

This is the full text from the catalogue published in conjunction with exhibitions of Terry Setch's work at Oriel, Cardiff, the National Museum of Wales, Turner House, Penarth, Camden Arts Centre, London and the Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh.

**The river is within us, the sea is all about us;
The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation 1**

A sense of place lies at the heart of Terry Setch's painting. In 1969 Setch moved to Penarth, a suburb of Cardiff on the Severn estuary. Since then his principal motif has been the two-mile stretch of beach, close to his home, which runs from Penarth esplanade to Sully Island. The subject of this essay is the integral link which Setch has forged between his art and this 'ever-changing landscape'. **2**

The unique character of the beach at Penarth is due partly to its striking geological features. Its perimeter is formed by a steep headland whose layers of sedimentary strata are clearly visible. Where the rock face has been undercut by the action of the tides, landslides have strewn the sand and mud with a profusion of multi-coloured rocks and pebbles. In places the surface is ruptured by harder intrusive rocks which have been weathered into fantastic shapes and textures. For over twenty years Setch has been exploring this terrain, arranging and collecting the debris he finds there, and working on the large unstretched canvases which he carries to the beach and spreads out on the land.

Setch's art has developed as a means of expressing his relationship with the beach and his experience of it, in particular the processes of metamorphosis which are evident in the landscape. Such changes may be sudden and transient. For example, when rain or mist dissolve the view. Other transformations in the landscape are more gradual: the result of opposed elements in a continuous state of exchange. The beach is a place where land and sea come together. Its appearance records the perpetual dialogue between earth and water. The sea erodes the headland which spills its shattered masses onto the beach. These mingle with man-made rubbish washed up by the tide. All kinds of objects are visible: tangles of fishing line; plastic bottles and bags; bits of furniture, clothing and carpet; fragments of push-chairs and cookers; even rusting car bodies which have been pushed over the edge of the headland. As a result of weathering these synthetic intrusions in the landscape undergo an imperceptible but inevitable process of transmutation. Simultaneously sand, rocks and detritus are bonded together and fixed, repeatedly buried and unearthed, or

constantly shifted by the incessant tide.

Setch finds this conjunction of the synthetic and the natural, and the transformation of one by the other, aesthetically and intellectually stimulating. The implications of this attitude are complex. In one way Setch sees amidst this chaos the formation of an alternative order predicated on dissonance. He delights, for example, in the 'family of forms' which joins objects thrown together randomly. At another extreme, the presence of synthetic objects on the beach focuses, for Setch, the question of man's relationship with the landscape and with nature in general. In this way, such pollution manifests impending ecological disaster: the evidence of a society at odds with its environment. Setch's art occupies the ground between these poles. In taking the landscape as his subject Setch's artistic endeavour joins him to a tradition which stretches back to Turner and Constable. However, the means of expression which he has evolved constitute a radical development within this genre. Setch's paintings function as metaphorical equivalents for his experience of the beach.

Since the late 1970s, and particularly in the recent paintings in the present exhibition, Setch has sought to 'mimic' rather than to represent the landscape and its processes of metamorphosis. His art is founded on an analogous relationship between his materials and processes and the material reality of the beach and the cyclic processes operating there. This fundamental connection between painting and place is evident in the overall development of Setch's art. Just as man-made objects are processed by the forces of nature, Setch's artistic development has also been governed by recycling. New works grow out of and reformulate the concerns and techniques of earlier paintings. For this reason, Setch's most recent work must be understood within the context of a number of earlier key works which gave rise to these later developments.

The essential continuity of Setch's work is evident in the way that **Touch the Earth 1971**, one of his first beach-inspired paintings, contains many characteristics which he subsequently developed. In common with all his work until 1989, Setch employed a large piece of unstretched canvas as a support. This made the painting less like a window and more object-like, more intrusive in the spectator's space. On a practical level its eyelets and ropes meant that during the execution of the painting the tarpaulin could conveniently be carried to the beach and unrolled, permitting Setch to work on it in situ. He began by marking the support with sand and sea water and, after tying stones to the canvas, dipping the entire object in the sea. The marks which resulted were thus formed by a kind of tie-dye process. Such methods meant that a close physical relationship was established

with the landscape. Rather than representing the beach, the canvas was imbued with its presence through marks made by the beach itself. Whereas **Touch the Earth** sought to express a certain kind of truth to nature, in **Sisley, Marconi - were also present 1973**, Setch's intention was to parody this position. Its imagery was derived from a sculpture composed of six upright forms which Setch assembled on the beach using various found objects. These included lengths of driftwood which Setch stuck in the ground and to which he attached metal cans, seaweed and fragments of rusted metal. For Setch, such activity was like making 'a cartoon of the place'. These arrangements parodied the configurations of synthetic and natural elements formed in the landscape. A further level of irony is contained in the way that this behaviour alludes to the art school convention of arranging objects for still-life drawing. The sculpture was thus employed in this painting as a deliberate cliché.

