

Ruby Wallis *Unfixed Landscape*

It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

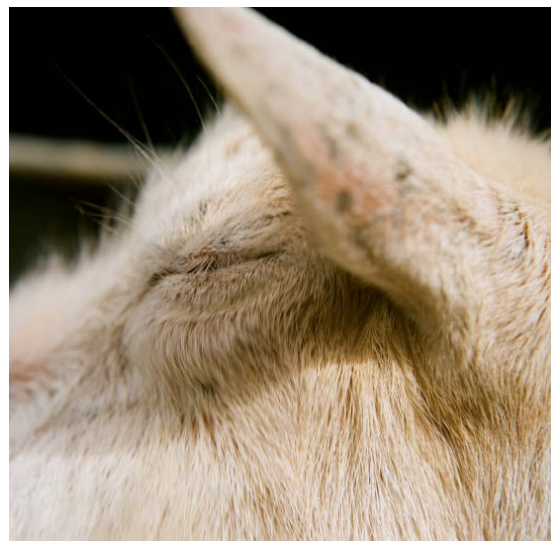
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, 1841.

Mirror was not an attempt to talk about myself, not at all. It was about my feelings towards people dear to me; about my relationship with them; my perpetual pity for them and my own inadequacy – my feeling of duty left unfulfilled.

Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 1986.



Dido's bus, Photographic print, 2012



Close-up of goat, Photographic print, 2012

The inhabitants of Coolorta in the Burren, county Clare, are the subject of Ruby Wallis's *Unfixed Landscape*. They include among them her parents and extended family. Coolorta has been described as a concentration of uncompromising individuals rather than a cohesive community. They arrived from various parts of Britain and Europe in the 1980s and settled in the area upon acquiring some land. That some would move on while others would join suggests a shifting presence and range of outlooks that belies easy definition. Still, if common ground can be found, they lie in ideals of self-sufficiency in energy, food, shelter and education as well as an interest in holistic thinking. The various activities of Coolorta's inhabitants were and are diverse – from constructing makeshift dwellings to elaborate house designs, raising children to breeding horses, growing vegetables, Tibetan Buddhist

meditation, puppetry, political journalism and teaching. One senses the allure of an isolated western enclave offered the promise of time and space in which to do their own thing on their own terms. But in the grim light of day, as with all dreams, it would, no doubt, be tempered and challenged by limited resources, unforeseen circumstance and shifting perspectives of its inhabitants over the years.

The foundations of Coolorta can be seen to be structured upon self-reliance and ecological concerns. In addition, it could be argued that they are driven by the lure of the primitive in the sense of those ideas based on a retreat from the polis for a closer engagement with nature as a source of growth and resistance.

For Ruby Wallis to frame the people and place through film and photography is also to be enmeshed in primitivist and pastoral traditions that have long governed western culture and thought. Leo Marx recognizes in the pastoral mode a contrast between a harmonious life of simple necessity in a rural retreat and an anxious urban existence amidst competing powers and ideas of sophistication. Marx also situates the pastoral retreat between the 'deprivations and anxieties associated with both the city and the wilderness'.¹ Marx makes clear a distinction between pastoral and primitivist ideals. The primitivist hero finds value in isolation from organized society whereas the pastoral retreat seeks a 'resolution between the opposed worlds of nature and art'.² Where Coolorta can be viewed as veering towards the primitive tradition (if we keep in mind its tension between uncompromising individuals and a discernible community ethos), Ruby works her subject matter through art in the hope of resolution and so, given the subject of her work, has clear echoes of the pastoral tradition.

A defining feature of the pastoral tradition lies in the dynamics of retreat and return. The experience of the retreat leads to insights that can question the social order to which he/she will return. In Ruby's case, her retreat is also a return. Ruby spent her formative years in Coolorta and she has returned in the attempt to visualize a sense of place and her own experience of that place over time. This return is as much a matter of family and belonging as it is a reflection upon the nature of Coolorta. This is a quest that will be dogged by retrospect, longing and displacement (Ruby calls it her 'home-not-home'). It is also dogged by the

question of how this can be represented through her selected media, if indeed, this can be achieved at all.

