

And the night was kind. 'Ruskin's Ponds' book works by John Woodman

Article

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Images from the book *Ruskin's Pond* - John Woodman 2010, UniPress Cumbria
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And the night was kind
Ruskin's Ponds, book works by John Woodman

Ciara Healy

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution two very different relationships with Nature have developed in the West: one of co-existence and one of control. These opposing approaches are connected to the pendulum swing between rationalistic and romantic viewpoints, an inevitable consequence of the dialectic movement of Western history since the Industrial Revolution. However, over the last century this fluctuation has slowly begun to solidify into the notion that there is a place for nature and a place for culture. As we become irreparably more urban, nature becomes increasingly confined to the rolling hills of ladybird books and biscuit tin lids. It has all but lost its companion, culture, to the smoggy sprawl of the city. They are slowly and inevitably, becoming binary opposites in the contemporary collective conscience.

In recent years, many artists and writers have attempted to overcome this separation in order to show that it is a false construct. John Woodman's dual bookwork *Ruskin's Pond A Photographic Study* (2010) and *Of Truth of Water from Modern Painters* (Editor) is one such example.

The bookwork is made up of two hardbound volumes, both covered in illustrated dust jackets with photographic reflections of trees and leaves from Ruskin's Pond in Denmark Hill, London. These photographic images, taken by John Woodman over a period of a year, capture sequences of changing light, the movement of the seasons and weather conditions on the surface of the water.

Ruskin's Pond A Photographic Study is a 60-page meditative and interwoven representation of technology, nature and culture. Operating together, these images visualise a critical discourse that began with the poetry of Clare, Milton, Blake and Ruskin himself. They engender and provoke a sense of wonder, becoming the here and now of nature as opposed to the 'representation' of it. This is because they offer a concrete experience in their own right, as credible an equivalent for the events that unfold in front of and inside of the rolling camera. The camera being the machine that absorbs images at the same speed as perception, as well as, perhaps, our own consciousness.

The second volume in this body of work is titled *Of Truth of Water from Modern Painters* and includes introductory essays by Heather Birchall, Howard Hull and Mark Haywood. This book reproduces three chapters from Volume 1 of John Ruskin's major work *Modern Painters*, and focuses in particular on how painters

have represented water. The three accompanying essays elucidate on *Of Truth of Water* and relocate Ruskin's ideas within a contemporary context, thus reconnecting Ruskin's respect for Nature with culture.

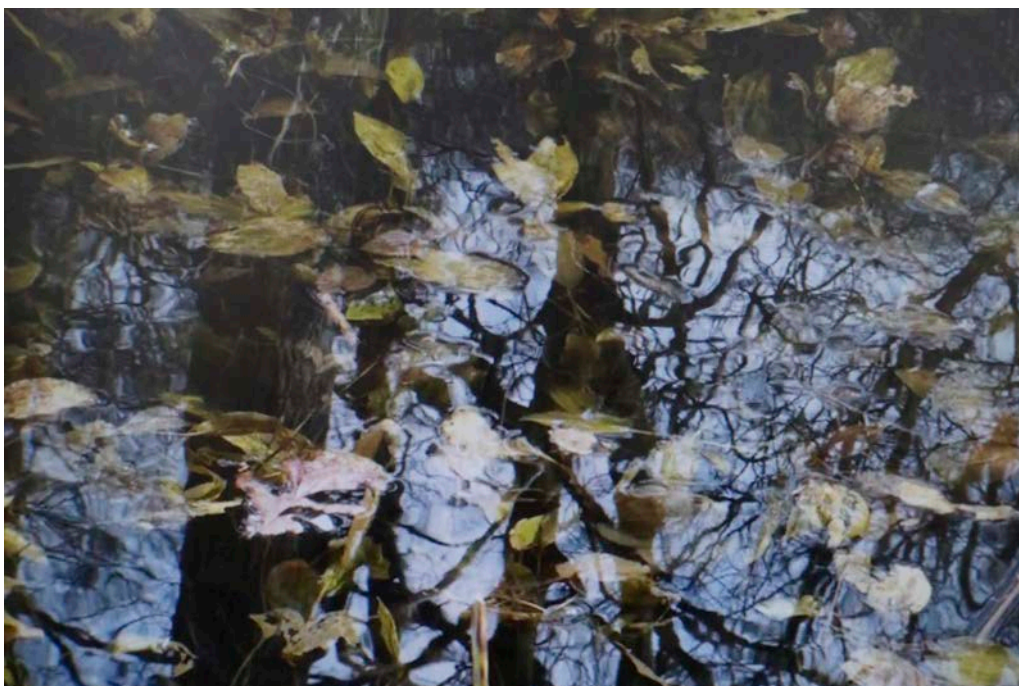
Published by Unipress Cumbria, these two volumes collectively contribute to the revival of the aesthetic and theoretical interests Woodman held when making his real time film works in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A period of time, like now, of economic instability, social discontent and a burgeoning frustration that social and environmental issues are of little relevance to political agendas of the day. Whilst Woodman's work is not political, the fact that his early films are now gaining a renewed recognition amongst new audiences is a hopeful indication that the relationship between nature and culture has become a philosophical and creative concern once more.

