

Cultural Environmentalism of Hope

by Iliyana Nedkova

***Crossed Paths* at Oriel Davies Gallery, Newtown 21 April – 12 June 2018**

The story of *Crossed Paths* is our story. It is the story of our sublime and fragile mountains, and all the life and death they embody and witness. It is the story of our fierce fascination with highs and lows, peat mosses and moor lands, white clover and purple heather, upland sheep and carbon storage. It is the story of our own cultural relationship to mountains, of all that gives us environmental hope.

In honour of the first, Welsh, part of the trilogy *Crossed Paths* – the Scottish and French parts will be made over the next couple of years – let us borrow the expression from the Welsh language which when translated into English means ‘rushing and hurrying through space while holding your breath in your fist’. When you feel your whole hand open, an entire Welsh Cambrian upland panorama opens up!

Yet, Whall’s Welsh panorama as seen in Oriel Davies Gallery, Newtown opens up not only across the way, stretching out for miles but right underneath our feet, below the surface, in the depth of ‘the living mountain’.¹ A landscape that rewards not only the widest possible gaze but the narrowest, the deepest possible focus. On our hands and knees the landscape reveals itself as dense and colourful as purple heather with a hint of ryegrass and a patch of blue sky or even as a murder mystery film noir unravelling itself at the road edge of a hinterland.

On arrival at the gallery, we are seduced to take a view from our hands and knees of that which goes beyond what can be seen. Our gaze is anchored by the arc of an 8-screen installation which traverses the gallery floor as if crawling from one end to the other. Once adjusted to the dark cinematic environment our eyes become immersed into the haunting soundscape which seems to change tonality every few minutes following a trail of enigmatic video imagery. Without the omnipresence of the usual nature documentaries narrator, our only guide is the key word *crawl* and the numbers 1 to 8 which grid and girdle the beginning of each of the 8 micro-episodes.

These 8 artist’s shorts are extracted from 4,480 minutes of footage ‘harvested’ by Whall following her 8 heroic crawls on all fours over 5.5 miles in the Elenydd Special Area of Conservation in the Cambrian Mountains, West Wales during the summer and autumn of 2017. Bringing a pair of hydrophones (waterproof microphones) would have been enough to dig deeper under the soft and squidgy sphagnum but Whall opted for wearing 14 GoPro cameras (waterproof video cameras) as well as her determination to push the boundaries of the walking artists’ practice citing amongst others the practice of her father Dick Whall, Francis Alys, Simon Faithful, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton.² Their walking practice falls within the art developments of the 1960s, which imply a break from the previous evolution in

¹ See N. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, Cannongate Books, Edinburgh, 2011

² See M. Whall, ‘Crossed Paths – About’, *Crossed Paths* <http://www.mirandawhall.space/> (accessed 20 April 2018)

terms of the dematerialization of art and the overcoming of form, medium and genre, giving way to experience, thought and action as artistic resources – contemporary walking art as a space for visual and conceptual experimentation.

To those walking artists enthralled by mountains the wonder is beyond all dispute. To those who are not as enchanted, the allure of climbing or crawling is a kind of madness. No wonder that Whall's own 'walking' artistic practice of crawling in the uplands – a practice more akin to a performative act or a dance floor work – is reported as 'insane' and 'adventurous'³. Yet, Whall's crawls are not summoned by the lust of today's adventurers who seek out danger elsewhere as their everyday life has become safer and more comfortable. The mountain for Whall is not a stage-set for a high altitude game of high stakes and high returns driven by big brands and breathtaking views. Her crawls in the mountain are not aimed at the summit but at the plateau. Her unassuming crawling persona who hardly makes any appearance in her film and audio installation is not like the ego of those adventurers half in love with themselves and half in love with oblivion.

The tension between heroic exploits and slow crawls, abstract and conventional narrative, voiced and scored sound is exposed further through the only other film presence in the exhibition showing on a wall-mounted screen in the adjacent gallery space. Whall invited the adventure cinematographers of Fforest Films (Rhys Thwaites Jones, Destina Bartley and Fraser Byrne) to interview her and portray her crawls in the style of the new cinematic and drone industry, which plays its part in the modification of our mountains. In the resulting documentary *Woolly Maggot* Whall assumes a lead character role and is 'transformed' into an adventure-obsessed creature who is trying to reach somewhere no one has ever reached before and to do something no one has done before. The documentary also opens up the vista of the seemingly dry and barren mountains, giving a wider overview by harnessing the humour, drudgery, joy and commitment.

