

Documenting the Anthropocene: after the celebratory and the horrific, can we begin to posit the emergence of positive anthroposcenery?

Abstract

Anthropocene: the era of humans. Anthroposcenic: landscapes 'deemed to mark an Anthropocene epoch' (Matliss, 2018). In this essay I will explore the notion of anthroposcenery; its evolution from the celebration of human achievement through emergence as a class of artistic enterprise, to commentary on our role in the destruction of our habitable biosphere. Then I will consider the arguably more feminine posture of positivity in architecture and conserving of resources. Finally, I will present the notion of positive anthroposcenery in which art represents human-scale change rather than apocalyptic reflections.

There is debate about when the Anthropocene era began but arguably it is at the point at which humans become part of the geological record, affecting the planet as never before. Radioactive sediment from early nuclear tests may serve as an example. Prior to this, it was geology and cosmology that determined the survival and evolution of species; now it is us. Anthroposcenery is art emblematic of environmental transformation by humans and while it has a short history under that banner, I would argue that it has been with us since we first learned how to build and to make artistic representations of ourselves and our buildings.

The majority of this early period of art was celebratory, showing off our skills and our capacity to manipulate the environment to our own needs. From paintings of edifices reflecting our relationship with deities (eg Filippo Lippi's 1449-1459 Annunciation,) to images arising out of the industrial revolution, such as David Birchall's (2020) Ribblehead Viaduct, which carves a new horizon across rolling Yorkshire hills. These are depictions of our triumphant supremacy as a species.

Filippo Lippi: [Fra Filippo Lippi | The Annunciation | NG666 | National Gallery, London](#)
 Ribblehead Viaduct: [Ribblehead Viaduct, Yorkshire. Photograph by David Birchall \(pixels.com\)](#)

Paul Nash, a man connected to nature via his love of trees, saw things differently. In his 2011 essay, *Cultivating Dead Trees; the legacy of Paul Nash as an Artist of trauma, wilderness, and recovery*, Gough cites Abbot and Bertram, 1955, who quote Nash as saying he has 'tried ... to paint trees as though they were human beings'. Elsewhere he notes how, to Nash, 'half the [first world] war is the memory of trees'. Nash often painted dead trees in profound reflection of unnecessary mortality.

Gough also describes the work of Gail Ritchie who, in a work entitled 'Wounded Poppies' named each flower after Irish and Northern Irish soldiers shot at dawn during the Great War (Ritchie, 2010). I found this work extraordinarily moving in its simple expression of those dreadful losses.

Paul Nash: [Paul Nash 1889–1946 | Tate](#)
 Wounded Poppies: [2009 \(gailritchie.com\)](#)

But while these are documentations of war and its consequences; violent and obvious; Julian Perry takes aim at much more subtle and often slow moving consequence of anthropocentrism – the erosion of the East coast of Yorkshire. In a piece written to accompany Perry's 2010 exhibition, Paul Gough discusses Perry's dedicated embedding of himself in these landscapes, making poignant and sometimes surreal reference to the social and physical impact of land loss. Time scale here is critical because it is too slow to register unless properly observed and starkly documented. Artistic imagery allows for that visual record.

Julian Perry: [Testament 2004 — Julian Perry and 'Caravan Holiday' The Anthroposcenic: Landscape in the Anthropocene | Issue 10 - November 2018 | Issues | British Art Studies](#)

Cheetham, in his 2018 paper, shows us Loutherbourg's 1801 Coalbrookdale by Night as an exemplar of images that celebrate industrial progress but represent power and excess. My first thought was that this was a scene from Dante's Inferno and not an icon of pride. This era is a watershed; the demonstrable onset of our impact on our environment. But it brought such benefits that we barely noticed until we began to choke.

Loutherbourg: [Coalbrookdale by Night | Science Museum Group Collection](#)

Art and architecture have been, and still are, dominated by men so it should not be surprising that scenes of power and grandeur, possession and status have followed us through to our current world where building bigger, taller, shinier, and more remote from the human scale has been the prevailing driver. We live now in the context of cities with labour pulled from rural areas into offices so that food provision is 'outsourced' to other kinds of factories. People are on trains for hours each day instead of invigorating their local community or benefiting from immersion in a greener ecology,

