

ROOT AND BRANCH DESTRUCTION

Jane Morrow

Ambulances always come with clouds of smoke. And then they disappear in a whistle. But what they bring is fear. Not freedom. Feardom is what they bring. And they bring fire and smoke... I fear freedom. I, above all, fear the freedom that is above all feardom.¹

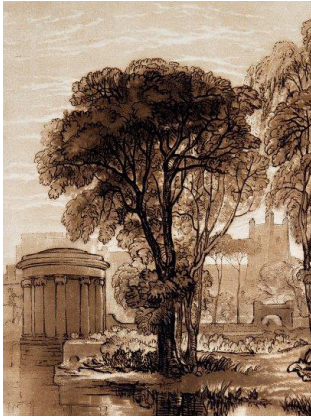
I recently read a tweet – now lost in the ether and therefore, unfortunately, uncredited – in response to yet more catastrophic American airstrikes upon countries whose civilians America then actively refuses to admit as refugees. I believe this is called ‘the Syria paradox’. Shameful that it even needs to have a name. Anyway, the tweet went something like this: ‘yeah, sure... it’s our freedom they resent’.

Fear is, of course, also, by definition, terror. Post-terror societies (I’m not even convinced by my own use of this term²) project onto objects and onto others. See: austerity, immigration, poverty, pain, loss of freedom or autonomy. In 2015, Britain was the second largest exporter of arms globally³. In 2017, it slipped to sixth⁴, behind China, Germany, France, Russia and the US, respectively. Presumably there is a rationale, somewhere, that ‘they’ve’ stolen ‘our’ ‘jobs’. Of course, somebody, somewhere, suffers; we’re bombing shepherds daily.

A quick scan of the Guardian’s 100 top global arms sales producers (2012)⁵ reveals seven UK-based firms. Where these are located, however, requires a good bit more digging. Via a strategic Googling of career opportunities offered by each of these companies, I found a robust mix of green-and-pleasant-land locations and those considered more traditionally industrial centres. They’re everywhere from the Hebrides to Halesowen. Like, there are definitely policies for these things.

Further rummaging reveals that all bar none of these locations – usually otherwise nondescript industrial estates – are obstructed in street view, indeed any view, by trees (who would advertise their wares if involved in such murky business? Furthermore, some of them even sponsor regional art prizes. It’s unclear whether this is a provocation or an attempt at subtly-run interference). I’m reminded of the ‘mushroom management’ phenomenon, which led the UK into war in 2001 and into an in-party feud that recently removed us from the greatest peace-time – and environmental⁶ – alliance that ever wuz.

And what does it matter if we know where they are but not what they’re doing? Well, they certainly have roles in the manufacture and sale of fighter jets, missiles and bombs to Saudi Arabia; targeting equipment and drones to Israel; machine guns to Bahrain; assault rifles to the Maldives; and guns’n’ammo to Turkmenistan. A nice wee earner; this haul brought in £7.9bn to



next three decades in order to renew Trident.

Tristram Aver's *Native British Trees* series exposes the 'hypocrisy of the arms industry by using warfare iconography to exaggerate how the UK may be seen from other territories, moreover by those affected directly from our involvement and export overseas. Outlines of mature oaks, limes, willows or elms bear a resemblance to that of an artillery explosion, detonated missile or military airstrike, which in turn, have been manufactured on (or originated from) our soil'⁸.

Despite such nostalgic views of the UK's landscape, it also has the second-lowest forest cover of any country in Europe (second to joint lowest – Ireland and the Netherlands. Others on this list are referred to as 'territories' – small islands such as the Isle of Man and Jersey, which are subsumed into a country's fold). Ambitious plans by the government and Woodland Trust exist, with benchmarks to plant 64m trees between 2015 and 2025 – a figure which has already slipped, and will continue to leave the UK near the bottom⁹.

