

PAUL HART

DRAINED : Looking for Belonging in the Fens

Tim Butcher

Good landscape photography has an uncanny quality. It can turn our gaze inward as well as outward, leading us to question our sense of place and belonging. More than mere escape from contemporary urban life, the land can offer us connection to something much greater than ourselves spatially and historically. In **Notes From Walnut Tree Farm**, Roger Deakin suggests that “in the Middle Ages people were on the land - on it, in it - in a way that we simply are not today. We live our lives outside the land. We stay off it, mostly” (p. 51). So perhaps what landscape photography can do is reconnect us.

Published in 2018, DRAINED is the second in a series of three books by Paul Hart that draw our attention to the post-industrial landscape of the Fens, which span almost 1,500 square miles of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Lincolnshire in the east of England. These fertile former marshlands were drained in the 18th and 19th centuries to radically transform them into farmland that fed the industrial revolution. Hart’s first book FARMED, to some extent shows what is now left behind. From the bleak row of houses along Gedney Main Road (p.45) to the hollow-looking Wesleyan Chapel (p.97), we are shown a land once used and then discarded by human progress. DRAINED doesn’t just extend this narrative, it deepens it by leading further into the Fens along the waterways and roads we know to be man-made, and yet which feel so far from the modern world we now inhabit. Where Sea Lane (p.51) leads the eye along a partially flooded old thoroughfare towards nowhere in particular, Lime Tree Farm (p.57) feels like the world’s end with a human figure on a bicycle guiding an unbridled horse past a bricked up chapel-cum-barn. Together the images in DRAINED say something to me about ideas of space and time in relation to human history.

Robert MacFarlane wrote a fascinating essay called **Ghost Species**, with photographs by Justin Partyka, published in **Granta 102** about life today on the Fens. I am reluctant to refer to it as contemporary, because the present seems to collapse into the past further those authors venture into the Fens. There is a timeless but forgotten quality to the lives of the people that Macfarlane and Partyka met. I get a similar sense of otherworldliness from the uncanniness of Paul Hart’s landscape photography.

In *DRAINED* Hart leads us along the seemingly endless man-made lines of Fenland drains, roads, telegraph lines, and ploughed furrows that are like incredible scars on the land. I feel compelled to pause and look into each image - I feel I recognise it, but I don't know it. The longer I look, the deeper I am drawn in. I am left with more questions than answers.

The images in *DRAINED*, as in each of Hart's previous books are exceptionally well-considered, both individually and in their sequencing. Hart's black and white analogue process extends from exposing the negative to making the final print. His crafted images are masterfully produced to arrest the reader just enough to invoke the uncanny but not too much to unsettle. As testament to Hart's craftsmanship he won the inaugural Wolf Suschitzky Photography prize in 2018, for images from both *DRAINED* and *FARMED* books.

DRAINED to my mind, is a book of landscape photography that has the ability to transport us to spaces recognisably marked by human endeavour but devoid of familiar everyday activity. The images depict a stark uncanniness. I would like to suggest that it is in viewing such intersections between the strange and the familiar that we begin to question the world around us - what has gone before us, what is to come, and thus our own sense of belonging in it all. Paul Hart offers us images that can situate us in such moments of critical contemplation. If, like me, you are drawn inward as well as outward through landscape photography, *DRAINED* is essential reading.

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1 Deakin, R.(2009) *Notes from Walnut Tree Farm*. Penguin Books

2. Macfarlane, R & Partyka, J. (2008) *Ghost Species* in *Granta* 102. London : Granta Publications
p.p 109-128 <https://granta.com/ghost-species>, accessed 11/3/2019.