

Looking to See

Steven Bode

Introductory essay featured in the publication "Seascape".

Published by Film and Video Umbrella, 2009.

Seascape is a multifaceted exhibition project, comprising a number of wall-based and online components, by the British artist, Susan Collins. Commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella and De La Warr Pavilion, and presented, in the Spring of 2009, in the highly resonant setting of the main gallery of the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea, *Seascape* offers a vivid meditation on the compelling, endlessly fluctuating nature of maritime light, and its inflection by both time and tide. Produced in parallel with the exhibition, this publication brings Collins's approach to her subject into sharper focus, foregrounding the conceptual impulses and technical processes that underpin the work, while also considering the longstanding pictorial tradition of the seascape in relation to the new horizons opened up by digital technology.

For its raw material *Seascape* draws on thousands of hours of webcam footage from cameras specially sited at five sea-facing locations along the south coast of England — all installed for the best part of a year before the gallery exhibition began. Relayed back to a central server computer, these ongoing data streams have been subtly manipulated (by Collins) so that the image generated from each webcam is no longer a real-time representation but rather an amalgam of different moments over the course of a particular period of time (the individual pixels that make up the video image renewing one after the other to form an extended composite picture which, following the rhythm of the tides, covers an approximate six to seven hour span). This technique, pioneered by Collins in several earlier webcam landscape pieces, notably *Fenlandia* (2004), reaches a kind of apotheosis in *Seascape*; the slow updating of the digital image, evolving pixel by pixel, echoing the action of its restless (yet disarmingly changeless) subject as it, too, refreshes, wave after wave. Breaking in the present, surrounded, almost overwhelmed, by a Proustian backlog of passed yet remembered time, the one 'live' pixel in each image, pulsing somewhere in the intricate mosaic of the screen, marking the point of 'now' like a little light-emitting diode, goes frequently unnoticed among the other more prominent features of the scene: an illuminated section of pure blue colour recording a

nostalgic hour of unbroken sun; or the stark black bands cutting across the picture like a shadow, marking the dead of night. An elegant reminder that light is both wave and particle, Collins' seascapes disclose both the invisible grain and the wider repetitive patterns of the passing days.

Fanning out from Bexhill towards the nearby resort towns of Folkestone and Margate, or heading in a westward direction to the village of Pagham near Bognor Regis and the Portsmouth suburb of Stokes Bay, this parade of webcam views inevitably recalls a series of earlier vistas of these and other adjacent stretches of coast as reflected in the more traditional seascapes of generation after generation of painters. Looking to the sea for an iconic backdrop to their work, or, as in the case of JMW Turner, seeing it as a test-bed for examining the formal/perceptual limits of vision and representation, artists have long been attracted to the liminal space of the shore, finding much in this shifting coastal environment (with its spectrum of weather and its ever-changing skies) to spark their imagination. Landmark sites in the development of English painting, these places on the English Channel have also been marked by a history of maritime defence and coastal surveillance. Although none of the five project webcams ended up being located in any of the original five Cinque ports, their unblinking vigil, like lenses trained on the far-off horizon, evokes a time when this part of the world was perennially haunted by the threat of invasion, as evinced by the pillboxes, Martello towers and other lookout points that are still dotted around this seaside landscape.

Shown side-by-side as a series of small-scale projections at the heart of the gallery space, the five webcam feeds form a kind of virtual panorama, looking up and down the coast. The panoptical desire implied by this omni-directional overview is mirrored, and partially sated, by the accompanying project website, which is also displayed as part of the exhibition; an exhaustive online archive, whose interactive timeline allows viewers to dredge up a specific image from an individual location from a specific hour of a specific day. From this veritable sea of material, Collins has selected a number of keynote images that surface (beachcombed rather than salvaged) elsewhere in the exhibition as digital inkjet prints. Abstracted from the endless flow of data, the larger prints especially have a stilled, contemplative quality, and a quietly imposing material presence; the greatly magnified pixels that make up each printed image suggesting a moment in time, as looked at under a microscope. Alongside these, a number of smaller prints – laid out in series or as an occasional elongated spread – testify to the intricacy and multiplicity of

the project as a whole.

Putting together an exhibition of this ambition and complexity requires close collaboration at every stage. Film and Video Umbrella and De La Warr Pavilion have worked in partnership throughout the long development of this project, and I would like to thank my colleagues at Film and Video Umbrella (especially Mike Jones, Nina Ernst and Hannah Barnes) and the staff at De La Warr Pavilion (particularly Celia Davies, Alan Haydon, Jane Won, David Rhodes and Stewart Drew) for the key contributions they have made to a strong and successful relationship. The extensive project website owes much to the generous financial support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, to University College London Information Systems, in particular Adrian Barker, and to the technical know-how of Jerome Rigaud, Matthew Jarvis, Oliver Knight and Rory McGrath. Going further back in time, Collins' body of webcam-based works, of which *Seascape* is the latest and most significant manifestation, is equally indebted to the programming skills of Simon Schofield, and to the longstanding support of Slade Centre for Electronic Media, in particular Martin John Callanan and Michael Duffy.

For the assistance they provided to the production of the prints for the exhibition, Ian Cartwright, James Keith and the Slade Digital Print Studio deserve a special mention; as do the writers Sean Cubitt and Nicholas Alfrey, whose insightful texts have illuminated this publication, which has been equally inventively designed by Oliver Knight and Rory McGrath. Finally, I speak for everyone involved in the project in expressing my sincere thanks to Susan Collins, for her energy and commitment, and for creating, in *Seascape*, such a beguiling and memorable piece of work.