'The countryside [for the London masses] is always foregrounded as [a] selling point: a lush, halcyon Rupert Brooke world where time stood still. Here, the [hypothetical] poster says, the

*landscape is as calm, welcoming and undemonstrative as the people. Here there'll always be an England.'*¹⁰

Stereotypical views of bucolic life are frozen within the oil paintings that hang in many stately homes and museums worldwide. Between 1939 and 1943, Kenneth Clark (not that one – the former director of the National Gallery, and – no less, the landmark BBC arts series *Civilisation*) embarked on a propaganda project entitled *Recording Britain*, now held by the V&A. He commissioned "one thousand five hundred" topographical watercolours", largely concentrated on the landscapes of the south of England because "the bombs looked set to obliterate them first". This was perhaps spurious, since apart from the Baedeker raids on cathedral towns, the main targets for the bombs were industrial, working class areas in London's East End, Liverpool, Manchester, Coventry, Southampton, Plymouth, Bristol, Clydeside and Hull.'¹¹

Of these paintings, Aver says: 'such works, often hyper-real, fabricated utopias or idyllic landscapes, only show us an aesthetic filter of the world at that time, just as the media may only supply a viewpoint or agenda which they, their stakeholders or our Government, intend for us to see.' These works constitute the bulk of decorative collections, like those amongst the (possibly ethically dubious but certainly

Left:

Middle: *Common Ash*, 2017, Watercolour and Guoache on paper.

Right: Tristram Aver

rigorously bureaucratic) acquisitions in the galleries and museums in which I – and Aver, separately – have worked. Bastions of public trust, complicit in objects-as-postcolonial-spectacle, these institutions play out their shame under an educational banner – not quite the collective culpability which has led to Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Until the specifics of the UK's history (and geography in a territorial sense) is taught in schools, nostalgic myths of patriotism will prevail.

Fear brings about a misconception of risk at every turn. But where to turn for reassurance? The work that Aver produces is hysterical, in the ungovernable emotional excess¹² sense. They're not remotely casually observed or composed. They scream

‘LOOK, LOOK AT WHAT IS HAPPENING’ like a firm grip and shake to the shoulders. The way that he formulates thoughts on a computer screen replicates his approach to paint, ink, board and more. A blog post from January (timely) reveals his anxieties, abridged below:

*‘how powerless we are in recent times;
how to protect ourselves against*

damaging ongoing austerity; how divided our society is becoming (or already is); how we are murdering each other in fear and control, or how we – as a nation – are implicit in killing through foreign intervention and arms sales; the slow and eventual destruction of our planet, moreover how we over-consume plastics that only end up in landfill or the oceans (and then in our food and the animals we eat)...’¹³

Aver's printmaking palette is painstakingly considered around the CMYK equivalents of gold and silver, (a currency of 'precious' colours) and the easy transition from military language to common parlance, such as 'gunmetal' grey. He uses recycled paper, water based paints and inks within his prints. A pyrography tool is deployed to burn into board, a further extension of the explicit 'burn' of heated metal onto wood. Within his paintings, texture and colour are created through the use of acrylics, spray paints, oils and varnishes; they are also both added to and removed by pyrography. Aver skips between paint, pyro, print, scraperboard, scraperfoils (etching) and

Left: *Scraperboard work in progress*, 2017
Middle: *Cyanotype being exposed to the Sun*, 2017
Right: *Pyrography work in progress*, 2017

mentation feels equally exploratory in terms of an artistic sensibility as it does in an almost alchemical exercise.

Like nervous laughter or cuteness aggression, his screaming pinks are unsettling. They're hard to place amongst knowing whimsy and absolute brutality. A few steps back from representation, their style is porous between languages of beauty and abjection, tradition and currency.

The analogies and thoughtfully woven associations in this work just keep on coming: the relationship between bark and camo, the hanging of an exhibition to form a map of arms manufacturers across Britain. Considered as a whole, this work is too, too, TOO much, when we're already overloaded. But why *should* anyone be let off the hook? When Aver talks about the historical paintings amongst which he works, he points out the differences between figures included in the landscape for decoration, and those who have 'roles' within the landscape. Mankind's labour, purpose and responsibility are prevailing themes.