Having re-organised part of the landscape in this entirely 'synthetic' way, the traditional practice of landscape painting was subverted further by marking the canvas in situ, basing it on the sculpture in front of him, and then executing the work in a 'gross, exaggerated and deformed way'. Setch's use of colour is deliberately garish and his handling of paint is consciously crude, employing what he has called 'a paint trash mark'.

Setch's use of dissonance in **Sisley, Marconi - were also present** marks the beginning of his strategy of remaking the landscape in a 'synthetic' way. This entails making a painting which does not reside within the conventions of representation but is invested with 'a more intellectual argument'. The purpose of this is to provoke a confrontation with the spectator who must either accept or reject Setch's evocation of the landscape. Faced with this choice they are compelled to re-evaluate their own relationship to that subject. At the same time, Setch's 'synthetic' presentation forces an engagement with the question of aesthetic validity. In works such as **Rock Sculpture** and **The Wheel**, both **1975**, the deliberate awkwardness of the imagery in these paintings was extended by their physical nature. Setch stitched the edge of the tarpaulin supports with rope. When the canvases were dipped into water the linen shrank while the rope remained inert, producing extensive buckling in the support. Each work was then painted using 'vulgar marks' which intentionally compromise naturalistic description. Setch described these paintings as 'entirely tasteless objects made with a great deal of care'. a paradox nurtures in his subsequent work and one which is intended to provoke a re-evaluation of what is good, bad and appropriate in art.

Since the late 1970s Setch has been increasingly concerned with

finding an equivalent within his painting for the processes of transformation at work on the beach. He has achieved this principally through his use of a synthetic, microcrystalline wax, a by-product of the petroleum industry which he therefore identifies with the synthetic objects found on the beach. The way the wax behaves also led Setch to regard it as a metaphor for the beach itself. Initially he used cold wax. This was prepared by mixing hot wax with turpentine and then adding pigment and dyes. When applying it to the canvas the resulting paste could be made to mimic the mud and sand of the beach. From around 1978 Setch has used wax as part of an encaustic heat process. This involves the application of molten wax direct onto the canvas and the build-up and fusion of further layers of wax by using a hot-air gun. In some states the molten wax cools and becomes hard and plastic-like, echoing the way synthetic objects in the landscape are transformed by weather and water. The use of wax in Setch's painting thus functions as a metaphorical equivalent for the interaction of synthetic detritus and natural forces.

Setch's recreation of the landscape in this synthetic way, and his desire to make visually provocative and intrusive objects, proceeded by impressing and fixing detritus into the wax surfaces of his paintings. This invariably comprises objects collected from the beach. The incorporation of detritus is characteristic of the beach paintings he has made since **Penarth Beach Car Wreck 1979**. In this work parts of a derelict car were wired to its surface, demonstrating the way Setch's use of detritus functions literally, descriptively, and as a means of amplifying the physical presence of the image. The key paintings of the 1980s were the series entitled **Once upon a time there was OIL 1981**, and Setch's largest painting **Touch the Earth Again 1987**. These works demonstrate a more extreme use of found objects attached to their surfaces. Correspondingly, their mood is darker and represents Setch's engagement with the condition of the landscape on a global and more political level. They evoke a landscape destroyed by pollution and nuclear war, reduced to a saturated atmosphere of noxious decay.

The works in the present exhibition have all been executed since 1989 and are a significant development from Setch's earlier work. They demonstrate and intensified exploration of the equivalence between painting and place and in physical terms they constitute a more extreme challenge to aesthetic conventions. In contrast to his previous paintings, nearly all the components in his recent work are synthetic and oil-based. This has a dual implication. It reflects Setch's desire to bring the physical substance of the painting closer still to the man-made detritus found on the beach. At the same time their constituents are made more coherent and interrelatable. One of Setch's principle

