

# Art and Sacred Places

Charity No: 1086739

ARTISTS' BOOKS SYMPOSIUM  
THE WINCHESTER GALLERY 13<sup>TH</sup> JULY 2007

## **SIX SACRED SITES**

Walking Tour 2.30 pm

As a preamble to the walking tour of the Six Sacred Sites exhibition I thought artists might find value in having an insight into the project brief and process.

The project was designed to:

- Explore the range of ways in which a location can be regarded as sacred.
- Give an opportunity for a range of people to reflect on the sources of sacredness and its meaning in contemporary society.
- Allow a range of people to reflect on the enduring power and significance of the notion of sacredness in society.
- Add greater depth and breadth to our engagement with these issues
- Give an opportunity for different faith communities to explore and develop common interests
- Allow interaction between diverse faith communities

The sites with which we worked were:

- Basingstoke Hindu Society
- Wessex Jamaat Mosque
- Portsmouth Anglican Cathedral
- Contemporary, spontaneously created roadside shrines working with RoadPeace (the national organisation which works with families of victims of road accidents)
- South Wonston ancient long barrow
- Newport Quaker Meeting

Artists, who were selected by open submission, were matched with sites with which they had no affiliation. The requirement was that they should either already produce bookworks or that their work would adapt to the book format. They also had to be experienced in working sensitively with communities and they had to stimulate thought about relevant contemporary issues of faith and life, and above all, they had to offer a new, informative and enjoyable experience of the visual arts. The project partners, that is Art and Sacred Places, aspeX Gallery in Portsmouth, Hampshire Sculpture Trust and The Winchester Gallery, eventually selected three experienced book artists and three artists who were new to the book format.

A full education programme working with schools, faith communities and art galleries was carried out by the artists. The books were firstly exhibited at or near to the sites for

which they were made and the display mechanisms, which changed depending on the location, were constructed by the team at The Winchester Gallery.

John Gillett, Director of The Winchester Gallery, devised restrictive guidelines on the completed book and advised on or produced the finished pieces.

As we look more closely at the books themselves you may be interested to know that the default format for the book was to be A4 (297x210mm), either portrait or landscape, bound on either the long or the short edge, with half-Canadian Wire-O binding, double thickness leaves, and ten or twelve pages. The display mechanism envisaged would accommodate books of this approximate size i.e. with a maximum open span of some 600mm and a height of 297mm. How things can change.....

I will talk about the books in the order in which they appear in the exhibition leaflet omitting 'Census', made for the South Wonston Long Barrow, which will be covered by site artist Glenn Boulter, who is here with us today.

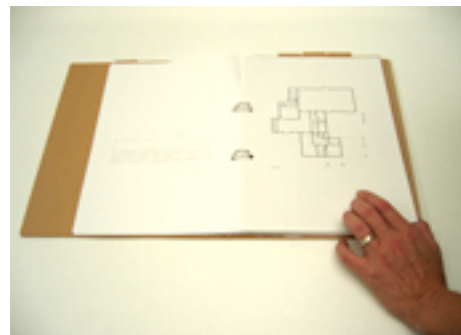
### **Basingstoke Hindu Society – Stuart Mugridge**

At Basingstoke the temple room, or Mandir, used by the Hindu Society is almost invisible placed as it is in the corner of a community hall. A small sign and a short length of ornamental fabric are all that may alert a member of Basingstoke's Ladies Choir or the Sapphire Sequence Dance Club to its presence

Immediately next to the temple room, separated only by a partition wall, is the more visible office from which members of the sharing and community-minded Hindu Society undertake the day-to-day running of the hall. It is here that Mugridge's response is centred; to quote the artist "where the sacred and the profane exist cheek by jowl".

This is exemplified in an image of two people either side of a diagrammatic wall each connected to a telephone receiver. One person is signified, as in an office, by having the receiver linked to his ear; the other person has the receiver linked to her hands, raised in the act of prayer, portraying the remark of one Hindu worshipper that 'The temple, its rituals and its imagery act as a telephone to connect the worshipper with [the supreme being] Brahman and so with himself'.

Mugridge's research led practice and use of strong graphic imagery has led him to produce a buff coloured office ring binder of facts, figures and diagrams about the site and its relationship to other Hindu groups throughout the country. You will see through building plans, maps, names, post codes, and grid references attributions to location and to connections with the wider Hindu community.



