



Max Colson

The Green and Pleasant Land

24 November – 21 December



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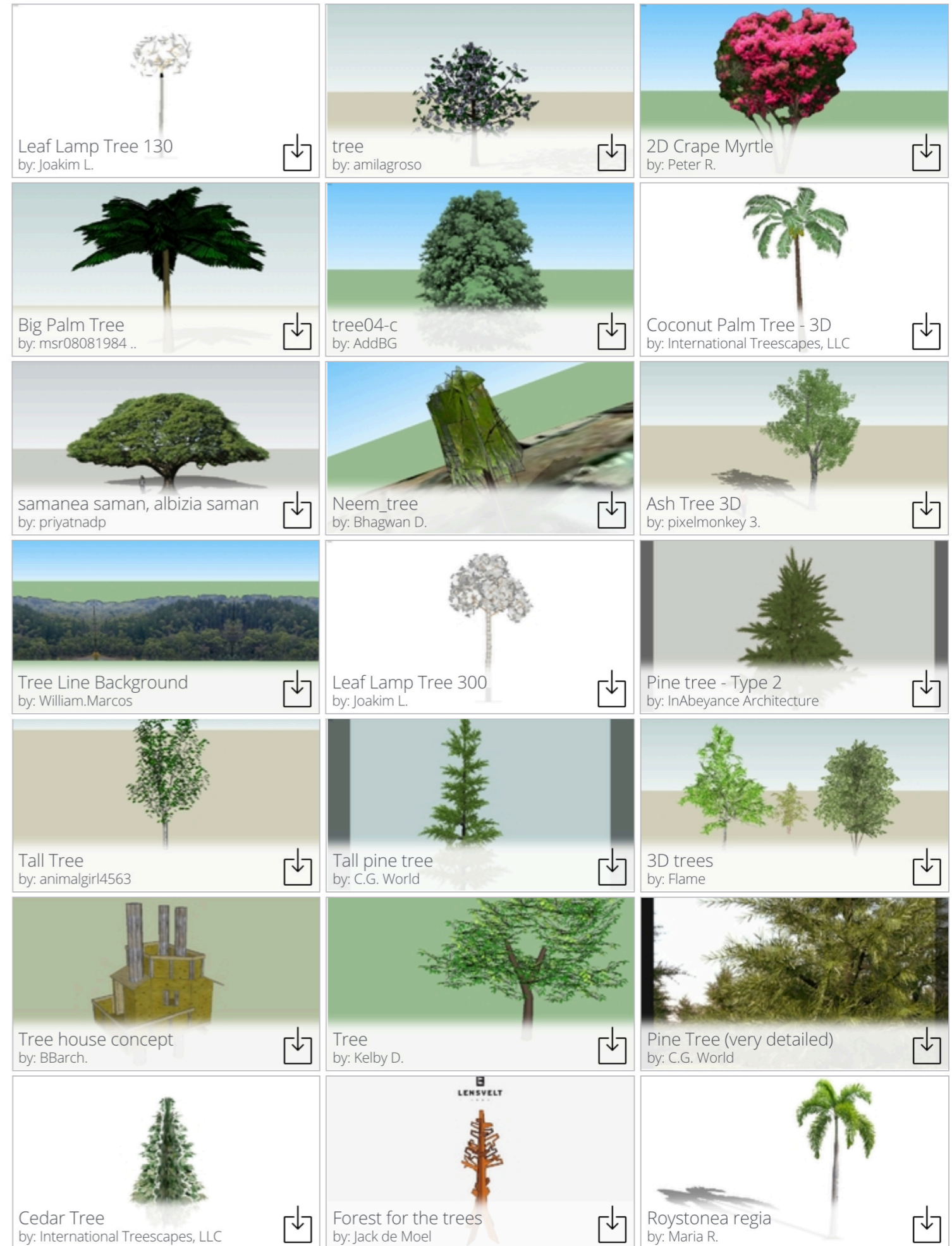


arebyte Gallery is pleased to announce *The Green and Pleasant Land*, a new animated short film by the artist Max Colson.

The Green and Pleasant Land is the outcome of Colson's residency period at the gallery earlier this year.