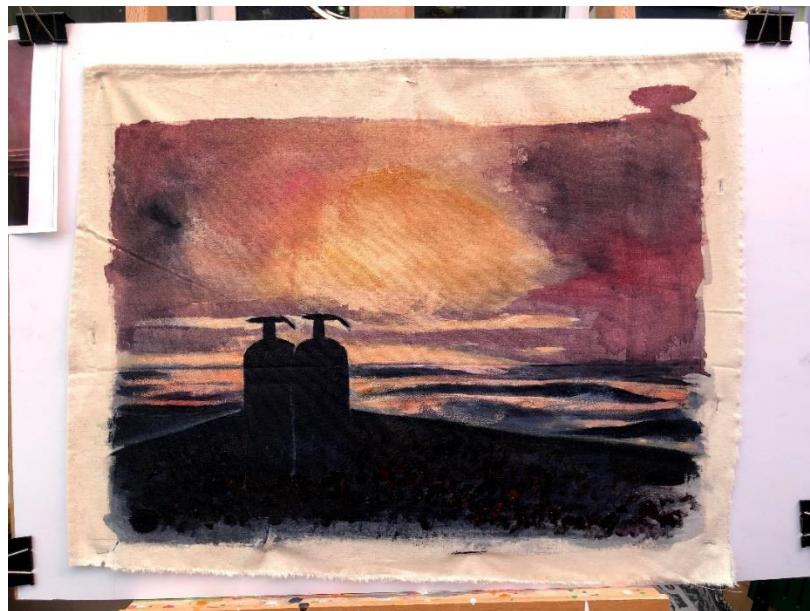
and of course art should reflect this. But I have been wondering what happens to morale or the capacity for making change when everything reminds us of how negligent we have been while still celebrating the muscular art that preceded it.

I remember watching the science fiction film, Bladerunner in 1982 and, sci fi fan that I am, thinking throughout that there were no cushions anywhere in these angular, uncomfortable, edifices. Where were the women? I expected the 2017 sequel (Bladerunner 2049) to have remedied this but it had not. Bladerunner is set in a man's world and it is designed according to a masculine template of dominance, power, and intimidation. Latterly, the colours; dark, reddish, and brooding; brought to mind Casper David Friedrich's (1830-1835) painting, *Evening Landscape with Two Men*. This is a stark image in which two cloaked figures in hats look out over a darkened and featureless landscape. They stand on a high point in that landscape, somehow above it but also a part of it. Are they priests? Is there some religious connotation to this? Or is it a simple secular scene of a sunset, ruddied by the late setting sun?

Evening Landscape with Two Men: [File:Caspar David Friedrich - Evening Landscape with Two Men - WGA8284.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)

I used this painting, copied and subverted it to meet an exercise in an earlier module. Driven by that atmosphere which, to me, was forbidding, the figures became sanitiser bottles. Prominent and silhouetted against that ruddy sky, they seemed icons of our survival, there being nothing else at this point with which to face a global and existential threat. Death seemed to be everywhere, but our attacker was invisible.

I tried to mimic the brush strokes, to blend the colours, and to recreate the atmosphere of the original so as to give this 21st century version the weight it needed to carry for its symbolic purpose.



But the image and my repainting of it seemed to trigger, or allow to breathe, other changes. The most prominent the very thing that proscribed old work practices and instituted new ones. COVID. Suddenly the human scale was prioritised by necessity and travel minimised for the same reasons. People began to value a softer way of working and living.

This kind of thinking could not have happened without the work of artists and architects first demonstrating these different ways. Zaha Hadid, for instance, made designs for buildings that, while huge, were also curved, softer in presentation, in lighting, in presence, despite also being huge. In Milan and many other cities, other architects designed buildings that support plant life, a strategy that not only cools buildings and the streets below but seems likely also to improve the mental health of the people living, working, or operating in and around them.

Zaha Hadid: [Zaha Hadid - Wikipedia](#)

Milan: trees on balconies [Milan plants a new forest in the sky - Architecture Lab](#)

[Remarkable Buildings That Use Trees as a Design Element | Architectural Digest](#)

Siobhan Lyons, however, in her 2020 article for Arena, has criticised many of these developments as no better than other instances of anthropocentric behaviour in that many of the edifices were not maintained and, in fact, some of the 'vegetation' was artificial. The trees in Gardens by the Bay,

Singapore for instance, which mimic the process of photosynthesis using human-made artefacts. She regards these 'heavily choreographed scenery' and far from helpful in achieving effective change.

In researching anthroposcenic art, it seems to me that it is stuck in negativity which, at its worst, is horrifyingly apocalyptic. Russell Carey's 2021 work for instance, Bettina Furnee's 2005 Lines of Defence, and John Gerrard's 2017/19 Western Flag. And what do we make of Gormley's metal men on the beach which he hopes will last a thousand years (Pidd, 2021)? How are we supposed to act in the face of these horrors? Do they indicate a way forward or just leave us helpless? At best these pieces drop thinly veiled hints, like a parent saying loudly that they wish 'SOMEONE' would pick up around here. We run from the first, overwhelmed by the message, and walk away from the second because the message does not mean us.

