

Ruskin's Pond

Introduction to book 2

Ponds and Rivers- early experiences- John Woodman

The most meaningful and memorable early experiences I can clearly recall from my childhood and early youth living in South London were those sitting for hours in the same place fishing next to a pond or river. Whether it was the ponds on Clapham or Wandsworth Commons, or Battersea Park, or beside the River Thames, Mole, Wey or River, I now realise how important those experiences were to me and how personal qualities developed at this time were later to be useful to me as an artist. As they combined the instincts of 'hunter', (explorer, enquirer), with a self- imposed but unconscious training in perseverance, concentration and contemplation. This activity was in complete contrast to my other encounters and experiences of growing up during the 1950's and early 60's in South London, and certainly different to anything taught at school.

The absorption in nature, and the reflection on and observation of its continuous changes and transformations while sitting next to those watery environments, has never ceased to amaze and inspire me, and as a consequence has had an immense influence. However during those early years I was not able to fully appreciate nor comprehend the symbiotic communication process which had been gradually taking place, through sitting and returning periodically to the waters edge. I could only glimpse this subtle form of communication with nature, which, I now put down to my arrogance and misplaced sense of superiority which must have unknowingly acted as a kind of perceptual barrier that prevent a deeper engagement and understanding of the natural world. Then realising at a later date, but this time with more humility and gratitude and with a deeper affinity, the sublime power, beauty and subtlety of nature .

It has taken considerable time and reflection to be able to appreciate the significance and value of those formative years and the profound effect they have had on my soul. One of the benefits of sitting for long durations by rivers and ponds had been the realisation of the immanence of nature, and how it/she can be experienced and understood as a mirror or as theophany. In this respect nature can be regarded as a living book in which the reading of its language and meaning is best interpreted through intuition and contemplation.

Early Landscape Work

This early 'baptism' through water, and the later exploration through art and philosophical enquiry led me to investigate issues of representation through the photographic and film mediums. The experimentation and visual exploration of light, time, place, chance and transformation set a wide agenda to follow; but the viewer's phenomenological experience of film duration also play an important part in my early

work. Films such as *'Pebbles'*, *'Light Movements'*, and *'Spider'* (all 1979), *'Reflections on My Shadow'* (1980), *'Bridge'* (1980), *'Dawn and Dusk'* (1980) are relevant works from this period. My long time collaboration with Roger Polley has resulted in visual investigation and experimentation with the Elements, Earth, Water, Air and Fire, while acknowledging and celebrating their sacred qualities. Rivers and the sea have been an important focus for our work over a number of years. Commissions, projects and film and video installations involving water have included *'Ritual'* (1982), *'Christening'* (1983), *'Or Brook'* (1984), *'Eaumage'* (1984), *'Dorset Stour'* (1989), *'River Exe'* (1992), *'Fossil Forest'* (1996), *'From Moors to Sea'* (1997), *'Mapping Saltburn'* (1999), *'River Lym and its Environment'* (2001) and *'Sequences- The Call of the Running Tide'* (book 2007).

The Pond in Ruskin Park

It was my good fortune to have lived at Denmark Hill within a 'stone's throw' of Ruskin Park, where John Ruskin's house once stood (and where he wrote *'Modern Painters'*). Today the Park has an expanded acreage including the grounds of Ruskin's house, though the only features remaining from his time are the Old Portico and the Ornamental Pond. The Friends of Ruskin Park and the local community now contribute ideas and help with the Park's upkeep and development.

In 1980 just after my time at the Slade School of Art and while still living at Denmark Hill, I decided to make a comparative study of changing light movements on the pond in Ruskin Park. Using a camera to frame a small area of the pond's surface, I made recordings at different times during the day and returning at different times of the year to continue the work. It was a year's observation of the continuous changes of reflected light on the water within the same space. A typical days work involved sitting in the same position on the banks of the pond observing the subtle shifts of light and movement on the waters surface as a result of the interaction of various kinds of natural phenomena, such as wind, rain, frost and changes of light in response to the sun's position in the sky. Although the contemplation and perception of change was experientially engaging and rewarding in its own right, the outcomes of the work are presented to the reader as a series of photographic representations which depict visual difference and transformation, the result of a comparative study of changing movements on water. A reflection on the narrative of light and the passing of time. The photographic series is published for the first time in this book.

'Modern Painters' and 'Of Truth of Water'

It was at this time when I decided to research Ruskin's writing in more depth and in reading *'Modern Painters'* volume one, was astonished at the astuteness of his perceptions and the eloquence of his descriptive writing on nature and the elements. Reading section 5 *'Of Truth of Water'* was inspirational as well as being synchronic as I began reading it when making this artwork, and observing and documenting changes in the quality light on the pond in Ruskin Park. These perceptions seemed to be heightened by being very near to the place where Ruskin wrote his book.

Ruskin's critical comments on the limitations and merits of how painters had represented water and particularly the sea, seemed to me be founded on the confidence he placed in his own astute perceptions of water and other natural phenomena. Initially I empathised with the depth and quality of his observations and the refined aesthetic sensibility that was so evident in his descriptive writing. Through which he was able to reveal, often in minute detail and with remarkable lucidity, some of the more ephemeral, subtle and the sublime aspects of nature. However it was Ruskin's ability to see both value and beauty in the small and the 'everyday' and the often unnoticed things that are thought of as being insignificant or which are taken for granted or completely 'missed' by many of us, that I admired most.