During his residency, Colson started by investigating how architecture, urban planning, and real estate developments operate peripherally and within cities, and how they will influence social relations and the environment in post-Brexit Britain.

The exhibition ultimately questions place and identity; *The Green and Pleasant Land* is a site where opinion, memory, history and highly charged emotion are given form, and are opened up for discussion and critique.





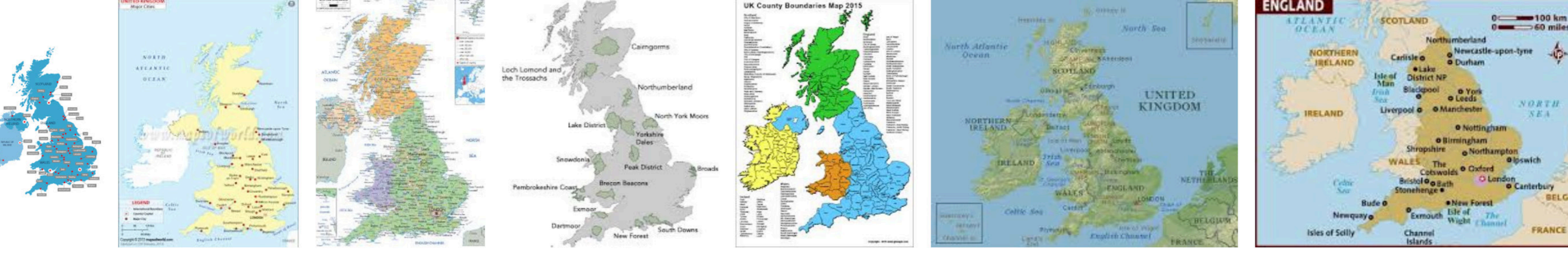
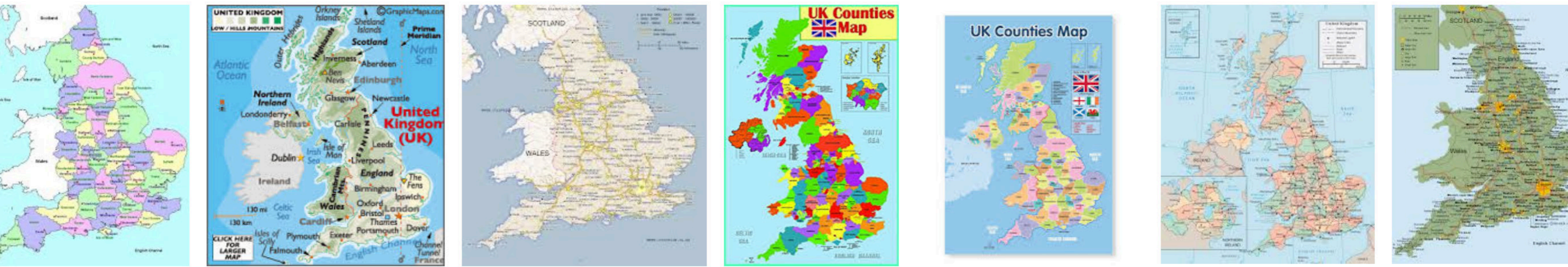
about Max Colson



Max Colson is a London based artist using 3D animated film and photography to explore extraordinary narratives concerning architecture and landscape.

His film *Construction Lines* was the winner of the Fiction Short category at this year's Architecture Film Festival in London and has also won the Tenderflix 2017 International Experimental Film and Video Competition, organised by Tenderpixel Gallery in November 2017. His films have been selected to screen in a variety of film festivals including Aesthetica Short Film Festival, Architecture Film Festival Rotterdam, Milano Film Festival and Kassel Dokfest (all 2017). His first solo exhibition was hosted at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London (2015). He has also exhibited his work in shows across Europe including Showroom MAMA in Rotterdam (2016), Noorderlicht Photogallery in Groningen (2015), and C/O Berlin (2014). His work has been featured in a broad range of publications across architecture, design and photography, including *Icon* (2015), *Architecture Today* (2015) and *Vice* (2016).

He teaches on the MA Graphic Communication Design at Central Saint Martins in London and is a graduate of the London College of Communication's MA Photojournalism and Documentary Photography.





