

Parson's Pleasure and the Ponds:

A WOOD ENGRAVING EXHIBITION

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third century China, and the carved woodblock – its ridges and troughs forming a perfect negative of the final image – follows the same simple principle as the seal, used from at least the Bronze Age. Not to mention the most low-tech of reproducible emblems: the fingerprint.

It's appropriate, then, that a forthcoming exhibition at the North Wall Arts Centre in Summertown as part of Oxfordshire Artweeks, mixes wood engraving with the equally low-tech topic of bathing in the open air. Parson's Pleasure and the Ponds, the debut solo exhibition of printmaker Duncan Montgomery (like Bewick, a native of the Northeast) presents a new series of wood engravings depicting bathers in and around the water at two locations: Parson's Pleasure, the famous Oxford bathing spot, used for naked bathing and sunbathing by men of town and gown until the early 1990s; and the ponds of Hampstead Heath in London, which have been used for swimming and paddling for centuries and remain active to this day.

Why these two places? As well as being Montgomery's debut, the show marks the culmination of a collaboration between the artist and myself. As an Oxfordshire-born historian specialising in the history of bathing

Wood engraving brings to mind the past more than practically any other artistic technique. Thomas Bewick, son of a Northumbrian tenant farmer, raised the technique's status to unprecedented heights around 1800, drawing praise from poets like William Wordsworth with his lively engravings of birds. The Victorians multiplied the work of more anonymous wood engravers on an industrial scale, to illustrate their booming newspapers and triple decker novels. William Morris made many wood engravings for books printed at the Kelmscott Press, named after his Thameside Manor in Oxfordshire. And this Victorian heyday was only a brief chapter in a history stretching back centuries. The oldest surviving block prints on cloth were made in

Duncan Montgomery

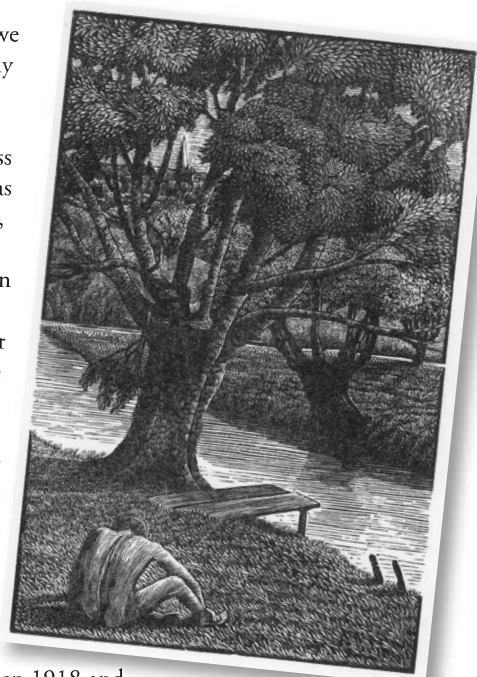


outdoors, I brought to the conversation a wide range of source material relating to Parson's Pleasure (the focus of my PhD and also, my article for the August 2018 edition of OX Magazine). This included diary entries by C S Lewis, old poems and entry tickets, picture postcards, Victorian photographs, book illustrations, newspaper cuttings and much more. Much of this fed into Montgomery's re-imagining of the place and will feature in the show. As for the ponds, the link is more personal, and more everyday: the artist lives close to Hampstead Heath and is fascinated by his local bathing spaces – the presence of the trees, the gloom of the cubicles and the green-painted corrugated screens, as well as the mixture of mundane and 'classical' scenes formed by the bathers themselves.

