

Stephen Vaughan

Opened Landscape: Lindow, Tollund, Grauballe

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Continuing the current trend in re-visiting sites of human devastation, artist Stephen Vaughan takes his audience back somewhat further than many of his contemporaries – such as Paul Seawright, Simon Norfolk and Tomoko Yoneda – to sites where Bronze Age victims of sacrificial rituals have been discovered, preserved by the peat bogs which Vaughan documents. Vaughan visited three sites across Northern Europe; Lindow Moss in Cheshire, and Tollund and Grauballe, both parts of Jutland in Denmark. He photographs each location under the same meteorological conditions – at the poles of winter days – and thus presents a homogenized collection of desolate images where it is impossible to distinguish one site from another.

The layout of Vaughan's work is particularly interesting at the Picture House, which has rows of waist-height plinths set at 45° angles. At a glance, the space has more in common with a museum than a gallery. Accompanying Vaughan's wider landscapes are more detailed images of the areas, and a handful of related reading material. There is one apparently erroneous row of studies of the 2000-year-old cadavers. Although it is appropriate to display these alongside, I cannot understand why Vaughan decided to photograph them in monochrome, and make them look so much more abstract than the accompanying landscapes. There is also a display-case at the front of the exhibition showing Vaughan in action, at various stages using his 10x8 camera. Whether it was intentional or not, the whole display is almost a parody of a local archaeological society's exhibition room, however, this does not distract from the understated density of Vaughan's images. While the exhibition may be a little confusing, particularly in relation to artists such as Joan Fontcuberta whose work plays with natural history, *Opened Landscapes* remains as a collection of images rather than a body of work relying on various different textural and figurative elements to complete it. The lack of captions or titles aids this.

A sentence that describes the series very neatly is by poet Seamus Heaney, whose books are among the artifacts accompanying the work: "I began

to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it". I find the concept of the peat bog as an archive or a time capsule a wonderful notion. The title of the work, while it may seem simplistic, seems to be appropriate. Unfortunately, we do not see the Bronze Age bodies as they were discovered within the context of their landscapes, nor the precise openings from where they came, however, Vaughan hints at this through his use of use many water-filled ditches dissecting the composition, making a gash through the landscape, and by their reflectivity, appear almost bottomless.

The bleakness of Vaughan's images also demonstrates the great paradox of photography. Vaughan's photographs show the surface of the peat bogs, yet he is urging the viewer to consider what lies beneath. It is through the emptiness of these images that we assume that these must be sites of some historical significance: the prosaic is didactic of the meaningful. This is by no means a revolutionary approach to the genre of landscape, but it does seem an appropriate treatment of these locations of human sacrifice.

Vaughan claims that the primary purpose of this work is to document these landscapes before they are completely eroded. It clearly fulfills this objective, and, especially through the curative direction in this particular exhibition of the work, poses an interesting connection between photography and archaeology, as opposed to photography and history, as is usually explored through documentary landscape photography.