Banksy's (2015) Dismaland exemplifies for me the political and social messaging that underpins so many of these works, and while Brian Alfred's animations seem relatively gentle, one showing a protest on a bridge, another with multiple instances of human encroachment into the natural world, they are 2D nags that remind us of our negligence; latter day Bladerunners highlighting disruptions and encroachments rather than positive and feasible action we could all take to some degree or another.

I have a mantra about a man throwing starfish back into the sea. There are thousands of them, and the task seems never ending. Another man, passing by, asks him why he is bothering, he can't possibly save all of them. The first man picks up another starfish and throws it back into the sea; no, he says, but I have saved that one. The second man nods, then reaches down and picks up a starfish. It is an illustration of the importance of small contributions, and it concerns me that in focusing on the awfulness we have created, we may be alienating ourselves from any sense of hope that we can effect change.

Brian Alfred: [Animations — Brian Alfred](#)

Dismaland: [\(1\) Dismaland: inside Banksy's dystopian playground - YouTube](#)

Russell Carey: 2021 anthroposcenic exhibition at [Rogue Pop-up Gallery \(roguepopup.com.au\)](#)

Bettina Furnee: 2005 [Lines of Defence by Bettina Furnée | The New English Landscape \(wordpress.com\)](#)

John Gerrard: Western Flag (Spindletop, Texas) 2017/2019 Desert X video [John Gerrard - Western Flag \(Spindletop, Texas\) 2017 / 2019 Desert X - YouTube](#)



Figure 1 own photograph, Brighton sea front, 2017.

There are brighter lights. Sculptures made from waste materials, although that in itself has an edge, and Liz Hickok's use of augmented reality (AR) people can access while viewing some of her pieces and which show for instance, how crystals grow to make remarkable natural designs (see [Home / lizhickok](#)). The new architecture, where that succeeds in properly ecologising itself, and managing the human scale while still being large, has the potential to reduce energy costs and provide health benefits via lower ambient temperatures and better air quality, but as Lyons (2020) points out, these efforts need to be genuine and sustainable rather than show pieces.

In the spirit of Nash's relationship with trees, the natural rewilding project described by Broughton (2021) demonstrates a less interventionist approach to ecological matters; and although it remains anthropocentric in that we, as a species, made it happen, it happens slowly, in its own way and at its own pace. This feels to me to be a way forward. Working not to frighten people or guilt-trip them but to nudge with positivity and show what can be done. A paper from 2001 by Ruiter et al indicates that fear may interfere with precautionary action in the context of health; and while another, directly related to climate change, discusses a worrying lack of fear in most people, the authors place this in the context of timescale and, to interpret the text, a sense of powerlessness in the face of the immensity of the problem (Loewenstein and Schwartz, 2010). This is the one starfish at a time problem and the need to validate the reality that small actions can make a difference.

In terms of artistic effort, the ability to make explicit those prolonged timescales seems important, as does the positioning of creative thinking to show growth and benefit over that time. Art seems to me to be well placed to visualise positive scientific effort such that more of us can 'see what they mean' when they talk about the cumulative effects of small interventions.

Conclusion

The Anthropocene epoch as a planetary event is only recently named but has arguably been in existence since humans first impacted its geology by moving stones from their place of origin to a building site. As evidenced by art, we have for centuries celebrated our buildings, industry, and

impact on the natural world by painting the products of our enterprise and positioning ourselves within and in front of them. Latterly though, art has joined science in sounding the alarm as to the consequences of our essential narcissism and produced dystopian images that show us what we have done. Unfortunately, messages of impending disaster are only really successful if they can also show us hope; small human scale things we can do in mitigation. There exists a will for this, albeit sometimes flawed (cf the Milan building projects), and this to me suggests there is a place for positive anthroposcenery – art that shows us the possible and the hopeful.

There was a meme in the early months of the pandemic when the air cleared as traffic melted away:

- *But we can't possibly do anything about climate change!*
- *Here's a virus, practice.*

Word count: 2058 of 2000 +/- 100 excluding text boxes, references, and title.

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Additional link: [10 Inspirational and Architectural Lessons from Zaha Hadid | Boca do Lobo's inspirational world](#)

The starfish story. There are various versions of this, some featuring a man, some a boy, and others a girl. I have been unable to find one that also features a person joining in at the end so I am hoping maybe I added that myself. This link goes to just one version: [The Starfish Story | Academic Therapy Center.](#)

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