

Romantic, and wholly illusory,
the mythical landscapes of

HELEN SEAR

Helen Sear's landscapes are strange atmospheric places. From a distance they evoke romantic vistas, terrains to be conquered, places yearned for, the traveller's goal. Closer observation reveals the seductive scenery to be the fur and skin of stuffed, dead animals photographed from exhibits in a number of natural history museums. These are metaphorical geographies, they engage with the psyche. Unsettling and sensual, their romanticism is both surreal and suggestive. Wanting to sink into the fur you find yourself brought up against the surface of the photographic print. These memento mori terrains seem to exude life and promise, yet they are also about denial; the skins a mirage, dreamscapes of interiority, mythical places. These are, in the title of her most recent works, Unsettlements. Helen Sear's latest landscape series is a continuing dialogue with the issues that excite and engage her, landscape, mythology, physicality, the body. Her earlier series such as Covert and Gone to Earth both engaged with desire and a dialogue with Roland Barthes theory of the punctum, where the photographic image was pierced with i.e.d lights. Sear's work has always had a very physical presence and a sense of "elsewhere"; she delights in ambiguity. Meeting Helen in her studio and listening to her warm resonant voice dispels the uncanny, but, as one would look at pictures in a fairy tale book whilst being lulled to sleep, the photographic images surrounding me are unsettling. The storm clouds can gather but it can never rain.

Jean Wainwright: Your latest series of landscapes, *Grounded*, is an exploration of the human environment which you have transposed and metamorphosed. How did the series come about?

Helen Sear: The *Grounded* images are hybrid photographic landscapes. I took photographs of the backs of stuffed animals in the natural history museums in Britain, Germany Switzerland, wherever I travelled. The museums are places that I like to hang out in. They are combined with a series of photographs of skies that I also take in various locations.

J.W: What is the relationship of skin to sky?

H.S: Obviously I take some time selecting the right sky for the right skin, but initially I wanted to produce a series of images which at first sight,

when looking from a distance, would look like landscapes in a romantic tradition. They might look like a "place" but as you get closer to the surface of the image you are brought up against the skin of the photograph, and you begin to realise that this isn't "ground", this is a dead animal. This is a series, one to ten, and I am still working on them, so they are quite new. I have just done a small set at the moment which are included in my show *Unsettlement* at the Zinc Gallery in Stockholm, but actually what I want to do with the new ones is to start working on a larger scale, so that they fill your field of vision. I do take photographs all the time and I am not always exactly sure what I am going to do with them, but with the skies for several months I was just going out and taking pictures, because I knew that I needed a large number to be able to edit from. The typical landscape idyll would have a few animals in it, so why not make the landscape the animal?

J.W: These images are medium scale, 16x16 inches square, is that the kind of scale you normally work to?

H.S: Well, I am interested in the physical experience of being in front of the image, not just in what is represented but also in the photograph as an object. I quite often make decisions about scale related to my own body. Sometimes the images might be my arm span, or it might be the size of my hands, or the width of my shoulders. I think that just gives a more direct relationship with the viewer when in the presence of the piece of work. Rather than it being printed in a magazine and just being image, I am interested in the photograph being object as well.

J.W: Can we talk about the process that you use to make these photographs and the layering intrinsic to them.

H.S: They are made of two images, one a photograph of the sky, the other the animal skin. I shoot on a 35mm camera. I then scan the images into the computer using *PhotoShop* and merge appropriate images together. Sometimes I have to subtly manipulate the colour. I am very interested in nature, technology and mythology, and I like the idea of using technology to produce something that perhaps is not immediately obvious. In the series of works which I made for the John Hansard Gallery called *Gone to Earth*, which was also a series of animal



Helen Sear
Grounded #1, 2000
Lambda print
Courtesy the artist

landscapes, the images looked like they were very high tech. The paradox is that now I have a lot of computer equipment the work is looking more natural! Previously I had nothing but I still wanted to talk about technology, only I was doing it in a very low tech way

J.W: You mentioned that you are very interested in technology, mythology and the romantic perception of nature. Are there any artists or images that have had a particular influence on you?

