MEETINGS WITH UNREMARKABLE TREES

The Photography of Paul Hart

Gerry Badger

> "A culture is no better than its trees." W.H. Auden
>
> "A fool sees no the same tree that a wise man sees." William Blake.

There is a school of critical thought which says that photographing rocks or trees in their natural state – the 'unspoiled' landscape in other words – is somehow irrelevant. Or even false or deceitful, for we all know that our natural environment is far from unspoilt. This school of thought proposes that, with the primary subject of photography deemed to be modern life, the only valid form of landscape photography is to draw attention to that ruination. It is quite probably a reflection of this selfsame attitude that has seen the reputation of Ansel Adams – the critical rather than the popular reputation, I should add – decline in recent years.

The fact, however, that whilst suffering a critical decline, the work of Ansel Adams remains high in the public's estimation and affection, might tell us something about what many people want from landscape art. The other great American landscape photographer bearing the Adams surname – Robert – certainly has the respect of those commentators espousing a political approach to the genre of landscape photography, but Robert Adams has other ambitions for the medium besides the overtly political. No matter how degraded the landscape he photographs, no matter the anger with which he photographs it, Robert Adams' images always find the potential for redemption. He is acutely aware of art's consoling mission, and what he firmly believes is the obligation of the artist to find, or create beauty, wherever he or she can. As he says, despite the necessity to look the iniquities of the world squarely in the eye, he refuses '*to turn away from what artists have traditionally celebrated in life – beauty*.'

Robert Adams has a particular affection for a picture that has certain links both with the English landscape and the photographs of Paul Hart. The picture is an etching by Lucien Freud, entitled *After Constable's Elm* (2003), and, as its title might suggest, is a reinterpretation of John Constable's painting of the trunk of an elm tree. Constable's original painting is an example of a genre which was somewhat novel around the time it was created– around 1823 – an oil sketch made out of doors. It is, like many of Constable's oil sketches, both modest in size and of nominal ambition, born out of a desire not to make art, but to observe and to record. Its modesty extends to the fact that it is not even a depiction of a whole tree, but merely of its trunk, up to the point where the first leaf canopy begins. Like Paul Hart's photographs, it is a portrait of a particular tree, treated as an individual, as an old friend we know and cherish.

‘Arena’. Paul Hart 2005

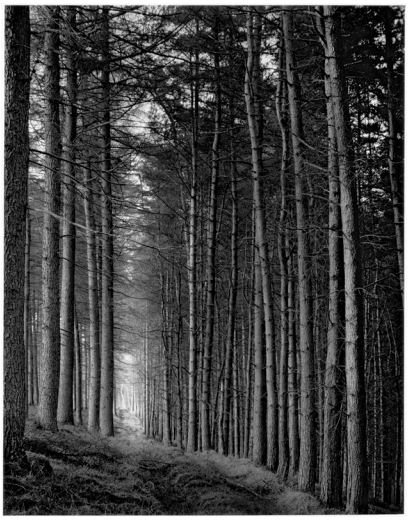
‘After Constable’s Elm’. Lucien Freud 2003

Such an approach reflects an attitude towards trees, indeed towards nature in general, that first appeared during the Romantic movement, when mankind was encouraged to be in active communion with the natural world, communion of an essentially spiritual nature. Of course, in almost every age, and in every religion, the tree has been regarded as an aspect of the divine. Mankind began in the Garden of Eden. Paradise is frequently seen as a garden, in religions from Ancient Egypt to Islam. In Norse mythology, the ash tree, Yggdrasil, was the world’s cosmic tree, with all life contained within its branches.

During the Romantic movement, however, trees – with their roots in the soil and tops reaching heavenwards – were seen not only as symbols of the divine but of man’s nobler aspirations. After the Enlightenment, and with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, the veneration of nature itself became a kind of secular religion. Nature was not so much worshipped in the traditional sense, but aesthetically appreciated. It was outside culture - the man-altered world - a healthy antidote to the ravages of man, and in order to bring it into harmony with culture, it required secular priests in the form of poets and artists to divine its essence.

Artists had been painting trees and nature since the Renaissance, but landscape painting as such only emerged after painters turned their attention from the Annunciations, Nativities, Crucifixions, and assorted saints and martyrs that had occupied the foregrounds of their images, and brought their landscape backgrounds to the fore, as the primary subject.

The new art of landscape painting came to fruition in 17th century Holland, with painters like Jacob van Ruisdael and Meindert Hobbema. London's National Gallery contains one of the first great 'tree' pictures, Hobbema's *The Avenue at Middelharnis* (1689), a view looking down a muddy Dutch road lined with scrofulous, but indomitable looking trees. Significantly, Hobbema's masterpiece is also a 'path' picture. The avenue functions as a direct invitation for the viewer, as it were, to 'walk' into the picture's space and inhabit it psychologically. The viewer is brought into a daringly direct and personal relationship with the pictured landscape.