Taking as its subject our different perceptions of the British landscape, the film is a roaming exploration of our national identity and collective history. Using a 3D model of the United Kingdom, a variety of visual scenarios – poignant, nostalgic and absurd - are enacted using a 'live' animation technique. These scenes draw directly on user comments found below the line of videos and online newspaper articles concerning the English and British countryside.

What emerges is a meditation on the British landscape – both as an imaginary vision and as a new world digitally constructed. Colson's animation practice draws mainly on his concurrent interests in digital architectural visualisation, landscape planning and video game walkthroughs.

The latter is a popular genre of YouTube film making in which one user walks through the completion of a video game, identifying hidden obstacles and tricks, to help other users do the same. Colson's video work increasingly draws on the techniques found in these online videos to show the construction of specific architectures and landscapes, while exploring the speculative viewpoints of the 'users' who inhabit these spaces.



HERITAGE

KELVEDON & FEERING SCOUT GROUP
CARNIVAL & FETE
10th June 2017

Procession
starts 1pm

Fete starts 2.15pm
at Scout Headquarters

The Green and Pleasant Land by Tom Jeffreys

“Caring for our environment” – the fourth word marked out in green on the side of a pick-up truck. If there has been one lesson from the Brexit campaign it’s not to trust slogans on the sides of vehicles. In this case, it’s not the mythical £350 million per week that Boris Johnson promised to the NHS, but the motto of Ground Control, an Essex-based contractor that specialises, its website proclaims, in “arboriculture”. This is less about the care and cultivation of woodland (which the word’s etymology might suggest); for Ground Control, “arboriculture” means cutting down trees.

By the Harvil Road in Harefield, northwest of London, Ground Control is just one of the companies involved in the destruction of suburban green-belt woodland to prepare the way for HS2. This is the controversial high-speed railway between London and Birmingham that will cost UK taxpayers at least £55.7 billion according to official (contested) estimates. On the other side of the road, a small group of protesters have pitched a pair of tents on the verge – a sad, bright huddle of tea and activism.

In November 2015 I walked the route of HS2 – 119 miles as the drone might fly, many more than that as the incompetent map-reader trudges, limps, dithers, backtracks... My experiences of the journey – detailed in *Signal Failure* (Influx Press, 2017) cleave closely with those of artist Max Colson during his research for *The Green and Pleasant*

Land (2017), a new film that examines the complexities of national identity and its seemingly sudden return to prominence. The film continues Colson’s fascination with the relationships between architecture and access, nature and surveillance, cities and control. Through a practice that spans photography, film, animation and speculative design, Colson’s previous projects have involved assuming an alter-ego to document the use of environmental design in crime prevention (*Hide and Seek*, 2013); concealing a CCTV camera behind indoor plants, in collaboration with artist Ollie Palmer (*CRM v1.14*, 2015); and appropriating imagery from development marketing (*Images of Enjoyment and Spectacle*, 2015). More recently, Colson’s animated film, *Construction Lines* (2017) – produced with 3D architectural drawing software – re-appropriated complaints by local residents to imagine the life of a “gentleman” in the proposed subterranean hideaway of his Knightsbridge mansion. The film was named best fiction short at the Architecture Film Festival London and won the Tenderflix Prize in 2017.

Like *Construction Lines*, Colson’s latest film also makes use of vocal opposition against proposed (or imagined) changes. *The Green and Pleasant Land* began as an exploration of the green belt – the name given to those loops of land around many of the UK’s urban areas conceived in the 1930s to limit urban growth and protect areas for agriculture, forestry and outdoor leisure. As calls grow to lift green belt restrictions and allow houses and other developments, Colson travelled through the Essex green belt, looking and listening. There he found fierce defenders. But, he asked, what exactly are they trying to defend? This is the question – or one of them – at the heart of Colson’s strange, funny, depressingly perceptive film.

The Green and Pleasant Land opens with a silhouette of the United Kingdom, filled in with the red, white and blue of the Union Flag. That single image captures the central lie that has given nationalism its power: the tie of blood to soil. The naturalisation of nationality, the nationalisation of nature. As if the very rocks bleed British.

