

# Excursions

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## Interview with Richard Hawking

Richard Hawking's latest exhibition, *An Imaginative Nature*, exemplifies the interaction between the natural world & the imagination. It offers a series of elemental landscapes which, through abstraction, repetition and sense of visual heightening, seek to individualize & focus one's engagement with nature. Through his practice of layering and reworking the canvas, Richard aims to represent topographical features, which are largely defined by their relationship with colour. His work has a close relation to the biological and, given this thematic connection with our Virus issue, the Excursions board were very keen to hear his thoughts.

**Excursions:** Your pieces often cross the divide between landscape art and representations of the human body. How long have you been interested in this connection? What first motivated you to explore these ideas? Would you situate your work in relation to a particular artistic tradition?

**RH:** It's really interesting that you have made this connection of landscape and the representations of the human body in my work. My father was a farmer, so I grew up being fascinated by not only the wider landscape he worked, but also the detail to be found within that landscape. Being surrounded by the inevitable cycles of life and death as I was, I had perhaps a more involved experience of our relationship with our environment in the increasingly sanitised experience of late twentieth-century life. Consequently, I try to offer an abstracted interpretation of our reliance upon, but also separation from, all aspects our natural surroundings which has become an increasingly complex relationship.

In terms of situating my work in a particular artistic tradition, I draw great inspiration from

early abstract expressionists such as Turner; Goldsworthy's investigations into the fleeting forms in nature are consistently enlightening and beautiful; whilst Voss-Andrae's sculptures - in which he visualises the molecular shapes that are inherent in the functions of living organisms - continues to explore the connection between art and science in more direct terms.

**Excursions:** There are numerous ways in which your work crosses boundaries, between the internal and external; the seen and unseen. What is it about these tensions that you find interesting? What is your purpose in aligning the landscape scene and the biological, microscopic world?

**RH:** As a consequence, my work certainly does aim to 'cross boundaries, between the internal and external; the seen and unseen' as you eloquently put it. To try to achieve this, I endeavour to dissolve the viewers' perception and expectations of the artistic construct of landscape and less picturesque biological forms. This is important as a close attention to nature reveals that a variety of forms are repeated throughout the natural world, be it on the macro or micro scale. As a result of my work being focused on our relationship with nature, science will inevitably play an integral role in such an examination.

With this in mind, one of the consequences of technological and scientific development is in one of the human species fundamental needs - food production. We now have means to sustain ourselves in food not grown in the local environment or, to a large extent, even in our national environment. This shift has had, and continues to have, a significant effect on not only our rural culture, but also on our view of the natural world. The aesthetic conception of landscape - man's framing and taming of his natural surroundings - continues to dominate our vision of, and interaction with, nature; such a conception reinforces our possession and

removal from it, arguably to a greater extent than ever before. Therefore, although I would regard my work as predominantly of the landscape, I am aware that because landscape itself is significantly an artistic construct, I have in my art a desire to narrow our removal from it. In doing this, one of my clear aims is to represent biological forms in order to stress the interdependence of the external and internal, and its increasingly fragile relationship.

**Excursions:** In a culture that seems to separate art and science in increasingly pronounced ways, how do you think your work bridges this segregation? What is your perspective on this separation? How do you foresee their relationship in the future?

**RH:** Although I agree that our often reductive culture does build up a separation between art and science, it is important to consider that there has been a long tradition of exploring the close relationships between the two. Leonardo da Vinci's works were informed hugely by scientific investigation; in a country where both the microscope and the telescope were first developed, Vermeer, the 17<sup>th</sup> Dutch painter celebrates both art and science in his painting *The Astronomer*; in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Impressionists, Post-Impressionists such as Renoir, Degas, Monet, van Gogh, explored to a lesser or greater extent physiological, psychological and phenomenal effect of light and colour.

Today, artists such as James Turrell continue to explore the interaction between art and science on an often grand scale, whilst the rise in popularity of transgenic art gives emphasis to examining biological kinship with other species, and their environment. Artists and art forms such as these exemplify the point made by Robert Eskridge, and suggest that they share a common moral and place in society, "science and art naturally overlap. Both are a means of

investigation”. If I have one overall aim when approaching my art, it is to recognise the significance of this, and attempt to express it.

**Excursions:** The pieces *Harvest Moon* and *Disintegration*, and even *Grange Meadow* suggest cell-like structures and show a resemblance to viruses. *Disintegration*, in particular, seems to suggest a fragment in a void, yet it also projects spines into its surrounds: weakening the closure or separation of forms, and suggesting a certain integration. Could you comment further on these ideas, and particularly the role of the viral in your work?

**RH:** When undertaking *Harvest Moon* and *Disintegration* I wanted to demonstrate both the division between forms and the reliance forms have upon each other. To this end, the wire stitching offers an anchor to these forms which, as such, symbolises both a connection and a separation. Again, the aim was to highlight the often uneasy relationships we have with nature; a relationship under increasing strain. As the title implies, *Harvest Moon* has connotations with our dependence on that which sustains us; the aim was to exemplify that, despite our society’s increasing disconnect with the production of our resources over the last half century, it is a dependence fundamental to our biological existence.

In relation to *Grange Meadow*, the resemblance you identify to viruses once more endeavours to communicate the tension that exists in our relationship with the countryside; on this occasion by reflecting a more specific event. *Grange Meadow* was in response to the highly contagious foot and mouth disease outbreak of 2001 in Britain which resulted in the culling of millions of livestock, the decimation of farmers’ livelihoods and lives, and rendered thousands of acres of farmland off limits for fear of contamination. The awkward perspective of the composition, together with the deep red of the meadow flowers / viruses set in flesh-

pink blurs the scale of the subject, leaving it ambiguous as to whether it represents the internal or external.

**Excursions:** Finally, could you tell us about how your work is evolving? If and how you are exploring these themes, especially around the virus, further? And where your work can be viewed currently and in the future?

**RH:** I am currently working on an exhibition for an autumn show in Worcestershire. The work is mainly canvas-based, using mixed media - primarily acrylic and charcoal. Similarly to my previous work, it will consider how nature, art and science are inextricably bound together, offering visual texts which examine their divide and dependence, deepening the exploration of the relationship between perceptions of landscape and our place in it. For this, I am working from a guiding principle, which is beautifully expressed by W. Mitchell when he states that “landscape is not a genre of art but a medium. [It is] a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other”.

I thank *Excursions* for the interest shown in my work, and the opportunity to share my thoughts in relation to it.

**Excursions:** Thank you for your time, thoughts, and insights.

*Excursions* Editorial Board

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