H.S: I am interested in romantic painting, particularly artists such as Turner and perhaps the German romantics such as Caspar David Friedrich. I think that in terms of contemporary artists the people who influenced me were, in the end, the people who taught me when I was at college. At the Slade artists like Tim Head and Helen Chadwick, and people from my B.A course who were working with light, people like Bill Culbert. I am very influenced by film and film light, Peter Greenaway and David Lynch are particular directors that I like visually. There is a cinematic feel certainly to some of my past work, although I am not sure about this current series.

J.W: In your latest series you say that you have used natural colour. Can we talk more about the role that colour plays in your work?

H.S: I think that previously the colour in my work was pretty saturated and very unnatural, which is unlike this current series. In the earlier work I often started off with the original photograph, the document, in black and white. There was then a whole process of reconstruction. In the studio I might use slide projections to project colour back onto the image and then rephotograph it, or I might use the computer. This artificiality of colour is important to me, because it means that you are not easily located in relationship to the image. Sometimes you can't tell if it is day or night, or exactly where you are, because of the artificiality of colour. That for me provides a much more poetic or imaginative space. I am not necessarily interested in photography representing the landscape per se, photography as representing any typographical reality, but rather the artifice and construction of it.

J.W: Perhaps we should talk about the earlier photographic works that this landscape series developed from.

H.S: They were shown at the John Hansard Gallery, and also the Portfolio Gallery in Edinburgh, and called *Gone to Earth*. I think that there is a strong relationship between the body, landscape and technology; that's why I made the images. I am trying to find an equivalent for using the female body. I think that it is partly because I came out of an education system that was very hardcore feminist, and it was almost impossible to represent any part of the body - it would just be seen as something for the male gaze. But I still wanted to define something, a territory, or explore a landscape, that might be identifiably feminine. For that reason I tried to find an equivalent, so it might be dead animals, the skin or the texture, or it might be the bush photographs that I made called *Covert* which I think are quite sexual in the way they remind you of the body, you can see what they are but they conceal their interior.

J.W: You came out of a fine art sculpture background, how has that affected your work?

H.S: In my earlier work the photograph as object was very important to me, which was partly because I had come out of that background. I didn't train as a photographer and I think that that filtered through. I originally painted, and then I moved into time-based media using film, video and installation, and a bit of performance. I took photographs all the time, but it is only in the last ten or twelve years that I have concentrated on making photographic images in their own right, not as part of another piece of work. My struggle with the photograph was with the fact that it was a flat bit of paper and I used various devices to accentuate its objectivity. I drilled holes into the surface of the image, put lights into the image...

J.W:and then rephotographed the image?

H.S: Sometimes rephotographing the image, and sometimes in the early works the lights were actually in the image, although not in *Gone to Earth*.

J.W: In *Volcano* you have the real presence of the lights, the slippage between the object and the photograph creating a very tactile piece.



H.S: Well, I suppose it was an attempt to go beyond the image, to literally pierce the image. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes talks about the punctum as within the image. My piercing is trying to interrupt the very flat, sealed, surface that is characteristic of the photograph, to go beyond it, and to talk about something that is within the psyche or something that is interior. Photography then becomes a site that is just on the edge of exterior and interior, and the viewer is hovering in a slightly uncanny or anxiety provoking area. Talking of *Gone to Earth* specifically, they are quite mystical, an unfashionable word. Another reason that I drilled these images and inserted the lights was that I wanted two viewing distances from the work. One of these might look like it was from a long distance, so it looked like you were flying in at night over my landscape. Also the piercing had the function of drawing you to the skin of the image, so that you go right close up and you're almost up to the fur of the animal.

J.W: When did you first start using light to reanimate or punctuate your landscapes, was it with *Struck*?

H.S: *Struck*, which I made in 1993, was exhibited in a shopping unit in Tower Bridge Piazza where we did our own show. The photograph showed landscape images of trees that had fallen after a storm. I then projected an electric

Helen Sear
Grounded #4, 2000
Lambda print
Courtesy the artist

Helen Sear
Grounded #5, 2000
Lambda print
Courtesy the artist

presence onto the image, a light. I projected slides back onto photographs and then rephotographed them. The two side panels of the triptych show two animals, a fox and a hare both stuffed, but I wanted to photograph them as if they had been caught in car headlights. They stare at each other across the landscape. I really liked the image, which was one of the first ones that I made using a conventional landscape.

J.W: What drew you to working with the skin and fur of dead stuffed animals? Was it a fascination that you had from when you were young?