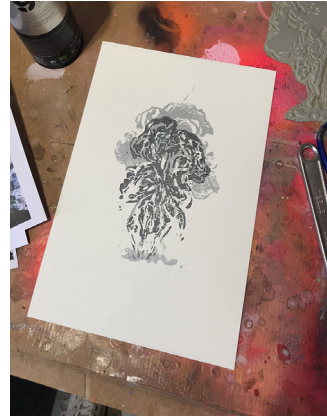
His work is produced with impatience. I wonder if the impetus to work quickly, compulsively, laborious in all but time, is an

attempt to mediate or offset the effects of the damage we've all done? Aver's return time and again to the multiple, subtly different each time, feels like both a performance of some kind of self-annihilation, and a hopeful gesture towards the potential and eventual corralling of an amorphous, uncontrollable thing.

I've recently been reading a lot of creative non-fiction – a term that I often think I find the most akin to art-making as written language permits. One, *Being a Beast* opens with an apology:

*'I'd hoped to write a book with little or nothing of me in it. The hope was naïve. It turned out to be (too much) a book about my own rewilding, my own acknowledgement of my previously unrecognised wildness, and my own lament at the loss of my wildness. I'm sorry.'*¹⁴

Beautiful, isn't it? We all respond better to implied vulnerability than to outright bluster. The space in between is the one in which Aver's works occupy. They urge us to do better, without a trace of preachiness. They're