If Whall's film and audio installation as part of *Crossed Paths* adheres to an unequivocally non-romantic approach to mountains by taking the viewer into the underbelly of the landscape and under the skin of the mountain, then by including the documentary in the exhibition, Whall's project doesn't shy away from casting a critical eye on the heroisation of the wild, even by those who love it most.

The title and opening credits of the documentary introduce another aspect of Whall's *Crossed Paths* project – the desire to explore the mountains from a different perspective – that of an animal, such as yak, donkey or a sheep. Burdened with the heavy load of light-weight cameras, the artist proceeds through peat bogs and rough country roads with the mindset of a mule. Every limb adorned with a camera lens she crawls like a cyborg sherpa. With the abandonment of a wild animal she moves at the speed of a multi-eyed centipede foraging for footage.

With a sheep's fleece casually thrown over high-tech mountaineering kit, it is the sheep that becomes the signifier of Whall's self-deprecating, humble attitude towards the mountain. It is in this disguise that the artist seems to ask us to recognise that there is a conflict between the two objectives – protecting traditional sheep farming culture, which is valuable, and protecting and enhancing ecological integrity, which is also valuable. With three sheep to every human on the Cambrian hills, could Whall's sheep be an allegory of 'the fully automated system for environmental destruction, selectively grazing out tree seedlings and all other edible plants,

³ See ITV's report about Whall's first public exhibition of the project at Oriel Davies Gallery, Newtown (23 minutes in): <http://www.itv.com/news/wales/2018-04-26/catch-up-with-wales-at-six/> (accessed 27 April 2018)

leaving behind a highly impoverished and restricted flora, offering very few niches for animals⁴. How could we strike the balance of hectares grazed to the quick to produce a remarkably small amount of meat and those same hectares becoming our great wildlife preserves with greatly enhanced capacity to store carbon and hold back floodwater?

Whall's 8-part crawling performance amongst the sheep's habitat succeeds in conveying the allure of mountains, while also underlining their scientific importance to us. Her 'immediate and fugitive series of performative reverberations'⁵ succeed in bringing us down to all fours, in focusing our minds on the sustainability of our upland ecosystems including the lush peat bogs which in Wales as well as in Scotland are 'the lungs of our land'⁶ – the largest and most efficient natural carbon storage system absorbing the harmful carbon emissions.

These peat dominant environments provide the UK with 70% of its drinking water, play a crucial role in managing water flow and prevent flooding in the lowlands. Water and the representation of air-born or bog-born water prevails not only in the cinematic works as part of *Crossed Paths* but also in the portfolio of photography, drawing and text works on paper 'crawling' along all of the exhibition walls as a Möbius strip showing on either side of the documentary film.

To enable the crossing of paths in the exhibition, Whall calls for a multitude of voices summoned by the 'siren song of the mountain'⁷. In addition to Fforest Films and the 8 soundscape musicians (Ric Lloyd, Harriet Earis, Tim Noble, Diarmuid Johnson, Jasper Salmon, Toby Hay, Angharad Davies and Sam Christie), Whall calls for the collaborating contributions from fellow artists and scientists including Hannah Mann (photography); Zoe Skoulding (poems); Phil Smith (essays); the Whall family (plant drawings); Mariecia Fraser (plants identity); Simon Whitehead (movement artist essay); Stefhann Caddick (artist's book design) and her GPS device (map drawings).

Whall's approach to collaboration reassures us that we won't be able to make the journey towards sustainability on our own. The artist seems empowered by one of the preconditions for survival in the peaty rush bogs and heather moorlands – in the face of the fierce and unrelenting winds (both natural and man-made) which are striving to separate us and keep us alone, we need to shelter and support each other, to seek refuge in the landscape and for the landscape in us. With wild places throughout the globe now under unprecedented pressure, *Crossed Paths* can be part of a contemporary cultural environmentalism of hope. A secular moss mass.