H.S: I think so. I have one very strong childhood memory of when we moved into a victorian house in Worcestershire. My parents bought it when I was ten, and when we first went to look at the place there was an amazing collection of stuffed birds and animals, hundreds and hundreds in the house. The previous owners sold them off at auction and we kept one. That was a very strong memory for me. I also have very strong memories of walking in the countryside and having a very idyllic childhood. My parents were very interested in the outdoors and taught me about plants and animals, and I think a lot of my visual memory comes from that. Why is one person preoccupied with one thing and one with another? Museums are places I like to visit and I have been taking pictures in London's Natural History Museum since 1988. But it is also the thing about the "other" that we don't know what it is like to be. There is that wonderful essay by John Berger in *Ways of Looking* about the loss of the relationship we have to do with animals.



Talking generally about my work, what does interest me is the space and

time between the taking of the image, the death of the moment and the making of the document. Then there is this desire of mine to reanimate the moment in the present. So I think that some of the lights in *Gone to Earth* became like acupuncture points where there is a sort of Frankenstein desire, where I want to bring the image back to life again. In *Grounded* there are atmospheric traces in the sky. Often I have used dead things like birds and animals in order to revive them. What I am trying to do with photography is to accentuate, or have something in the image, that makes you aware that there is an ambiguity of time and space that has elapsed

J.W: So you are interrogating the idea of the dead moment?

H.S: I am trying to challenge that, or give it some meaning in the presence of the viewer, so that it is not located in a particular time and space that is no more, but can still resonate somehow in the present.

J.W: So do you see landscape in a fairly broad sense?

H.S: Yes I've done portraits which, when turned on their sides, begin to look like landscapes. I'm interested in how one thing can become another, and I don't know where one ends and another begins in either a conventional sense, or in a more literal sense. My landscapes being shown at the Zinc Gallery are together with another group of

Helen Sear
Grounded #6, 2000
Lambda print
Courtesy the artist





Helen Sear
Grounded #7, 2000
 Lambda print
 Courtesy the artist

my works called *Homescapes*. These are images of houses and bird cages and all very unfixed. The whole show was called *Unsettlement*. I was also thinking about the idea of beautiful landscape, the conventional notion.

J.W.: So your conventionally beautiful landscape would be...?

H.S.: I think there is a convention that you find in painting...

J.W.: The picturesque.

H.S.: The picturesque, which is somehow culturally imposed. I was reading somewhere that it is actually a much more primitive process, that early man might have stood and looked out over a landscape, and the reason that they liked it was that it was somewhere that you could survive or somewhere that you could settle. But it is the idea of "unsettlement" that propels my work. There is no way the you could sustain life in my landscapes because firstly the animals are dead and secondly there are no trees, no water. And yet they still look attractive. They are barren and very bleak and sometimes there are jet vapour trails, but that's about it. The other reason for the title was that all the houses and the cages were to do with the relationship with nature and culture. I suppose the first images were the cages which were in the Arts Council show *Here to Stay*.in 1998. I found a bird cage in a skip and it was just so like a house and it was just the perfect object. It was also for me the missing piece in a show with

Zelda Cheatle. It was about everything I had been talking about, the window was open, the cage was moving, the bird had flown, as it were, and so I photographed it several times in different guises. Another image I like of mine, which is being shown at the Nunnery Gallery in London at the moment in a show called *Wreck of Hope*, shows a child's sponge in the shape of a house. I found it on the floor when I was giving a tutorial to one of my students at Chelsea. So again you are thrown back on your own psyche, because you cannot inhabit the house.

In the house the emerald colour for me is spiritual, the colour of death, and it is also the dominant colour of a film that I really liked, John Boorman's *Excalibur*. If you think of the colour in terms of light it was a colour that was really used in that film. So the green hut in the wood is an uncanny space.

J.W.: So is that work also coming from the uncanny fairy tale?

H.S.: Yes. It is a fear of the void or something.

J.W.: You mentioned earlier about hard-core feminism. How you are dealing with the landscape as body in your work?