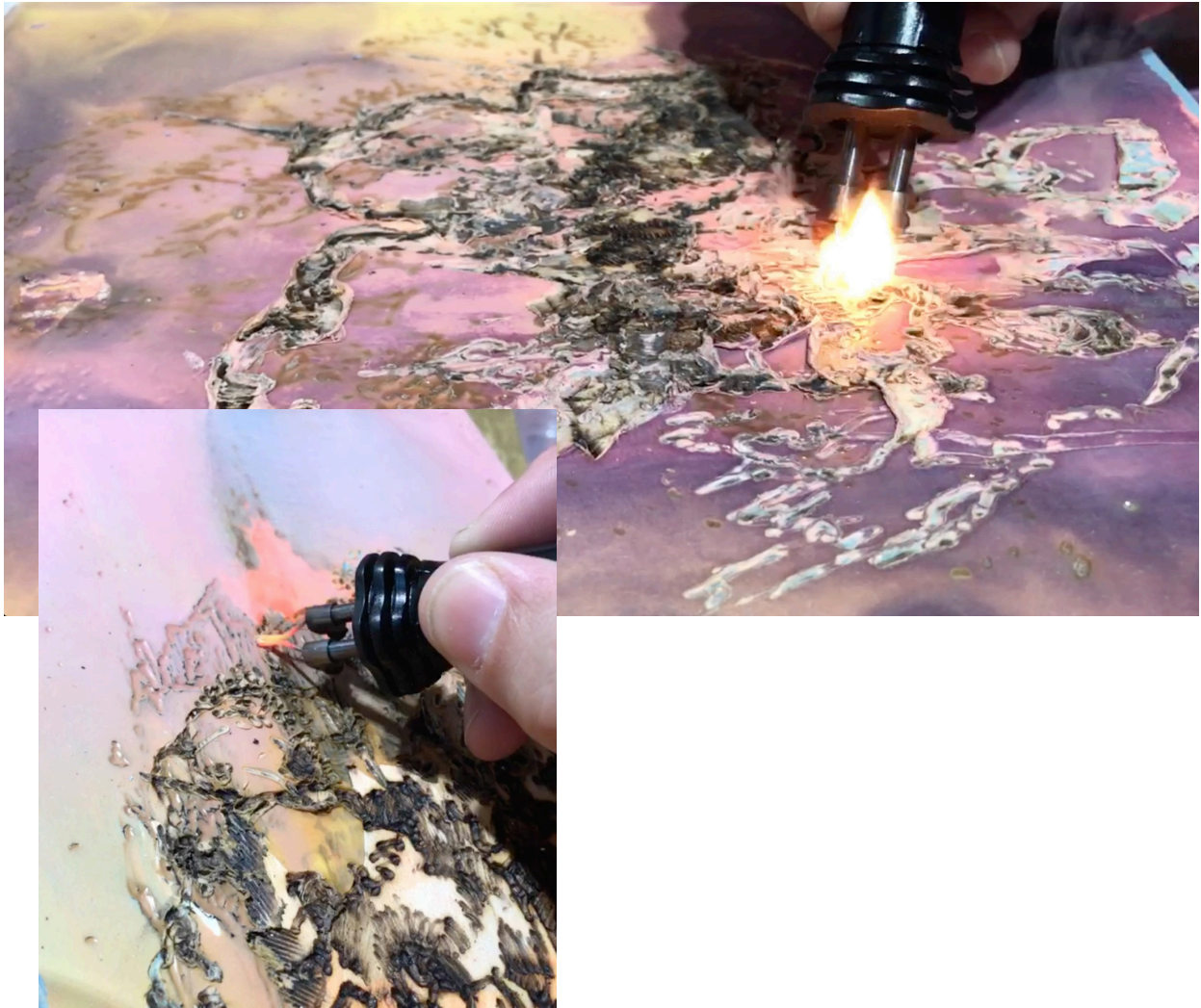


indicative of a man's process in working out what is and isn't important. It's the antithesis of the toxic masculinity that often gets us into this mess. I can't shake the associations, in writing this, with The Wars of the Roses, which of course eliminated the male lineage in both of the Royal Houses involved.

There's maybe something more to this though: preserving and cultivating our landscape and planet; cleaning up our irresponsible exports and foreign policy; responsibility, for one's own actions and with a collective conscience. That's what we'd like to offer our children, right? If every generation reacts to the previous one, then social compassion can be the only payoff from our current crises, right? A shame publicly acknowledged and a feardom universally unpacked – unrealistic propositions perhaps, but surely there is a critical-and-unapologetic-enough mass by now, right?

Impartial bystanding is a luxury none of us can afford.

Jane Morrow is an independent curator and PhD researcher with a specific interest in artist and organisational development.



1. Giannina Braschi, *United States of Banana*, (London, AmazonCrossing, 2011)

2. I'm writing this from a silo of the UK which is considered a 'post-terror' society, which has the highest proportional rate of suicide and prescription drug misuse of the four UK nations. It also recently broke the dubious record for the (democratic) nation which has also spent the longest period of any developed nation without an elected Government in place. I keep saying 'nation(s)' because we have yet to formalise an alternative - Northern Ireland is technically not a country.

3. The UK's largest clients were: Saudi Arabia (49% of all sales), Oman (14% of all sales), and Indonesia (9.9% of all sales). The UK accounted for 4.8% of all exports and its exports increased by 37% compared to 2008-2012.

<https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/uk-is-second-largest-global-arms-dealer/>

4. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-03/fssipri_at2017_0.pdf

5. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/mar/02/arms-sales-top-100-producers>

6. <https://greenallianceblog.org.uk/2016/01/28/seven-things-you-should-know-about-the-eu-and-the-environment/>

7. <http://www.stopwar.org.uk/index.php/news-comment/2162-britain-is-now-the-second-biggest-arms-dealer-in-the-world>

8. Artist's brief, communicated by email, June 2018

9. UK forest area would increase by 8%, from 13% to 21%.

As a result, the UK would remain well below the average area forested among European countries (29.6%). <https://gabrielhemery.com/european-countries-and-their-forest-cover/>

10. Owen Hatherley, *The Ministry of Nostalgia*, (Verso, London), 2017, page 85

11. Owen Hatherley, *The Ministry of Nostalgia*, (Verso, London), 2017, page 72

12. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hysteria>

13. <http://www.tristramaver.com/news/post/b72ace92-ddac-4509-bbd3-e7622c3a398f>