Atop the flag is selected a layer of green from among the countless options offered by a Google image search. Again, this simple gesture points to a complex question: what exactly is meant by “green space”? What makes the green belt green? National parks; public spaces; nature reserves or sites of special scientific interest; football pitches; golf courses; country estates; overgrown scrubland; disused railway; the pristine lawns of white, middle-class suburbia; landfill: some greens are more equal than others. I once read that Hackney is the “greenest” borough in London. Whether that referred to public parks or the council’s recycling policy I have no idea. It’s almost like it didn’t matter.

With nature neatly in place, the film’s absent animator chooses historical objects to place in this pristine England (for this is largely an Anglocentric Britain). Overdetermined symbols of national identity: a manor house, a telephone box, a black horse rampant. There is no meaningful relationship between them. Instead we see the rigid edges of a flower meadow, a ridiculous ring of sheep around a hill, a cow stuck in a river. Each highlights the ridiculousness of building “Britain” from scratch or of capturing its essence. In amongst it all is placed a wholesome family. The child points: England is a

place to be visited, looked at, *appreciated*. But where do people work in such an England? Where do people live? Industrialisation is “our gift to the world”. But the world beyond these shores exists only in the form of a Roman pot or Egyptian statuary. So British! The twentieth century never happened here.

The format of Colson’s film foregrounds its own processes of construction, echoing the techniques he developed in *Construction Lines*. Made using a 3D-modelling programme called Sketchup Pro, and appropriating pre-made components from its open-source 3D Warehouse library, Colson places the viewer in the role of a post-war town planner or God creating Eden. The movements of a mouse suggest the thoughts and decision-making of an unseen authority. Comments sourced from across the internet point to the faceless ferocity of online debate. Colson shows their passion, suggests origins. His occasional ridicule is a serious response.

In so doing, Colson demonstrates that nationalism, but also every narrative we tell about ourselves, involves a process of selection and exclusion. Every way of thinking about what Britain is and means, of what we cherish in a place, is a product of history, and is therefore subject to change over time. The church spires, for example, that one commenter claims as inviolate British heritage were a feature of the Gothic style imported from France from the Middle Ages. Celebrated Victorian nature writer Richard Jefferies hated them. Then again, just because our values are socially and historically constructed, that does not make it less valuable.

By forming a collage from pre-existing options, the film gives new life to that famous argument expounded by *Karl Marx in The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852):

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.

The potency of Marx's words is not dimmed but realised anew by new technologies: data banks and news filters, personalised search algorithms, the internet of things. Each new technology offers new tools for both freedom and control. Google predicts our desires. Colson's trawl through online comments, message boards and social media shows the effects that such platforms have upon the nature of discussion (and the discussion of nature). Would online abusers say what they say face-to-face? How many are even people? But then nationalism is not new, nor hatred nor war. The easiest enemy to hate is the one we never meet.

The Green and Pleasant Land offers us the view from above, the view from where decisions are made. This is the view that science has long adopted (economics too); it is the view I was shown of the HS2 route when I visited engineers Arup in 2016. But nobody exists outside of place, outside of time. And nowadays, even road-side protesters have access to the latest technology. At the Stop HS2 protest camp in Harefield, I'm surprised that one of the activists is using a drone-mounted camera to provide footage for local news channels. I'm told that the contractors have been using an illegal signal jammer to stop him. I'm told too that I really ought to meet Islamophobe fascist Anne-Marie Waters, "a lovely lady". If Brexit has sliced the country in half one way, then HS2 does so in quite another. Where is the centre now? And where the fringes?

"This is our land. We have not taken it nor are we going to give it away," says the film's final commenter. But perhaps the very act of saying "our" is an act of taking: "our environment", "our gift", "our land". Watching Colson's film, a second question arises: is it possible to cherish a place, to defend it against unwanted change, without resorting to myths of nationalism or supremacy or exclusion or racism? Without resorting to words like "proper", "genuine", "natural"? Is it possible to make a convincing case for the mixed and the multi-layered? Belonging without ownership. Community without an external enemy. "Us" without "them". Many have tried; many must keep trying.

Tom Jeffreys is a writer and editor. His first book, 'Signal Failure: London to Birmingham, HS2 on Foot' is published by Influx Press.





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