The following two extracts from Ruskin's 'Modern Painters' volume one - 'Of Truth of Water' are examples which epitomise his approach;

'Go to the edge of a pond in a perfectly calm day, at some place where there is duckweed floating on the surface, not thick, but a leaf here and there. Now, you may either see in the water the reflection of the sky, or you may see the duckweed; but you cannot, by any effort, see both together. If you look for the reflection, you will be sensible of a sudden change or effort in the eye, by which it adopts itself to the reception of the rays which have come all the way from the clouds, have struck on the water, and so been sent up again to the eye. The focus you adopt is one fit for great distance; and, accordingly, you will feel you are looking down a great way under the water, while the leaves of the duckweed, though they lie upon the water at the very spot on which you are gazing so intently, are felt only as a vague uncertain interruption, causing a little confusion in the the image below, but entirely undistinguishable as leaves, and even their colour unknown and unperceived. Unless you think of them, you will not even feel that anything interrupts your sight is their effect. If on the other hand, you make up your mind to look for the leaves of the duckweed, you will perceive an instantaneous change in the effort of the eye, by which it becomes adapted to receive near rays, those which have only come from the surface of the pond. You will then see the delicate leaves of the duckweed with perfect clearness, and in vivid green; but, while you do so, you will be able to perceive nothing of the reflections in the very water on which they float, nothing but a vague flashing and melting of light and dark hues, without form or meaning, which to investigate, or find out what they mean or are, you must quit your hold of the duckweed, and plunge down.'

And the following;

'Now, the fact is that there is hardly a road-side pond or pool which has not so much landscape *in* it as above it. It is not the brown, muddy, dull thing we suppose it to be; it has a heart like ourselves, and in the bottom of that there are the boughs of the tall trees, and the blades of the shaking grass, and all manner of hues of variable pleasant light out of the sky. Nay, the ugly gutter, that stagnates over the drain- bars in the

heart of the foul city, is not altogether base; down in that, if you will look deep enough, you may see the dark serious blue of far-off sky, and the passing of pure clouds. It is at your own will that you see, in that despised stream, either the refuse of the street, or the image of the sky. So it is with almost all other things that we unkindly despise. Now this far-seeing is just the difference between the great and the vulgar painter: the common man knows the road-side pool is muddy, and draws its mud; the great painter sees beneath and behind the brown surface what will take a day's work to follow, but he follows it, cost what it will. And if painters would only go out to the nearest common, take the nearest dirty pond among the furze, and draw that thoroughly; not considering that it is water that they are drawing, and that water must be done in a certain way, but drawing determinedly what they *see*; - that is to say, all the trees, and their shaking leaves, and all the hazy passages of disturbing sunshine; and the bottom seen in the clearer little bits at the edge, and the stones of it; and all the sky, and the clouds far down in the middle, drawn as completely as the real clouds above; - they would come home with such a notion of water-painting as might save me and every one else all the trouble of writing about the matter.

In Celebration of water

Water is such an integral part of every aspect of our lives but the way it is perceived is very different, its value and significance is often underestimated and 'taken for granted', its as if its very abundance for many of us and the severe lack of it for others, together with its transparent appearance, contribute to its 'invisibility'. There is little doubt that in the near future we will be 'forced' to recognise and appreciate the qualities and value of water as it is predicted to increasingly become a precious natural resource as a result of global warming and climate change, and an important element for a sustainable future. Should we not recognise and celebrate the qualities of this unique element, as it permeates all levels of our existence from the spiritual to the physical. And to begin to appreciate and understand better its true value and its ecology as it continues to interconnect and affect all aspects of our lives and environment.

Following Ruskin to Cumbria- From pond to pond

After leaving Denmark Hill and the Pond in Ruskin Park I moved to the West Midlands

followed by a period living in Devon before moving to Cumbria in 1996 to take up an appointment at Cumbria College of Art (now part of the University of Cumbria), near to the Lake District. Discovering Brantwood, Ruskin's second home overlooking Coniston Water was a delightful experience and the gardens he created are quite special. As well as cultivating a large collection of ferns he also engineered an elaborate system of water management which was designed to harness and control the often damaging winter rains on its steep slopes, whilst providing irrigation for his experimental gardens. In the Moorland Garden at the top of the estate he gathered the natural run-off from the moor into a series of reservoirs and underground tanks which proceed down the hillside. The system provided water for the house and a cascade

outside the front door which could be run to order. At the southern end of the estate he harnessed another natural source to create a pond which I now enjoy visiting whenever I have the opportunity, which was then stocked with fish. While the steep flowing 'Bee House Beck' in the centre, with its cascade, provided the site for him to establish a stone seat where he spent many hours in contemplation.

It has been a great pleasure to have experienced Ruskin's two environments at Denmark Hill and Brantwood through the inspiration and connection with water and through links in word and image. However Ruskin's observations and perceptions of water and the aesthetics of its representation as in 'Modern Painters' sets an example for us at a time when there is a call for greater vigilance and for better understanding through a change in our consciousness of our relationship with nature and the environment.