

Review – Charlotte Cooper

Cathy Ward and Eric Wright are artists, proper artists, not pretend artists. Ward and Wright paint, they construct things, they make ideas into things, they are skilled, the things they create make you see the world in a different way. They work quietly, they are prolific because they are artists and that's what they do - make art - and they are modest.

Ward and Wright are a bit like the odd couple: she's dark, secretive, (a bit shifty even - yes it's true!) he's sandy, genial and open. She's from Kent, he's from Ohio. The partnership works, obviously, and it's hard to imagine them without each other, impossible even.

When I first met Ward and Wright, I didn't know what to make of them so I went to see a show they did at RBS, which is the very posh Royal British Institute of Sculptors. I went on a day that no one would be around, so I could just look at their work and make up my mind in my own time, without any pesky interruptions, and without the pressure to pretend that I liked it if I really didn't. That's the problem with having friends who make stuff, what if you hate it?

The RBS show was like a really weird fairytale forest. It's been a few years since I saw it, so I can't remember every piece, but what I do remember is this: trees, brought inside and decorated with miniature oil paintings of schmaltzy chocolate box landscapes. Trees, lopped, smoothed, painted, beribboned, accessorised, emasculated (that's a pretentious word, can you even do that to a tree?). Trees taken from nature, taken from the forest and made human, decorated, honoured but transformed into something grotesque yet also pretty. Some trees were functional, some were studded with candles, Bavarian ephemera, horse brasses, trees that look as though you could hang someone from them, trees that look like creepy souvenirs, maypoles, more objects for which I don't have cultural references. Folk art? Yeah, it's something like that. Pop culture? Kind of. And now I'm thinking: why waste words on this stuff? I don't have the vocabulary to describe it. And if you looked at it you'd doubtless see something different. That's why it's called art.

So, you know what? I didn't have to pretend I liked their work when I saw Ward and Wright next, which is lucky because I was standing in their home, a place from which they're now moving, somewhere you are unlikely ever to see, poor you. I think this was the point at which I realised that Ward and Wright are no fakers. The RBS trees? They were just a tiny part of the experience. As I snooped around their house I discovered that the pair of them had developed and realised a complete aesthetic in their own home, they had created their own visual universe based on obsessions so obscure and peculiar that the only appropriate response is to let your jaw hang loose with duh-brained wonder. Here is a hall of oil paintings of fucked up country music stars; over there is a toilet bristling with dayglo day of the dead junk, and I mean bristling; here is a heavy carved table, like a notebook, a memory bank of those who came to visit

and left a little vandalism to remember them by; here's a hallway hung with leaves and lights. This is only part of it.

Then there's The Pub. This is a basement room decorated with antlers, horse brasses, more stamped brass platters, ribbons, ugly things made of wood, shillelaghs, Tudorbethan beams painted into the ceiling, roughly hewn chairs, low enough for a wetnurse to suckle some stray infants in the corner. There's a bar too, smothered with nasty little bar accoutrements, the kind of stuff that dull people invariably describe as "politically incorrect". But again, why describe? A visit to this magical place is like entering an altered state.

Random Ward and Wright fact: the pair of them worked at Disneyland Paris, before it opened, painting fairytale scenes for a storybook ride. I have ridden on this ride in order to have a closer look at their work. I am not ashamed.

I hope that one day Ward and Wright allow you to enter their world for a moment. Don't try and talk, they're used to hosting guests who are unable to focus on a civil conversation, just let your eyes fall on one object after another. Your brain won't be able to cope with the visual information, so you'll have to be patient, think paint, wood, shape before you try to decipher meaning, context, montage, I find that helps. I swear that you will love every moment. Appropriate cliché for this experience: kid in a candy store.

I want to say more about the art, so I'll write a little bit about HerWorld, Ward's insane hair drawings. These are small-ish pieces, imaginary landscapes drawn of hair. Ward's hair pictures feature disconcerting orifices, slits, plaits, eyes, turd-like shapes, hints of sacrilegious symbolism, swirls of dreamlike Little Red Riding Hood forests. They reek of sexuality, they are feminine, delicate and beautiful. They are also deeply subversive. There's a Jacobean tragedy where someone dies after looking at a poisoned painting and I could quite easily imagine the same thing happening to that wrong person at the wrong time who rests their eyes on these dangerous, witchy drawings a moment longer than they should.