Woodman spent many months between 2008 - 2012 recording the effects of light and changing seasons on Ruskin's ponds at Denmark Hill and Brantwood using a fixed frame, hand held camera in both video and photographic formats. Compositionally, the images in this book reference Palmer, Turner, Constable and Impressionists such as Cezanne, Pissarro and Monet. All of whom engaged in some way with the relationship between light, water and perception. Their aesthetic is almost impossible to erase from the consciousness of the contemporary Western artist and the ways in which they represented and depicted spaces using paint is echoed in Woodman's photographic compositions.

With every turn of the page, these images of ripples and shadows become more beautiful and mystical than one could initially have imagined them to be. This is because the viewer observes not only what is occurring on the page but also what is taking place within themselves. Light moving slowly across the surface of water can induce a change in one's breathing, a momentary transcendental state of acute awareness, a form of enchantment.

This sense of enchantment bears a close relationship to the writings of Paracelsus, who cultivated a form of perception that involved meticulous attentiveness to the singular specificity of things, and, in doing so, opened up the possibility of seeing one thing mirrored in another. He marvelled, for example, at how the light of the stars could be repeated in the twinkle of the eyes of those we might love:

Just as the sun shines through a glass, so the stars penetrate one another in the body. For the sun and the moon and all planets, as well as all the stars and the whole chaos, are in man.



April 2010 *Brantwood*. Still from the series of videos 'Ruskin's Ponds' - John Woodman, 2012.
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January 2011 (1) *Brantwood*. Still from the series of videos 'Ruskin's Ponds' - John Woodman, 2012.
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March 2011 *Brantwood*. Still from the series of videos 'Ruskin's Ponds' - John Woodman, 2012.
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February 2012 (2) *Denmark Hill*. Still from the series of videos 'Ruskin's Ponds' - John Woodman, 2012.
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Images from the book *Ruskin's Pond* - John Woodman 2010, UniPress Cumbria
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Both the image, its reflection and the artist therefore tread what Robert Macfarlane describes as a 'visionary threshold' – an uncertain space where separation is impossible. For Deleuze, enchantment takes place when things overlap, when wondrous marvels of metamorphoses happen between animal, human and machine. The textures of light and time in Woodman's images combined with Ruskin's writing suggest that natural magic is, and always has been, all around us, even in our cities. Far from being mundane, the shifting narrative of this collection of images combined with the inclusion of eloquent historical and contemporary texts; celebrate what Virginia Woolf once called 'Earth Life.'

We see this idea most clearly midway through *Ruskin's Pond A Photographic Study* when Woodman photographs it in summer. Here we can imagine that we can glimpse the skimming dance of water boatmen, their tiny feet never breaking the fragile membrane of the water's surface. Beneath them the dark gathering of last winter's rotting leaves, above them the passing clouds. They converge on invisible pathways, and for a moment the chronological perception of time becomes diluted and transparent.

In offering us a bookwork that presents pockets of the world from such a vantage point, Woodman focuses not only on visual transformation, change and transience in light and time-space, but also the concept of 'loosing' himself, and us, his audience, during that experience. Throughout the book the orientation of our perception is forced to shift, sometimes it feels as if we are beneath the surface of the frozen pond looking up at the light of the sky between the trees. We must re-locate ourselves relentlessly with every turning page in order to understand where we will go next.

Like Woolf, Deleuze and Paracelsus, Ruskin recognised that the material advances of mankind would irrevocably threaten the fields, forests, riverbeds and coastal paths that fuelled his imagination. As John Clare's poem *Decay* (1832) points out, nature needs protection from the onslaught of modern civilisation:

*Mere withered stalks and fading trees,
And pastures spread with hills and rushes,
Are all my fading vision sees;
Gone, gone are rapture's flooding gushes!*

But this doesn't mean it has to be separated from us, where it would inevitably wither. For Ruskin, nature needed to be protected by culture. In other words, its salvation would be through education, through writing, through art, through *looking*. It needed to be re-enchanted. Ostensibly one of the first ecologists, Ruskin would often make his students stand knee-deep in water

during his classes so that they could really grasp the extent to which nature is integral to everyday life, how it is a part of culture.

Woodman continues this argument, gently and contemplatively. *Ruskin's Pond* and *Of Truth of Water* collectively offer a glimpse of a world which becomes more than we would ordinarily see at night and twilight, in the midday sun, at dawn. The shifting shadows he captures hint at a dynamic system far greater in complexity and beauty than we would otherwise normally see at a glance. This real-time process of truly looking, reveals the world not so much as it should be, but the world as it already is.

Ciara Healy

Since moving to Wales from London in 2010 Ciara Healy has been exploring cultural, linguistic and creative links between the West Coast of Wales and the West Coast of Ireland through writing, book arts and curating. She is currently Head of Critical and Contextual Studies at The School of Creative Arts, Coleg Sir Gar/University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

In 2011 she was one of three writers to be awarded the WAI & Axis Developing Critical Writing on Contemporary Visual Arts Programme. Since then she has worked with established critics JJ Charlesworth, Cherry Smyth and Chris Sharratt. Her own book works have been exhibited internationally and are housed in national and international collections as well as private collections in Ireland, the UK and the USA.

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