What do you think is the role of the monument nowadays? Do you believe it has shifted from being a testament of human success and achievement to a criticism to anachronistic manifestations of power, obsolete values, and delusional hubris?

SB: In my paintings I'm making a folly of the monument, but not as a criticism of 'the monument' as a structure into the future. I'm making a folly of the societies and cultures which erected those monuments and ideals with which I engage. Those monuments act as heterotopias, or access portals into another time, which help me understand the present and thus what to do for the future. I do believe that monuments can be constructed appropriately and avoid criticism hitherto levied at monuments as – as you put it – testaments of human success, or anachronistic manifestations of power. Just because something is a statement doesn't mean it has to be arrogant. I hope my works are testimonies to that fact.

RP: During one of our conversations, you mentioned how you studied geography and how this knowledge has helped you develop your practice. Would you like to talk a bit about this important aspect of your work?

SB: Studying geography informed my work massively. From childhood, I had always painted landscapes, but before studying geography my paintings verged on pastiches of the European and America Romantic tradition. Studying geography changed that. I was introduced to the history of the landscape aesthetic among the European and Western artists I'd admired, and to the roles played by church and state in shaping that history. I began to think about art and landscape and history differently, and my work started to move towards a painted investigation of the aesthetic language of landscape art. Studying geography made my work more critical and reflexive; these landscape paintings subvert rather than celebrate themselves.

RP: The buildings in your pictures are always rigidly composed, while the nature surrounding them is agitated, sublime and in full demonstration of its beauty and power. How do you explore and experience nature in your practice and in your daily life?

SB: A key concept underpinning my practice is the collapse of the subject/object relationship that exists in Western concepts of 'Nature', namely the Sublime. In this, the human viewer of an awe-inspiring landscape has their own sense of self consolidated in opposition to the viewed, hostile scene. In my work, I force a collapse of that arrogant distinction by situating the manmade within the natural forces, and moreover making it humbled and incorporated into the scene.

My daily life has always focused around the outdoors. It was my life-long love of being outside which initially got me interested in seeing, and then creating, landscape paintings. Besides art, the activity I spend the most time doing is fly fishing. This informs a lot of what I believe about humankind's place in nature: fully immersed, quiet, respectful, with a devotion to working symbiotically with it for the flourishing of both. When fishing, I break out of my own life and into another, if only briefly. What I also like about fishing is that it brings me to water, a substance that fascinates me with its paradoxical transparency and opacity, its capabilities of salvation and destruction. Water is always in my works, not because it has a fixed meaning or because I understand or can capture it, but because of that very lack of meaning and control.

RP: What do you think is the role of landscape painting in art?

SB: This question is one which can be answered in two parts and is one to which I've been alluding throughout this interview, especially in the question regarding the ship of fools allegory.

The first way to answer this is to say that there has been one, historical role of landscape painting (here I refer to European landscape painting, as that is the history my art interacts with) since its development as a distinct genre in the late seventeenth century.

The second is to state what I think this role *should be*. This is precisely what I try to convey in my works. I take features and techniques of the historic body of so-called 'landscape' painting – Claudean foreground coves, Turner-esque pine trees leaning and framing the scene *just so*; *repoussoirs* leading the eye into the canvas's background – and through their insertion, critique them. That's not landscape, my paintings say; that's how the human artist has pictured and composed landscape. I think W.J.T Mitchell's idea of 'landscape as verb' holds much potency in my practice: landscape painting has historically been something *done* to a view. My landscape painting isn't yet painting landscape as it is. Rather, my landscape painting – and what I think the genre currently requires – depicts a self-reflective critique upon that history. I really want to wrap my head around the history, *the landscape*, of landscape painting, in order to filter out the constructions from the reality.