This collective liturgy to sheep and sphagnum finds its definitive expression in Zoe Skoulding's poems which weave around each of Whall's 8 crawls, 'running sideways | or looping to infinity | a figure of eight | repeating the day's journey | in the silences between | the words stretched out | in a Möbius strip | where you can't tell | which way the landscape | will unfold itself next'⁸. Skoulding's poems chart our nuanced disengagement from the living

⁴ See G. Monbiot, 'Payments for Not Mugging Old Ladies', 5 May 2018, *George Monbiot* <http://www.monbiot.com/2018/05/05/payments-for-not-mugging-old-ladies/> (accessed on 20 May 2018)

⁵ S. Whitehead, 'Crawling, not walking...' *Crossed Paths Miranda Whall*, Oriol Davies Gallery, Newtown, 2018, p. 7

⁶ K. Polwart, *Wind Resistance*, Faber and Faber, London, 2017, p. 7

⁷ See *Mountain*, 2017 (Australia/USA/Canada/Germany/United Kingdom), directed by J. Peedom, narrated by W. Dafoe and based on *Mountains of the Mind: a History of a Fascination*, 2013 by R. Macfarlane

⁸ Z. Skoulding, 'VI', *Crossed Paths Miranda Whall*, Oriol Davies Gallery, Newtown, 2018

world echoing post-apocalyptic dreams of electric sheep⁹; evoking Dolly the sheep's body which is no longer animal not yet machine; reminding us of the wolves in sheep's clothing who pull the wool over land ownership, knitting the land 'into bleated graphs of profit and loss'.

Resonating with Whall's film and audio installation, Skoulding's poems seem to pose the question, if we lose our wildlife and natural wonders, if we lose our connections with what remains of life on Earth, would we lose the words that described what we once knew. Throughout, Skoulding repeatedly uses nearly extinct words including 'hoof, heft, wool, fleece, bleat, flock, woolly maggot, baaing, rumination, ewe, trot and pastures.' This sheep lexicon which gathers momentum in *Crawl 2* with 'the rasp of a bleat asking | where are we going | the same unanswered questions' seems to explode in *Crawl 5*: 'a fully automated system | keeps ticking over | from the red sky in the morning | to deserted glass blue hills | that fade in circles | nibbled to the root.'

Both Skoulding and Hannah Mann (who accompanied Whall with her trusted photographic camera on 7 of the 8 crawls) are fascinated by what is hardly visible such as 'a tangle of wool | caught on the wire.' Mann, though, employs the power of creative, near black and white photography to further freeze the ticking time of Whall's slow crawls. Mann's choice of distanced, almost aerial views contrast with the deep-probing, short-sighted vision of Whall's crawling body augmented into a body – all eyes. Mann's is a photographic poetic essay, which like Skoulding's poetry, also hovers above and slides sideways refusing to follow directly the hand and knee imprints left behind by Whall's performative persona. Mann's is an essay, which reveres the Cambrian mountain yet captures its indifference and disinterest in us – see Whall's persona depicted by Mann as a fluffy, fleecy speck on the horizon or a digital flicker in the vastness of time and space, too vast for us to comprehend. An essay, which powerfully documents Whall's arrivals and departures into the Cambrian Mountains yet acknowledges that these hills have been here long before we were even dreamed of. A portrait of the mountains, that watch *Crossed Paths* come and go. A portrait of the mountains, which belittle the human instinct and reveal our insignificance.

Being in the mountains ignites our astonishment not only at the world's indifference to us. It also ignites our imagination in how to deal with the profane transactions of the world. The imaginative, stream-of-consciousness texts generated by Phil Smith in response to each of Whall's 8 crawls manage to juxtapose the deep time and space of the mountains ('titan's edge' and 'sun stuck speared on a stem') with the mundane and insignificant ('blistered thumbs' and 'Argos of cameras catalogues').¹⁰

Smith's prose verse also reminds us that our responses to landscapes are for the most part culturally devised, i.e. we do not see what is there, but largely what we think is there. 'Up there on your own today, you were crawling in a crowd' is the opening line of Smith's response to Whall's *Crawl 2* and Smith goes on naming the ghost presence of at least 13 real and imaginary artists, including himself. The author continues to attribute qualities and feelings to the Cambrian landscape which it does not intrinsically possess reminding us that 'fifteen feet feels like fifteen miles', for example.