Ward and Wright's most recent show is called Destiny Manifest. In its simplest terms, it's a giant painting, a couple of videos, some photographs, some smaller paintings, some tree sculptures. It's also a seven and a half thousand mile road trip that Ward and Wright embarked upon across the American West, and it's a history lesson too.

The giant painting is the kingpin of the show. It borrows from the style of Victorian travel paintings to tell the story of a journey as well as depict the route taken. It's a landscape that mixes fantasy with reality. Funnily enough, it reminds me of the drawings in the flyleaf of my mum's old copy of The Hobbit. I could never get into the book, but I loved the imaginary map, which had sharp ridges and jagged mountain ranges, endless plateaux, strange landmarks, filigree text written in ornate banners, and a huge sense of

wide open geographical space. You can't but help imagine yourself inside the map, and the same goes for the painting, which depicts the trail taken by The Donner Party and that also taken by Ward and Wright.

In American histo-mythology, the Donner Party set out to take their place in the West, a land of opportunity, in the 1840s. They planned badly, their journey was a disaster and all but a few of the travellers died. Starving through a bitter winter, they resorted to cannibalism.

The Donner Party exemplified the notion of Manifest Destiny, the idea that the United States has a divine right to expand where they choose which meant, in the 19th century, the North West of America. Ward and Wright undertook a journey that followed the Donner Party trail, but these two are no neo-Manifest Destiny goons. They know that the romance of the road evaporates after the first five hundred miles, and that American folk history and American expansion are two things of which it is prudent to be wary.

How do they show this? Through video clips of the tarmac, the landscape slipping past, endlessly, the relentless road, the neon of the roadside motel, the crudeness and greatness of road culture and the magnificence of the mountains, the voice-over recanting the tale of the Donner Party itself. They also show these themes through the re-enactment of the Donner Party's trudge across the Great Salt Lake, Ward and Wright as two figures on the horizon, walking on, never really getting anywhere, the video loop as a metaphor for the endless journey, the inhospitable terrain.

They bring the past notion of Manifest Destiny into the present through Ward's photographs of military surplus and gun detritus rotting in the sun. She shows that the US produces so much military ephemera that it's no big deal to dump this mass of it in a field, so it lies there, all burped up by a country that is in love with war. These photographs of broken, unused rockets, the hard hats especially, make me wonder about the people who would have used them, would have worn them, would have been killed by them. They remind me of the shocking photographs that came out of the killing fields in Cambodia, a mass of death.

And there's more. Ward and Wright's smaller oil paintings suggest the fantasy of the West, and their tree sculptures are reminiscent of historical land markers that you see in the US, outside Elvis Presley's birthplace or next to a battlefield. It makes me think about how historical events get turned into tourist cack.

You can tell I'm only just scratching the surface. The work is so multi-layered that it makes your brain hurt (but in a good way). Manifest Destiny dances with notions of tourism and war, America's aggressive expansion threads through the idea of the near-endless road; the show depicts the interface between history and mythology, it brings into focus the uses of painting, the relationship of folk art to high art, to the ways that the land is conceptualised. Destiny Manifest ties the past up with the present, it's a series

of visual essays about landscape and one's relationship to the country. It is tremendous and grand, the themes are all mixed up in a jumble that makes sense. And look, Ward and Wright continue to express themselves in an international artistic language that is their own, making sense of the world, ordering arcane notions into something tangible, communicable, beautiful.

At this late point I want to say: how do they do that? I know how to write things, I know how to sit down and write a book, for example, or a review, or a poem. I don't know how to write a song, nor do I know how someone can draw or paint or sculpt something. That part of my brain is dead. I can draw a stick man, or a spazzed-out picture for a birthday card, but I don't understand how a person, two people, can conceptualise a show, can plan and execute a gigantic painting, can make something that really looks like something, that makes you think about life in a new way. How? How can Ward and Wright maintain their lives in the world yet also be able to make forests of magical trees? An epic painting? A drawing of hair that looks like perversion? Do they do this work in front of the TV? How do they make time for it? Do they have a room full of trees waiting to be used up? Where do they find the energy to create this work? What drives them? What do they talk about whilst they lie in bed together at night, before they kiss and roll over to sleep? How can they make this incredible art? That's their mystery.

Ward and Wright document all their work online. Find out more at <http://www.destinymanifest.info> and please, go and have a look.

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