innovations was to change the nature of the paintings' supports. He abandoned his use of tarpaulin in favour of sheets of polypropylene, a plastic-based fibre. This material was light and pliable and could be transported to the beach. In line with his usual practice Setch responded to the landscape directly by arranging found objects on the support in situ, marking the polypropylene with mud and sludge. The painting would then be developed in the studio. Polystyrene foam, used in conjunction with the polypropylene, provided a rigid backing. By applying heat to the surface of the painting the polypropylene and the polystyrene fused together, bonding with a progressive build-up of wax. Detritus impressed into the molten surface became fixed when the wax cooled and hardened. When subjected to extreme heat the polypropylene fibre tended to form undulating ripples across the surface of the foam and on occasion would dissolve into a liquid. More than ever these phenomena reflected the flux of the landscape and mimicked the transformation of synthetic detritus by weathering.

Despite their overt use of detritus Setch's recent works are more evocative of light and atmosphere than hitherto. This is due to his use of kaolin, a white powder used as a filler in paint. This is distributed across the surfaces of the paintings. Because it is unfixed a further technical development was necessitated. The encrusted surfaces of the paintings are sealed beneath sheets of polythene. This contains the kaolin while permitting a certain amount of continued re-distribution of the powder within the paintings: a progressive metamorphosis which Setch recognises as a further link with continual changes in the landscape. These transparent skins also introduce elements of depth and atmosphere into the paintings. Where the polythene is stretched tautly across objects it emphasises their presence; elsewhere it is highly reflective, preventing visual contact with the objects beneath its surface. Setch employs these means to evoke changes in light and atmosphere, and the exchange between close-up detail and distance experienced when moving through the landscape.

The mechanisms which operate during the making of these works relate them to cyclic processes in nature. A familiar experience in beach-combing is the discovery of newly revealed objects in the sand and the disappearance of others which have been reclaimed by the earth. The execution of Setch's paintings embraces similar phenomena. During the accretion of their densely worked surfaces, objects continually disappear and reappear, are forgotten and rediscovered: events which invest the paintings with their own internal history. A further analogy exists between the artist's activity within the space of a work and within the landscape. Setch's experiences on the beach - exploration, excavation, arranging found objects, marking the earth or

the support spread on it, creating and responding to configurations or forms within the landscape, noting changes in detail, perspective and atmosphere - all find equivalents in the studio during the creation of a painting. In this sense, Setch occupies the space of the works in a literal, physical manner which forms an equivalent for his presence and activities in the landscape.

This concept of the painting as an 'arena' for action derives from Abstract Expressionism whose influence is acknowledged by Setch. At the same time, however, his paintings are organised according to the conventions of perspective. In **St Mary's Well Bay 1990/91**, for example, the painting has a foreground - a flattened view of the bay - while the triangular shapes at the top of the painting denote the sails of yachts in the distance. This 'perspectival issue', as Setch calls it, is held in suspension with the flat surface of the painting which forms a 'play-place' in a literal way. Different works also move between extremes of abstraction and figuration. In works such as **Above and Below the Tide 1990/91**, and **Spillage 1989/91**, the surfaces of the paintings form a record of the dynamic processes which operated during their execution. The flow of wax across their surfaces echoes the ebb and flow of the tide on the beach. The detritus which encrusts their surfaces is organised according to the 'family of forms' which Setch perceives in reality: they relate in terms of abstract relationships of shapes and textures. In other works found objects are organised in a way which invests them with figurative significance. We recognise figures, boats and even a giant fly. Occasionally there are visual puns as, for example, in **International Waters 1990/91**, where a striped supermarket bag alludes to the American flag and to the influence of Jasper Johns. In some cases abstraction and figurative references coexist within the same work, a development of Setch's investigation of dissonance. In places the paintings' surfaces are imprinted with the shapes of found objects. Like footprints and fossils on the beach these images imply absence and the passage of time.

Setch's paintings operate on many levels and in various ways. Their scabrous surfaces are at once repulsive and seductive, expressionistic and baroque. They celebrate a new dissonant order forged from a marriage of the natural and synthetic, and simultaneously they warn us of the threat that man poses to his environment. Physical and intrusive, they challenge the spectator's aesthetic expectations and values. At the same time their relationship with the landscape and its invisible processes invests these works with a profoundly conceptual character. Apparently apocalyptic, his work is, as the recent paintings demonstrate, also infused with an undeniable sense of hope. As Setch has stated: 'There has to be a point of optimism. With the paintings that I've done in the last two years the optimism is in the light...'

1 T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

2 All quotations are statements by the artist in an interview with the author on 17 November 1991 Terry Setch

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