

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Maev Kennedy, "'Traumatised' pebble pictures exhibited to mark centenary of first world war", *The Guardian*, June 11, 2014

Anya Gallaccio's photographs on the Suffolk coast open the 14-18 NOW festival



Anya Gallaccio's 'Untitled Landscape' 2014 at Snape Maltings as part of the 14-18 NOW festival and the SNAP art programme at the Aldeburgh festival. Photograph: Owain Thomas/Aldeburgh Music/NT

One small scorched pebble, described by the artist Anya Gallaccio as "traumatised" in an explosion at one of the eeriest places in England, stands for a century of sinister and secret events, many of them still covered by the Official Secrets Act.

Among the acres of rustling grass and rattling shingle at Orford Ness, in Suffolk, her giant photographs of the fractured pebble, magnified 20,000 times under an electron microscope so that they look like aerial photographs of lunar landscapes, have now been installed as the first major commission of the 14-18 Now festival marking the centenary of the first world war.

"I wanted a poor stone that I knew had been through some trauma, that held within itself what had happened in this place – before I chopped it up and caused it even more trauma," she said.

She wasn't allowed to find the stone herself: the 10-mile spit of shingle and marsh, now owned by the National Trust, is littered with a century's worth of unexploded ordnance. Admission is only by a boat trip and guided walk, and visitors are repeatedly reminded that the myriad notices for them not to stray from the marked path are not just atmospheric set dressing.

Gallaccio's pebble was scorched not in an atomic bomb test conducted at the height of the cold war, but in a hollow dug in the shingle where the National Trust regularly blows up live ordnance to dispose of it. The warden who brought her the pebble also brought back a handful of bullet cases and shrapnel gathered in a 100 metre (300ft) walk. Somewhere on the site, there is said to be a live Doodlebug bomb.

The science fiction landscape, wilderness scattered with enigmatic decaying buildings and structures, was a secret place not just during the first world war, when bomb tests and aerial photography and radar experiments were conducted as part of the war effort, but right up to the point in 1993 when the National Trust took over the site from the Ministry of Defence.

Gallaccio's giant photographs are more solid than many of her former pieces, including works made in chocolate and ice, or her great carpet of crimson roses that gradually filled the galleries of Tate Britain with the scent of decay as they rotted.

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

At Orford Ness, however, the entire landscape is shifting, and many of the buildings, their original purpose still only hazily understood, are decaying.

The project was a joint commission from 14-18 NOW and the SNAP art programme at the Aldeburgh festival. At Snape Maltings, also on the Suffolk coast, her photographs look radically different, set against a rippling expanse of reeds, a tranquil landscape to be admired by visitors to the music festival in the intervals of concerts and operas.

Orford Ness still holds many of its secrets. When Grant Lohar got his job there with the National Trust, he discovered that his father-in-law had worked there. None of his family had known. Asked what he had actually done at the site, Lohar's father-in-law checked with the MoD what he could say. He wrote out a job description and sent it to the MoD for approval, but it was returned redacted beyond intelligibility.

"It's an unstable place," Gallaccio said, against a background rattle of the wind blowing through the rusted and decaying metal of an atomic laboratory roof. "Nothing is fixed here, the whole place is moving and changing."

Her pieces will be in place until the end of June. They are free to view at Snape Maltings, but access to the Orford Ness site is only by guided tour, booked through the Aldeburgh Music box office.

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/11/pebble-photographs-mark-centenary-first-world-war>