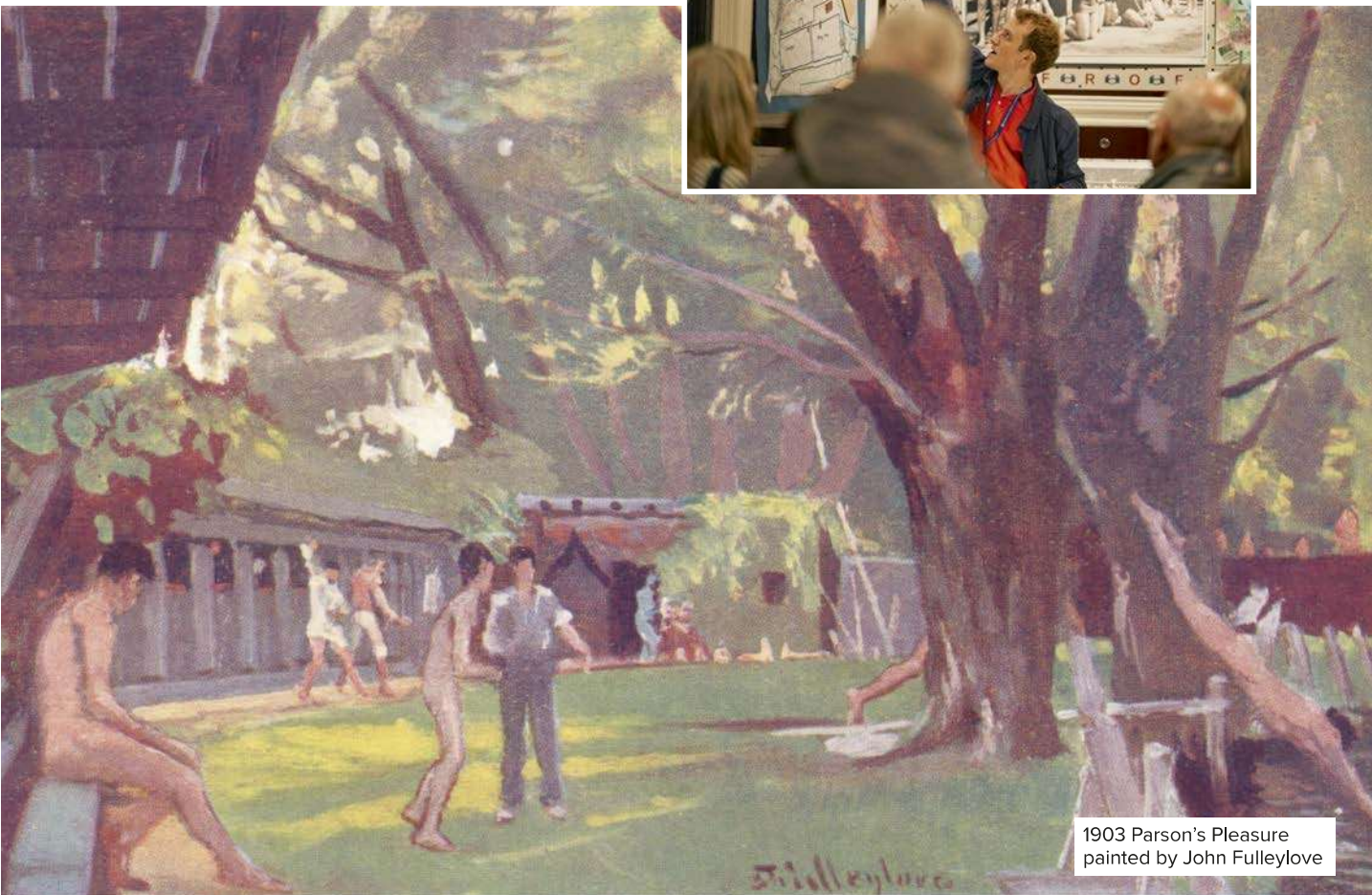
The exhibition is, as a result, a curious mixture of different times – the past and the present, free-time, time lost, time recollected. There's a strong historical dimension, and my job has partly been to curate this side of things, introducing some of the texts and images Montgomery draws on, and getting the show's facts straight – making timelines, for example, of the two key bathing areas.

