

# northcabin

*Inherent Sin*, By Gary O'Connor

Non-Immersive Fictions, A response by David Berridge

A disused operating cabin on a Bridge in Bristol. The windows are covered in black cloth. Three times a week, for a few hours at dusk, two curtains are parted and from an open window comes the sound of 1940's music. Looking inside I see a book on an upturned chair next to an old fashioned cream radio. The whole is lit from below, casting large shadows on the cabin's back wall.

On a hulk of old harbour machinery another pile of musty hardbacks, spines splitting, marble covers coming loose. A projector makes a white square on the wall. Has the film ended or has, for those of an art-minded nature, the 1940's paraphernalia - from the period when the bridge was constructed - given way to an impromptu screening of Nam June Paik's Zen for Film half way to Redcliffe?

Gary O'Connor's installation does not intend to offer too many easy answers to these questions. It doesn't intend to be too forthcoming about being a Gary O'Connor installation. There is no signage on the bridge or gallery - only the single label saying "Northcabin" with a website address in tiny type underneath. The installation has no invigilators either. It's running away on its own, door locked, explainable only through the viewers imaginings, or a later web search.

Or, rather - and this is what I'd like to explore in this essay - *Inherent Sin* both provides us with a fictional world and makes immersion in that world impossible. So, for example, the music, highly specific to the 1940s, gets caught in the traffic noise and becomes, at times, random noise. The apparatus of chair, book, and radio set a scene but are minimal enough to be skeletal. A non-immersive fiction.

For those of a curious frame of mind the uncertainty does not stop here. From a moss covered wooden stump in the water below, a 10 foot tree has grown. Is this part of this

new network of meaning *Inherent Sin* is positing as encounter, halfway between art, accident and daily life?

Cross over the road to the second control room - still involved with the bridge's working life and not available for art installations - and find thirty black rubbish sacks, weighted down with some heavy load, on a white sheet, next to three tins of caracol petrol and a huge chest covered in white bubble wrap. Not very 1940s, but possessed of a directness and opacity echoed back across the road.

Of course, writing about the show as I am, I get to go inside, sit on the chair, pick up and read the books, as Katie Daley-Yates, curator of northcabin, gets the installation ready. She takes black cloths off table and projector, gets the smoke machine working, finally parting the curtains so passers by can look in. As she does all this, I look through the books.

Perhaps I shouldn't say? The book by the radio is Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The pile by the projector includes books by Enid Blyton, the *Treasury of Knowledge*, *Little Women*, and a musty red hardback whose pages turn out to be entirely blank - Enid Blyton's little known Perec precursor perhaps? This was how she wrote so many. One page torn.

Gary O'Connor writes in an email:

I have always been interested social/cultural history and how it is documented. I know from personal experience how easy it is for information to be forgotten or even exaggerated when passed down from one generation to the next, it's this area that I'm interested in: in a very playful and at times humorous way, I subvert facts, stretch the truth. When making work for an unusual space or situation, my first instinct is to investigate the history of the site: this early stage of research can be the most rewarding part of a project for me. As I pick my way through the facts I immediately begin to form narratives in my mind. It is hard to say which comes first: words or visual ideas, it pans out differently for each project I do.

Looking in through the window, I cannot read the book titles. If the handrail to the cabin's staircase is a prominent part of any installation, the stairs themselves -leading down to the water level - have been boarded up. In both installation and architecture, attention encounters a limit, and comes back, without anywhere else to go, to the viewers own thoughts and the traffic on the bridge. Sin promises narrative, but gives a suspended moment, moving but frozen.

All of which may be a way of thinking through how writing figures in this. Writing has been key to O'Connor's work, particularly since his MA in Visual Writing in Norwich. Numerous projects - such as *The Field* (2009) at London's Transition gallery - have involved both published text and installation. I am wondering what word best describes the relation between the two. Is the text script, scenario, storyboard, and/or companion? O'Connor's own comments indicate a separate role for each:

I shy away from using text within an installation, although I have made artworks that have incorporated text in the past, I prefer to produce the writing as a separate component. This approach places distance between the two, allowing the viewer to digest the work in a more traditional way: this allows me more freedom to play with the context of the work. I also like the idea that someone can take a piece of the work home with them in their pocket.