'Portal'. Paul Hart 2007

'The Avenue at Middelharnis'. Meindert Hobbema 1689

This sense of personal intimacy became even more manifest when landscape painting went *en plein air*, with artists such as Constable, the School of Barbizon, and the Impressionists. The path figured frequently, not just as a useful compositional device, but as a way of declaring that these were not the traditional, monumental vistas upon which we gaze from afar with suitable awe, but the ordinary, everyday landscapes we inhabit, the landscapes of lived experience. Photographers too, evoked a sense of psychological intimacy with the landscape by photographing paths, none more so than the 'father of modern photography', Eugène Atget. Atget of course was known for his chronicling of early 20th century Paris, but he was also a truly great photographer of trees. It would appear that he photographed them, not so much as part of his documentary practice, but for their own sakes, because he was moved by their character and infinite variety. He made both 'portraits' of individual trees, and, utilising that so useful path motif, records of his wanderings in woods, in the great parks of the Île de France and in that favoured haunt of the School of Barbizon - the Forest of Fontainebleau.

Atget was a tree photographer, but also a forest photographer, and it is important to distinguish between the two. There are trees, and there are woods and forest, as there are people, and societies. If an individual tree connotes rugged individuality, trees gathered together in a forest - a society of trees - connote something quite different.

Trees are all around us in our urban society - individually or in groups, clumps, or coppices. We live among trees, but we might term them the domesticated variety. Forests, on the other hand, represent the realm of the 'other', where trees are at home but man is not. Few of us are actual forest dwellers. We may venture into the forests, for various reasons, even those who live on their fringes, but only a relatively small percentage of humankind lives permanently within the world's forests, and sustains itself directly from them.

The forest dwellers are a breed apart. For the rest of us, the forest remains a place to visit, a place of enchantment. Forests give us a sense of infinity and timelessness, of shelter and mystery. Man ventures into the forest for a time, perhaps to find God, or Nature, or to find Himself.

But if forests instil a sense of adventure or solace, they can also be threatening. I have used the term 'man' in relation to them, because for women especially they can be places of danger. Bad things can happen in forests. For the Romans, the dark, deep forests of Germany that bounded the northern frontier of the Roman Empire, represented barbarism personified. Their legions could never penetrate far into the German forests and in A.D. 9, the Roman general Varus lost three legions in a forest ambush, one of the most humiliating and well remembered defeats in the history of the Roman Empire.

Paul Hart may focus largely upon individual trees, but I think he could be said to be a photographer of forest rather than of trees. And ‘forest’ rather than ‘wood’ is the more apposite term for his imagery. He makes his pictures in the fir and pine plantations of Derbyshire, which, although man-made, nevertheless evoke the primordial forests of Northern Europe. Hart’s rich, dark prints capture the Stygian gloom of the dense pine forests perfectly, where the trees are so close together that little light reaches their inner depths. Furthermore, the lowest branches of pines may be little more than large twigs, but they are generally placed so low that physically penetrating the depths of forests like these is no easy matter.

These images, it seems to me, are as much about the act of moving through the forest as they are about observing what can be found once one has made the not inconsiderable effort. In this sense, they are very physical photographs. They certainly conjure up the forest’s materiality – the texture, smell, and feel of timber – but also the act of ‘getting there’.

Thus, although it might not be apparent at first glance, paths – and the opposite of paths, barriers – are as much a feature of Hart’s forest pictures as they are of Atget’s. Only one image might signify a path directly – the aptly named *Portal*, which leads us down a break between two lines of trees – but many of his images connote not just the important, indeed vital decision of just where to stop and make a picture, but describe the equally vital decision of how to move on through the forest.

In an image like *Paragon*, the portrait of a single tree, or *Buttress*, a group of four, we can easily glimpse the way ahead, as we can pass by on either side without difficulty. In *Tracery*, *Skeletal*, or *Polyphony*, however, it is not nearly so simple, as we face an apparently solid, seemingly impenetrable wall of trunks and branches, and it seems impossible to penetrate further into the heart of the forest. At other times, in *Stave*, for example, the way will not be easy, but a patch of light beyond the tree barrier, beckons enticingly, and ensures that we will try to move forward, come what may.

