

British Council Collection
My Yard

Discussion of the exhibition “My Yard” by Jeremy Deller
and Alan Kane

I.

Jeremy Deller

Welcome to the show. Alan and I put this together –

Alan Kane

You should say what it is. It's My Yard. The title of the show comes from a picture we bought for a project we did called Folk Archive.

Jeremy Deller

And it's a drawing by a young man, we presume, in a youth offenders' institution.

Alan Kane

Possibly not as young as the style of drawing might indicate. It actually has his age on the back, and I think he was 14 years old when he made this drawing, which the content indicates, perhaps, maybe not the quality.

Jeremy Deller

Yeah – there's quite a lot of adult content in it. It's basically a drawing of a crime scene, so that's where the title comes from. And it's a show about home, urban living and the urban landscape, in the most widest sense.

If we start from the left – we're not going to look at everything, because there's too much to talk about – we've got the two landscapes by John Davies, who I think is such an amazing photographer, because the works themselves just had so much history within them when he makes these photographs. And there's a very strong narrative within them as well about Britain's industrial past and future – or lack of an industrial future. So we thought it was important to have two big works by him.

And the Stockport Viaduct is a very famous viaduct above the town of Stockport, which is where, at one point during the Industrial Revolution, something like 70% of the

world's hats were made, but that's just one of those little facts. They're kind of epic photographs, in a similar way to the Lowrys, which are epic but constructed paintings of the industrial present as he saw it, even though they're slightly nostalgic.

Alan Kane

Although nostalgic, as Jeremy says, it's far from pretty. But an interest in people, I think – that's possibly a connection.

Jeremy Deller

Actually not, because there's no people in it.

Alan Kane

Well, the whole show is about people really, though, because we could have done a landscape show, and that would have been a show about... In a way, we've done a landscape show which emphasises the human presence in landscape.

Jeremy Deller

Which, in Britain, is very easy to see –

Alan Kane

Well, it's such a compact island.

Jeremy Deller

It's a small country, so you're going to see... wherever you go, you're going to see some sort of impact of a human life on the landscape.

II.

Jeremy Deller

Part of our ambition – well, not ambition, but part of our interest has been to make associations that wouldn't naturally be made, obviously. That's where the fun for an artist in curating other people's work stems from, in that you can make associations that wouldn't naturally be made, and associations that definitely wouldn't be made by more academic curators, so we're allowed to put Dave Shrigley next to the Boyle Family, just almost because Dave Shrigley's square block of rock formally looks a lot like the Boyle picture. But again, I think the connection is with the kind of human aspect of landscape or environment.

Alan Kane

Also in the room, there's a lot of 70s conceptual art, which is... I suppose it's artists going back to the landscape and going back to the towns and making landscapes, but in a conceptual way. So, obviously different from Lowry and Coldstream and the painters from the... modern British painters, but looking at the individual within a landscape, nonetheless, so there's Steve Willats and Keith Arnatt. So their concerns are possibly similar to someone like Coldstream or Spencer, but because this is a different era of art-making, they're making their point in a different way.

Jeremy and I were very lucky being invited by the British Council to look around their collection and make a selection for exhibition.

This is such a great opportunity, really, to go through the racks and just pick out things that you like. And it's been one of the least stressful things we've done. This audio guide is probably the most stressful part of it, because we can't work out what to say, now we're here and confronted with what we've chosen.

III.

Jeremy Deller

We've made a selection, and what we did was very literally went down to the stores and started pulling pictures out. We didn't have a clear idea of what we were going to do, and it's not anything we normally do anyway, but I don't think it would have been a very successful show if we'd had a point of view we wanted to get over before we started. But what happened was that, from the collection, which spans over 100 years, stuff seemed to kind of start going together, and that's really how we went about picking works for the show.

We started pulling things out, putting stuff we liked against the wall, and then things like the Coldstream, actually, I think, is a key work, because we pulled that out very early on and, for me, it seemed to suggest a picture of Britain which we haven't seen for a little while. I do think that we remember very well, and not so long ago, the country just didn't look sparkly, and I think this is something that very naturally came out of digging around in the collection: that, in our living memory, Britain looked a bit different to how it does now.

Alan Kane

And that idea of bomb sites, as well, because that's a picture of a very fresh bomb site. And bomb sites... I remember bomb sites in the 70s, and that's where adventure playgrounds would be set up, which relates to that photograph from Liverpool – the bottom of the two photographs from Liverpool, to the right of the Coldstream [by Paul Trevor]. And also the Steve Willats is on a sort of wasteland that could be a sort of former bomb site, possibly. So there's an atmosphere, possibly, of war in a lot of

these pictures, but also of destruction of landscapes. But it's definitely a pre-developed Britain in terms of recent property boom.

IV.

Alan Kane

We have, in a way, ended up with perhaps a point of view or an opinion or a position, but it came out of a very natural digging-around. And I suppose it's not difficult to imagine why, really: if the British Council had been collecting work for the last 100 years, then a good percentage of their work would have been from before the 80s and the 90s, when people seemed to think contemporary art was invented, almost.

And, with the vast percentage of work coming from before that time, you're able to build a more solid picture of what all this stuff we're looking at now in the Tate and so forth was sort of founded on. Maybe that's what we're up to: we're trying to dig. It's like an excavation, almost. We've just taken the topsoil off and we've found the foundations of a quiet and interesting culture that we'd almost forgotten about – a slightly less obvious picture of our yard.

Jeremy Deller

But also, if you think about the beer mug and the teapot, they are effectively depictions of Britain.

Alan Kane

Though the teapot is very much influenced by Japanese pottery.

Jeremy Deller

But then you have this kind of idea of the Empire, then, and travel, and about adoption of ideas and of products. But that beer mug is as much a depiction of Britain as anything in this room. It just screams Britishness, doesn't it?

Alan Kane

Well, it's brown.

Jeremy Deller

Yes, it's the right colour, but it just shouts out that it's a British object.

Alan Kane

That's the other thing, isn't it? The Britain we grew up in was a brown country. It wasn't a...

Jeremy Deller

It was slightly dirty.

Alan Kane

It wasn't jabot.

Jeremy Deller

No, it was nicotine-stained and was dirty. I've got to go – I said I'd be home by 10.30.

Alan Kane

The trouble is, if I start something, I want to get it right.

Jeremy Deller

Yes. Well, that's you. We should come back and do it properly.

Recorded at Whitechapel Gallery, 02 October 2009