Not surprisingly, the means of approach are fractured and kaleidoscopic. Ruby uses a variety of approaches that are immersive and expansive. The *Autowalks* track in real time various meanderings and conversations through the locale. Walking, for Frédéric Gros, is to 'recover the pure sensation of being, to rediscover the simple joy of existing, the joy that permeates the whole of childhood'.³ It can also give rise to the 'depths of the space and brings the landscape to life'.⁴ Indeed, conversations repeatedly hover around the idea of space and moments of repose in the lives of Coolorta's inhabitants. Place is encountered through motion and framed by transience. The *Turlough Swim* records Ruby's crossing with a head camera complete with sounds of her strained breathing. Swimming, for the poet Keats, was the perfect metaphor for 'taking part in the existence of things'.⁵ Once again, bodily immersion in space and place holds to the transient and the ineffable. The *Moving Stills* are slow-motion projections. The portrait of her mother, to take one example, is smoking a cigarette with ambient sounds in the background of barking, birdsong and a radio playing Bob Dylan's *Times They Are A Changin'*. Motion is stilled for significance yet these works remain indefinable but for their pensive mood. It is as if each attempt to capture that elusive sense of place knowingly maintains its own negation; as if the effort to grasp what Andrei Tarkovsky has called an 'exhaustive image of the Truth' is accepted as pure folly, a hope that will always be in vain but one that drives us nonetheless.⁶

The idea that Ruby's work is charged by failure expands to encompass not just her own attempts to capture indefinitely her subjective response to conditions of being but to encompass those who are the subject of her work. This seems a downright rude and somewhat perverse thing to say given the context of this essay. But I want to argue that the charm of Ruby's actual work lies here in an aesthetics of failure. It lies in the mood, tones and textures evoked in order to suggest a richer understanding of things.

Her still photographs capture this best. In *Portrait of Dido* (2012), for example, the figure of her mother stands by the entrance to a polytunnel that has fallen out of use to the extent that overgrowth has pierced through its skin. The post and lintel construction, once imagined

by the likes of Vitruvius and Laugier as the primitive architectural form upon which civilization was founded, frames the composition as an image of grand intent now abandoned. *Dido's Bus* (2012) focuses on an old bus converted into a home. Its aesthetic is born from contingent need and accumulated adornments such as wind chimes, bird feeders, old pieces of wood and aged ceramic pots. Its random make-shift vernacular is contrasted with the presence of a Mercedes lurking in the background, the proverbial machine in the garden. Death too lived in Arcadia.