While reading Smith's close reading of the Cambrian landscape, we also tend to interpret it in the light of his and our own experience – 'the first of the slitherings dropped gently from memory', for example from *Crawl 3*. Although people have traditionally gone into wild places

⁹ See P. K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Crafton Books, London, 1986

¹⁰ P. Smith, 'Crawl 1-8', *Crossed Paths Miranda Whall*, Oriel Davies Gallery, Newtown, 2018

to escape culture or convention, they have in fact perceived that wilderness through a filter of associations – see Smith’s stream of associations with the colour purple and the flowering heather including extracts from Shiel’s novel *The Purple Cloud* (1901) in *Crawl 4*. Smith also brings ‘this moment when the camera and sheep meet’ in his associative text for *Crawl 5* which goes on to survey how *Crossed Paths* enters and differs from a long line of other contemporary and historical work re-examining how humans co-exist and connect with other living species. This re-examination comes at a point when a comprehensive study shows that the world’s 7.6 billion people represent just 0.01% of all living things. Yet since the dawn of civilisation, humanity has caused the loss of 83% of all wild mammals and half of plants, while livestock kept by humans abounds.¹¹ To Smith, Whall appears as a glimmer of environmental hope, a ‘fragile super hero in Kick-Ass goggles, red soles and black knee pads’ offering her ‘white bones to the folds of the purply-brown mountain’.

Plants, including the purple heather (‘complacent in its dominance, schooled in hardiness, grounded on acid and hard knocks, waiting for its moment, modest emperor...’ in Smith’s poetic prose from *Crawl 4*) account for 82% of all biomass on the planet – 7,500 times more than humans¹² yet the Cambrian Mountains have been dismissively dubbed a desert (including in the opening credits of the documentary *Woolly Maggot*). Now mountains are numbered among the natural world’s most exquisite forms, and artists are even willing to crawl for love of them. Whall began her crawl through the bio-diverse landscape of the peat and heather moorlands high up at Pen y Garn (601m); then she moved down through the acid grasslands and peaty rush bogs, the improved pastures and managed farmlands to finally reach the Pwllpeiran Upland Research Centre in Cwmystwyth.

If Whall’s ‘Sheepwoman, Sheepthing, the Flocking, Agnus of Wallia, the White Fleece, Woolly Avenger, Deep Sheep, Creeping Angel, Harbinger of the Hill’ seem to preoccupy Smith’s mind and our collective associative ‘soup of thoughts’, it is the plants – and in particular, a tableful of 8 clear Perspex boxes containing plant matter from each of the areas Whall crawled – which are offered centre-stage in the exhibition. These scientific samples of the living mountain temporarily uprooted from their upland environment are tended to all their water and shelter needs in the micro-climate of the gallery cum nursery. These are the samples, which make visible the inner lining of the peat bog ecosystem that has evolved over millennia, upon beds of decaying, organic matter, layers upon layers of life and death. For the non-moor-dwellers or non-scientists amongst the gallery viewers the different gradations of the samples may sound poetic. The top layer, pillowy with sphagnum and dry grasses, is simply *turf*. The next layer, white peat, which is matted with roots, seems ‘suitable only for smoke and rarely for flame’. Finally, ‘in the depths below the surface, the good black peat,

¹¹ D. Carrington, ‘Humans just 0.01% of all life but have destroyed 83% of wild mammals. Groundbreaking assessment of all life on Earth reveals humanity’s surprisingly tiny part in it as well as our disproportionate impact’, *The Guardian*, 21 May 2018, https://amp.theguardian.com/environment/2018/may/21/human-race-just-001-of-all-life-but-has-destroyed-over-80-of-wild-mammals-study?_twitter_impression=true (accessed on 22 May 2018)

¹² Ibid

rich and dense, almost edible – the consistency of chocolate brownie which dries to a hard cake for the fire.¹³

While contemplating matters of life and death, the gallery viewer could encounter the research team at the Pwllpeiran Upland Research Centre who did not only identify, cut, dig up and label the sample plants. The team, led by Dr Mariecia Fraser, provided the botanical descriptions complete with the Latin names to accompany the plant drawings on the gallery walls. They hosted the artist's residency throughout the crawling summer and autumn of 2017. The research team also contributed to a recorded discussion following the sneak preview of Whall's films featured in the exhibition – accessible via a pair of headphones attached to the display table as an extension of the plant roots and mycelia.