H.S.: One of the questions I am trying to deal with is how you present the nature of experience. I do want the pictures to be experienced. That's why I was talking about the object at first. Actually you are thrown back on yourself, maybe the pictures aren't easy to read, or they don't have a particular story to them. I am looking at these landscapes and part of me doesn't really know what they are in a sense. I have just done them and I don't know what they really are. I

think if I did know completely they wouldn't be so fascinating, and for me it's the fascination, something that holds you, the image that keeps you wanting to look at it. It's that which you can't necessarily name or know which for me is the thing that keeps me interested in the work

J.W.: Your portrait series also has an uncanny, wraith like presence.

H.S.: The portrait series is something that I have been working on for two and a half years. It is an ongoing project. I was talking about the space between things. They came originally from a piece in 1994, my *Untitled* back lit projection eye piece. It was a self-portrait where my eyes are held in shadow. As the images were mounted on light boxes you couldn't actually meet the gaze of the person so you were forced back into the interior...

J.W.: So that is a trope in your work?

H.S.: It is a way of pointing one back into an interior space, I was thinking about the distance between one's self and one's mirror image. About that immeasurable distance, and the function of portraiture, which was to describe a person through all their surface features. I wanted to make a series of non portraits. The images called *Twice ...Once* are made up of two negatives; there are two moments, one shortly after the other when I photograph the sitter. I would go into the dark room and there was a space between the negative and the paper and I would make these small contact prints. What was happening was that the dark parts were getting very dark and the eyes were becoming completely black. I started to get pictures where people became clones of themselves and all their distinguishing features became erased, they became ageless and in some cases quite genderless. Again what I wanted to happen was that they hovered on the edge of becoming very glamorous. They are almost like forties film stars, yet on the other hand they are very haunting and quite disturbing. That position again which is between the exterior and the interior.

J.W.: I see a relationship between these and your landscapes.

H.S.: I think there is a relationship. I mean people see them and think "oh, black and white portraits, but they are very different..."

J.W.: What links them is the romanticism of the portraits but also your engagement with death, with preserving.

H.S.: Well they are quite dead actually.

J.W.: These are living people that are ghosts of the past, but with the landscapes you are reversing that, so there is this interesting dialogue. You are reanimating the dead animals in the landscapes and in the portraits you are referencing death, the idea of the vision. Are your eyes going to focus and will the image metamorphose?

H.S.: They are deliberately ambiguous. They are titled like a logo so you get 2X and the initial 2xCR. They do refer to technology in the sense of cloning and the idea of the double. People think that I have done them on the computer but they are impossible to do using that technology, they just don't work. You don't

get the subtle gradations of tones, so these are hand printed

J.W: They also have subtle qualities that are difficult to reproduce. So you are using a medium that's about reproduction, but which would entail a loss.

H.S: Yes, I have often been disappointed when I have seen my work reproduced, and that is part of my struggle to be in the presence of the work. I know that you can't always do that, but I know that we tend to think of photography as being almost the ideal medium to reproduce, but perversely it isn't. It does depend on how the artist has conceived of the work

J.W: And these are the only works in black and white?

H.S: Well, simply I wanted to pare them back with the black and white. I did try them in colour, but the doubling up in colour simply didn't do what I wanted it to do. It does all sorts of other things, becoming a bit too much like Renaissance painting. It confuses the issue. So I felt that taking colour out was appropriate for these works.

J.W: You talked earlier about Roland Barthes. Does theory interest you?

H.S: I am interested in Kant and Helen Cixious, and in trying to find another way to express things. That might be to do with the feminine, or a realm which was outside the

Helen Sear
Grounded #11, 2000
Lambda print
Courtesy the artist



Helen Sear
Grounded #8, 2000
Lambda print
Courtesy the artist

constraints of patriarchal sculpture which was a sort of "wild area" as it were. Also I find people like Jane Gallop very interesting, but I have always avoided reading too much theory because I feel that it inhibits my practice. I try and read when it is appropriate and I don't think that I illustrate any theory.

J.W: So you are engaging interior space and the body, the psyche and landscape in *Unsettlement*?

H.S: Well, they are metaphors for the psyche. While I don't want to talk in psychoanalytical terms too much, there is something intuitive about the work and think that intuition can be intelligent. I am more confident now and I try not to worry if I am doing the right thing, and I can leave things out and the works that I understand least are my current works.

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Helen Sear will be producing a major new project for the Kent based agency Photoworks, opening in November 2000.

For more details contact Photoworks on 01622 621134

Helen will also be exhibiting at the Axel Thime Gallery in Darmstadt in September 2000.