

Stourport Sketchbook 2004-2005

"A place comes into art loaded with content. An artist comes to a place in one of two ways: either loaded with content or like a clean slate, ready to receive, interpret and represent... If the former, the artist will displace the resident meanings of a place with preconceptions about art. If the latter, the artist will make those resident meanings visible for the first time." [adapted from Jeff Kelley 14th June 2006]



Stourport Canal Basins 2004 - 2006 (British Waterways)

Shortlisted for BURA Waterways Renaissance Strategy & Master Planning Award 2006.

Like Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, we are always at the edge of change – our faces turned toward the past while we are propelled into the future by the storm of progress.

Things have to change. Mary Palmer wanted to change things, so she gave Fred Payne the job of resident pianist. Nothing like this had happened before – and certainly nothing of this kind had happened during the time the Widow Tyler had been proprietress at the Tontine Hotel. Was Esther Tyler's silent hotel better than the first tune Fred would play on the piano? Is our memory of what was better than our anticipation of what's coming?

Only time would tell. Time is woven into the fabric of the Canal Basins at Stourport – it erodes the site but also opens up layers of content and memory and experience that enrich the place. As such, time bears witness to loss while providing the material for future recovery and revitalisation. And, as always, these things take time.

The important thing about walking the site together is not so much what we look at (although that is important) or talk about (although that is also important) but how bits of looking and talking become layered to suggest new possibilities. A looking and talking palimpsest excavating the layers of the site, exposing the incomplete erasure of the things that have gone and revealing the partial legibility of the things to come.

Alex said to Tom, quoting Goethe, "We ought to talk less and draw more." Perhaps she had a point.

Certainly drawing is like thinking – and we think about everything. Drawing is about noticing things, generating and accumulating evidence, and about narrowing the gap towards future action. Like when we turned the corner at the Tontine and imagined the ghost of the curved wall of the now dismantled Iron Warehouse.

We stopped our talking and measured out where the wall had stood. An 8.75 metre arc chalked on the tarmac, locating something that had once stood over 6 metres high – obscuring the views up and down Mart Lane. And we understood, for the first time, the real scale and massing of what had been here.

"Throughout his career, (Barnett) Newman referred to his 1948 painting 'Onement I' as a moment of origin: "I recall my first painting--that is, where I felt that I had moved into an area for myself that was completely me--and I painted it on my birthday (January 29) in 1948. It's a small red painting, and I put a piece of tape in the middle, and I put my so-called zip."

Although there were earlier paintings and drawings that consisted of a narrow, centralized zip in a monotone field, 'Onement I' was the first zip painting in which all three parts appeared congruently in a single field, rather than as a striped "figure" that divides a receding 'ground'. After painting 'Onement I', Newman stopped making art for eight months.

In August 1949, he visited the Indian burial mounds in the southwestern part of Ohio, where he was profoundly moved by the sense of his own presence within the dramatically open spaces. He wrote, 'Here is the self-evident nature of the artistic act, its utter simplicity. There are no subjects – nothing that can be shown in a museum or even photographed; [it is] a work of art that cannot even be seen, so it is something that must be experienced there on the spot....Suddenly one realizes that the sensation is not one of space or [of] an object in space. It has nothing to do with space and its manipulations. The sensation is the sensation of time – and all other multiple feelings vanish like the outside landscape.'"

– A. Kurlander: *'Index of Selected Artists in the Collection', Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College*