Portrait of Dido, Photographic print, 2012

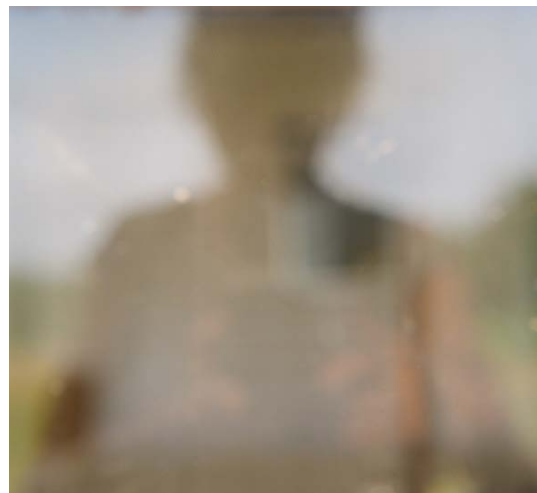


Dido, Medium Format, 2014

Dido (2104) is a medium format portrait taken from behind a sheet of greenhouse glass. Root systems have spread over the glass in the search of nourishment to form a thin veil. The texture creates a distance between mother and daughter at the same time as blurring the distance of age between two of a similar likeness. The nature of the veil is striking. If it suggests a sadness, the golden light suffusing the scene ensures it is a sweet one. Such a mood is in contrast to that of *My Brother Django* (2014). The contours are clean and crisp and the young figure is bathed in a fresh milky light. His eyes have the grace and introspect of Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto* as if assured and accepting of what is to come. The figure of Ruby can be placed between these two portraits of age. *Self-portrait in Caravan Window* (2011) is purposely unfocused; a light splat blur of a woman with camera stilled for a moment in the stream of time as if she can only be known to herself through framed images and the singularity of recollected events.



My brother Django, Digital Photograph, 2014



Self-portrait in caravan window, Photographic print, 2011

In the pastoral dynamic of retreat and return, the idealism and drive at the heart of the pastoral should be subject to critical appraisal. 'The necessity of the return', Terry Gifford states, 'always leads to the qualification of the idyllic retreat'.⁷ Its justification may not simply be a social critique of the polis but can be a return with material to haunt the culture from which it originates. *Unfixed Landscape* is a body of work presented for Ruby's PhD. In an era where accelerated competition for shrinking funding in the arts is matched by intensified academic accreditation for an artist to practice 'professionally', not to mention a sense of despair in efforts to challenge this state of affairs, her wanderings and considerations of what can be drawn from her past into this world offer a timely insight to present circumstance.

The overriding sentiment at the heart of these images, walks, swims and recorded conversations is the irresolvable struggle of the self to accommodate to a state of impermanence whilst seeking to realize the ideals of comfort and repose. If the character of the work is fractured and kaleidoscopic, it is also restless. The pastoral is at its best, argues Marx, when a world more 'real' is set in contrast to an idyllic vision. 'The old symbol of reconciliation', he writes, 'is obsolete'.⁸

There is also a sense in the work that Ruby is an heir to the dreams of her parents and the ideals of Coolorta. Their ideals of self-reliance and ecological awareness were born of a particular time. Many were inspired by publications such as the Whole Earth Catalog which

would have been in circulation then. Its editor, Stewart Brand, sought to create a space where a person could ‘conduct his own education, find his own inspiration, shape his own environment and share his adventure with whoever was interested’.⁹ Ruby’s conversation pieces reveal those adventures, capturing at times the aspirations of what once should/could have been and the drift towards the ways things are. The mood is neither tragic nor elegiac. The figure of Dido appears and reappears as enduring and resilient. The night shots of Johnnie’s caravan and the polytunnel characterize nature as furtive and much less a nature of bountiful possibilities.



Polytunnel at night, Digital photograph, 2013



Johnnie's caravan at night, Photographic print, 2014

In the end, it is idealism itself that is under scrutiny. ‘Utopia’, writes Lewis Mumford, often suggests the ‘ultimate in human folly’.¹⁰ Yet these vain dreams of perfection are more often conjured up in the most impossible of times. We ignore at our peril how each generation has dreamt afresh and has left a rich sediment in their wake. Perhaps this is the lesson to take from *Unfixed Landscape*. In our quest for wholeness and balance amidst the elusive and impermanent, an aesthetics of failure in touch with the wisdom of age and history can be the foundation for a more resonant form of art and, ultimately, politics too.

Gavin Murphy is a writer based in Galway

www.rubywallis.com

www.gavinmurphy.eu

¹ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Oxford University Press, 1964, p.22.

² Ibid.

³ Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, Verso, 2014, p.83.

⁴ Ibid., p.185.

⁵ Quoted in Roger Deakin, *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees*, Penguin, 2007, p.ix.

⁶ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (1986), University of Texas Press, 1996, p.104.

⁷ Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, Routledge, 1999, p.10.

⁸ Leo Marx, op. cit., p.364.

⁹ Quote from the first page of the 1969 Whole Earth Catalog; cited by Chris Wallis in correspondence with the author.

¹⁰ Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (1922), Compass Books, 1962, p.1.