Academic research teams like Pwllpeiran Upland Research Centre, are working with a range of partners, including Whall, to develop a sustainable future for the uplands in Wales. Bringing the uplands under both an ecologically and economically sustainable land management programme is one of the key challenges facing policy makers, rural communities and upland managers at present. Compared to other ecosystems, our overall understanding of the uplands is in its infancy and the art, science and ethics ethos of Whall's project could only shift this understanding a bit further. Although the mountains do not seek our art and science, nor do they seek anything from us, they do shift the way we see ourselves – 'they weather our spirits, challenge our arrogance, restore our wonder. More than ever we need their wildness.'¹⁴

Coming back to earth from crawling up the mountains may induce a feeling of being a stranger bearing experiences that are beyond expression and beyond price. To counteract this sentiment, Whall feels compelled to bring into the exhibition her own thoughts alongside another seminal text, which could encompass these experiences. These additional texts are given further grounding by slithering them on the gallery floor or the edge of the display tables as creepy-crawly vinyl letterings in both English and Welsh. 'To go deeply into a place is to briefly be in it like something else. | To know fully one field or one land is a lifetime's experience. | In the world of poetic experience it is depth that counts and not width'. These are extracts from Nan Shepherd's short book, *The Living Mountain*, which she wrote in the 1940s in the midst of the Second World War and upon which her posthumous reputation largely rests. Crossing paths with Shepherd, Whall literally and metaphorically internalises the writer's views into her own when stating on the gallery floor: 'Through the many lenses on my body, 'my eye could see what it didn't see before or see in a new way what it had already seen.'

Unlike Whall, Shepherd relied largely on her own unaided sight and on altering the position of her head for a different kind of world to be made to appear. However, for both Whall and Shepherd, it is the journey rather than the destination that matters most. For both, the mountains are living entities, beings in themselves, which speak to those with ears to listen and eyes to see. For both, the mountains provide a picture of the world in which the artists,

¹³ C. Flynn, 'For Peat's Sake. Review of *The Dark Stuff: Stories From The Peatlands* by Donald S Murray', *The Scottish Review of Books*, 2 June 2018
<https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2018/06/for-peats-sake/> (accessed on 2 June 2018)

¹⁴ See *Mountain*, 2017 (Australia/USA/Canada/Germany/United Kingdom) Directed by J. Peedom, narrated by W. Dafoe and based on *Mountains of the Mind: a History of a Fascination*, 2013 by R. Macfarlane

we, are not the focal point, the focal point is the landscape. The landscape is the subject and those who look and listen are the object from which and because of which the landscape is seen and heard:

'From the close-up springs of heather to the most distant fold of the land, each detail stands erect in its own validity. In no other way have I seen in my own unaided sight that the earth is round. As I watch, it arches its back, and each layer of landscape bristles – though bristles is a word of too much commotion for it. [...] This is how the earth must see itself.¹⁵

If Shepherd is recognised for intercepting the flow of male-dominated mountain literature¹⁶ mostly focussed on the goal of the summit, Whall should be seen as belonging to the new generation of women artists who continue to bravely explore the mountains on earth in their bracingly different, aimless and sensual way. To these pioneering women artists, the call to adventure of a new, intense and self-effacing kind is irresistible and it is perhaps by no coincidence that Shepherd's 'own' Cairngorm plateau summons Whall next for the second part of her trilogy *Crossed Paths*. Because the mountains we crawl are not made only of sheep and sphagnum but also of dreams and desire. The mountains we crawl are the mountains of our cultural environmental hope.

¹⁵ N. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, Cannongate Books, Edinburgh, 2011, pp. 10-11

¹⁶ A. Taylor, 'I To the Hills. Review of Into the Mountain. A life of Nan Shepherd by Charlotte Peacock', *Scottish Review of Books*, 18 November 2017, <https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2017/11/i-to-the-hills/> (accessed 1 June 2018)