'Buttress'. Paul Hart 2006

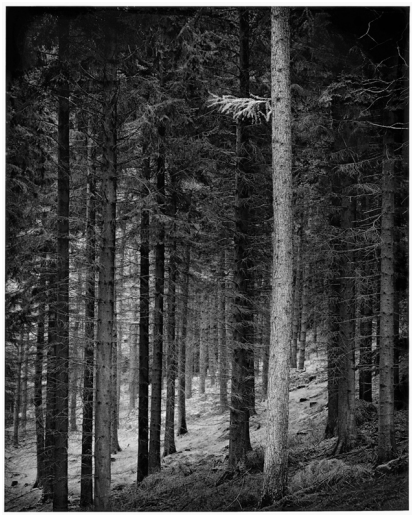
'Tracery'. Paul Hart 2005

But if the sense of traversing the forest is strong, even more so is the sense of being at rest within it, of stopping still at a particular place and paying close attention to what is there. Photography is the natural medium for meditation, freezing objects in space and time for our scrutiny. It does this especially felicitously in the case of people, that is, in the portrait, but the same strategy utilised to make a portrait – we might call it benign confrontation – also works well with natural and man-made objects. Paul Hart's images of single trees function like portraits, highlighting character and nuanced individualities – with one important difference. Trees do not react like people when a camera is pointed at them. Tree 'portraits' depend solely upon the sensibility of the photographer.

And yet, there is a distinct anthropomorphic aspect to trees. Of all natural objects, trees seem closest to man. It is clearly something to do with them being upright, perhaps the way their branches seem like arms. This is what draws Paul Hart (and us) to them, each tree has an individual character.

Here, perhaps because they are pines, they are not so individualistic as some other species of trees. They are like sentries, a little stiff in bearing, guarding the landscape (one is aptly termed *Warrior*) rather than relaxed old friends spreading themselves comfortably across the terrain. Two pictures, for instance, facing each other across a double page – *Semaphore* and *Sanctum* – strike us as being different views of the same tree. In fact, they are views of different trees, but such are their similarities that even the close scrutiny of Hart's camera cannot mark them apart. The people metaphor still holds though. Neither could the forensic attention of Diane Arbus's camera differentiate between identical twins.

‘Semaphore’. Paul Hart 2006



‘Sanctum’. Paul Hart 2006

In general, however, Paul Hart has been drawn to difference and character rather than an analytical view of anonymous trees. He is not the Bernd and Hilla Becher of trees, taking the clinical, analytical approach. His approach is a much warmer one, based upon the intuition of the moment, phenomenological and not conceptual. Some may see it as a formalist approach, and to an extent it clearly is. Hart’s pictures are studies in verticals – and in some cases horizontals – as stripped down and as rigorous as the stripe paintings of any minimalist. But yet again, the formalism would seem to be organic, arising naturally from the nature of the subject. Paul Hart’s forest photographs, in their quiet way, stress human experience above all else.

They stress those moments of inner peace we can find in the middle of a forest, when we have escaped, if only for a short time, from the stress of modern living and our over-reliance upon machines. Photography of course freezes things, so the stillness and silence of the deep forest is captured wonderfully well. Hart’s images echo, but only faintly, the ominous moments we sometimes experience when we are alone in the forest, when we suddenly feel lost, or that someone or something is watching us. In the main, they evoke a sense of well-being, the tranquillity that overwhelms us when we stand still and allow ourselves to respond to the magic of the woods, when we hear nothing except the rustle of wind through the branches, and perhaps the call of a bird or the rustle of an animal. Provided that, of course, we have remembered to switch off our mobile phone.

Forests are frequently compared to cathedrals, and it is likely that the architectural form of these great buildings, like the temples of Greece and Rome, derived from the forest experience as much as engineering imperatives. We do not need to be particularly religious to appreciate the sense of spiritual refreshment to be got from popping into the sanctuary of a church or cathedral for a moment of quiet contemplation, especially if we go there straight from the noisy bustle of a modern metropolis. Paul Hart’s images capture something of this. They not only take us in the woods, they compel us to go their in actuality, where we can sample for ourselves this quietude and beauty.

To return to the question we posed at the beginning of this essay, here is the relevance of Paul Hart's photographs. We live in nature. We depend upon nature. We are clearly bound to nature in the deepest psychological sense. Trees are our friends. We make use of them, to be sure, but we should not do so wantonly, profligately, without thought or love. As Paul Hart's photographs demonstrate, they have much to give us. As Robert Adams has written (about his beloved cottonwoods, but surely referring to all trees), trees '*can seem human – they seem to rejoice, and they seem to suffer. But they also seem to know a stillness that we can't experience, at least not for long. Maybe we are not even supposed to, given our minds and consciences. But the example of trees does suggest a harmony for which it seems right to dream*.'