I have approached the writing in various ways: in one case it was laid out as a stage play, with stage directions and detailed descriptions of each character, other pieces have been more fact based and presented as research or essay, but the majority of my work is written as a story in the first person, describing situations as and when they unfold.

For *Inherent Sin*, O'Connor wrote a story out of his research that provided the basis for the installation. The installation was made, and O'Connor went home to Cambridgeshire, to work, the northcabin website tells us, on the text. When the installation was taken down, only the promised text remains. Writing and installation seem to be in near-parallel, but out of synch worlds, each shifting from figure to ground and back and back.

Both text and installation mix grand illusion and poor theatre. There is also a sly transference between these very different media. The book readers act constructing worlds from the words alone does seem akin to what a deliberately limited installation asks of its viewers. I haven't seen the full fiction yet, but I imagine it will enable me some gallery going pleasures the exhibition refused: going close to see what the book is made of, maybe even picking it up.

In the durational act of reading the installation's moment gets unfolded into narrative. Of course the illusiveness of such publications, the erratics of their distribution, finds apt parallel in the occasional opening of curtains on a bridge, its undemonstrative claim on the attention of passers by. O'Connor has a somewhat different conception of how this limitation is operating:

I normally put myself through a rigorous reductive process when developing ideas and the work produced is fairly minimalist, but with the Cabin project I wanted to push things further. My initial response was to introduce a sense of theatre into the space, I wanted lights, movement, smoke and sound. I like the fact that there is no public access and the work can only be experienced through the windows and I wanted to play on this limitation: the division adds a voyeuristic aspect that again enforces the notion of theatrical spectacle.

This is the fourth and final installation to occupy the northcabin site. Not surprisingly, posed out there in the middle of the harbor bridge, previous exhibits have also played with the tension of looking in and looking out. The non-art cabin across the road plays with it too, with its creepy sacks and bubble wrap chest. As O'Connor blacks out the windows, Helen de Main, the previous incumbent, filled the space with her own construction. Both seem to have found site specificity through active removal.

The projector and its endless square of light is a focal point for many of these concerns. It suggests the narrative of a finished film, left running in the absence of audience and projectionist, whilst also pointing formalistically to the materiality of the cinematic apparatus and experience. In a variant on the (non-) immersive it evokes the grand illusion of cinema, alongside the stark, clunking, non-digital presence of the equipment itself.

A play of film and photography is evident, too, in how the whole installation suggests a camera obscura. This was emphasised when I went back to view the installation at night. In heavy rain and darkness the white screen was a decoy. There's no film in the projector, so its white square becomes pretend, even as it becomes the lit moment itself, not projected scratch marks off white leader.

Furthermore, the black curtains along the curving back wall become a screen for showing the continual passage of busses and people across the bridge, topped by the reversed pink neon sign of the Mercure Hotel across the harbour. It's not really on the curtain-screen of course - it's reflections on the window - but there's an appropriate play between planes, between illusion, reflection and actuality, appropriate to the perceptual character of *Inherent Sin*.

There's a black hole in such a dioramic swirl too: the body of the viewer-critic, obscuring this theatre of light in the keenness to see in. I stood across the road and watched how people responded to the invitation of flickering white light and muffled sound. I got most intrigued in passers by that looked in, but continued on their journey without hesitation. All these 1940's objects, it seemed, had escaped history to become an unremarkable part of December's Bristol rush hour.

*Inherent Sin* was produced by Gary O'Connor in November/ December 2009 as part of the northcabin commission's at Redcliffe Bridge 2008-2009. northcabin is a commissioning programme which invites artists to respond to unusual architectural surroundings.

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