But the pictures themselves, stars of the show, don't fit straightforwardly into specific historical moments. When we look at art

depicting people, as when we watch films or tv, we quickly get a feel for date through what everyone is wearing: period dress. But when dress is removed or pared down as it is in Montgomery's work, we lose our bearings. We could be looking at a golden age of the past, a naturist commune in the present, or even scenes from the future – more plausibly now than ever with the rise of wild swimming and increasingly hot summers, year on year. Sometimes Montgomery's titles provide a clue as to when we are. The title of Interwar (Parson's Pleasure) seems to place the scene somewhere between 1918 and 1939. But the picture itself, sparse and ▶



Duncan Montgomery
Parson's Pleasure



1903 Parson's Pleasure
painted by John Fulleylove



By Aubrey R. Thomas - swimmer at Parson's Pleasure 1904

enigmatic, raises more questions than it answers, its sundial-like figures casting long shadows across the grass beside what looks something like a bombed-out grain silo. Sometimes the engagement with time is more openly playful. In *Kouroi – Mixed Pond and Greek Relief*, bathers appear alongside and merge into classical-style carvings, complete with amputated heads, hands, legs and arms.

Images of wild swimming are everywhere, from documentaries and social media photos to the pages of glossy magazines. Montgomery takes a step back from this high-resolution world, and the bathing place re-appears not just as a social space or a place for escaping into nature, but as a quiet refuge of memory and imagination. “There ... under the willows,” wrote the American poet Christopher Morley in 1931, “you seem very far inside something. The humorous and maddening world is palisaded away by strong protections.”

Parson's Pleasure and the Ponds takes place at the North Wall Arts Centre in Summertown from the 8-25 May 2024 with an opening event on the 8 May from 18:00 to 20:00. Prints are available to purchase from the main desk. The show will also travel to London, where it is open from the 7- 20 June 2024 at the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution.

For more information on Oxfordshire Artweeks, visit artweeks.org



Manda Tudge Carbon Chronicles

Ponds, the Unsung Heroes

With all the rain and high groundwater we've had recently, it's an idea to use the water creatively and make your own wildlife pond.

Research shows that as well as providing a unique habitat for aquatic creatures, ponds are also very good at sequestering carbon. They only take up a tiny portion of land space in the UK, (about 0.0006%, compared to the 36% of grasslands) yet one study found that metre for metre, ponds can bury 20-30 times more carbon than woodlands, grasslands or other habitat types. The half a million garden ponds in the UK play an important but largely unappreciated role in mitigating climate change.

Ponds are also a fantastic instrument against climate change because they give people a way in which to take practical action. I'm at the beginning of a wildlife project at Bicester School. A wonderful group of sixth formers and myself are building a pond and applying for a community grant for the kit: a liner, sand, a water butt and native plants to create a permanent wildlife habitat.

We're planning to make the pond as natural as possible, to both encourage wildlife and boost the ability of the pond to mop up atmospheric carbon. Permanent and naturally vegetated ponds are the best at sequestering carbon dioxide, our planting will include thick moss and native aquatic grasses to help do a good job of absorbing and storing carbon.

The least efficient ponds are temporary, shallow, arable ponds which lack vegetation and are regularly disturbed. However, even these algae ponds have their role in mopping up other greenhouse gases, like nitrous oxide.

freshwaterhabitats.org.uk has useful free resources on their website. Their guide also has advice on choosing a suitable location for a pond.

wildoxfordshire.org.uk has a guidance page (under Ponds and Watery Habitats) which includes a Froglife brochure called, 'Just add water- how to build a wildlife pond'. There are some useful tips on making and managing the pond, and also suitable plants and how to attract wildlife.

Lastly, rhs.org.uk and bbowt.org.uk are also good sources of practical information. In Oxfordshire we're lucky to have fabulous community groups who offer additional advice and potentially hands-on help. For example Kirtlington Wildlife and Conservation Society (KWACS): kirtlingtonvillage.co.uk/kwacs who oversee their large village pond.

Building a wildlife pond is relatively straight forward but could play a priceless part in reducing greenhouse gases and climate change.