The sacred, says Mugridge, isn't necessarily location-defined but is also an expression of community and a state of mind. One of Mugridge's aims for the project was to interpret the value of the site not just physically but also within the consciousness of people. He became aware of how sharing and community minded the Hindu Society was through its efforts to make the hall available to all. Wishing to embrace this quality in his work Mugridge devised a way of inviting all comers to continue to participate in his work. At the back of the book you will find pages on which you may express your perceptions of the sacred. In amplification of the notions of the physical and the virtual, both of which Mugridge sees as boundaries between the sacred and the profane, he has designed an accompanying website at [www.sacredsite.org.uk](http://www.sacredsite.org.uk) on which these expressions of the sacred are recorded. As entries are made they are added to the book printed on saffron coloured paper.

The sacredness of a place, physical or virtual, may reside more in the perceptions of its users than in any physical characteristics – a factor which is echoed in the next work.

### **Wessex Jamaat Mosque – Ashley McCormick and Zana Wood**

The work of McCormick and Wood you will see only as a video presentation and two photographs.

The artists seek to enhance places so that their occupants might be transported beyond ordinary experiences, physical boundaries and expected routines - and you will see how this has been achieved. They had in mind before their selection a desire to produce an innovative high quality, image-based, interactive flick book that reflected their site research - and this they have done. They use animation both as a tool to discuss visual perception and spatial arrangements and to re-address principles of perception of material certainty – and this they explained to the Mosque community during preparatory workshops.

What had captured the artists' imagination was that the Mosque building had previously been a garden centre and a domestic residence. They were extremely interested in these changes of use, significance and occupation.

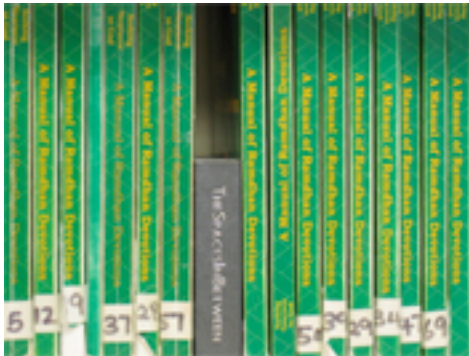
The starting point for their project was to develop a shared visual language with the community. Using mirrors they demonstrated how facial symmetries change and, using sunlight, they demonstrated how everyday objects' shadows evolve. They encouraged members of the congregation to observe and consider how decorative patterns can reveal culture and identity.

Referring to work by Leonardo da Vinci they explored the notion of artistic value conferred by society. What they had noted was the reverence with which the Mosque's sacred book was treated.

Key to the artists' socially engaged, process based practice was the help of the community in selecting everyday objects, such as carpets, cups and prayer beads, and working with a selection of the motifs derived from these objects. These the artists later

used, employing 'high' technology, to develop, patterns, which multiply, flow and diversify, reflecting the metamorphosis of the building.

The mandala/prayer wheel-like, patterns of the flick book meet the artists' objectives to create 'a profound sense of contemplation and inspiration and an urge to return to it again and again'.

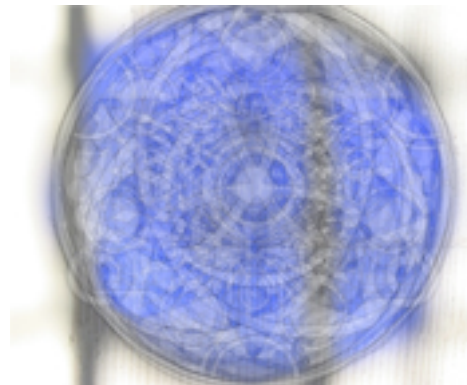


The finished book, entitled 'The Spaces in Between', you will see in video format only because, as one photograph shows, the book now resides amongst devotional books on the shelves of the Mosque. The other photograph is of the Mosque – a small pink bungalow.

### **Portsmouth Anglican Cathedral – Ansuman Biswas**

Portsmouth Cathedral, being steeped in maritime tradition, contains numerous images of fish and fishermen. Biswas when visiting the Cathedral noted these images and talked to visitors about their journeys through the Cathedral. He saw the way the stones were worn by people's steps: the way that marks were made in the space of the Cathedral itself. Looking back at the earliest ground before any intentional mark was made he thought that the whole Cathedral itself was a very deliberate mark on the ground. He saw connections between the notion of walking through a space and of writing on the page. With this he came to the concept of 'architecture as calligraphy on the page of the earth'.

The image on the front cover of his book 'A Basket of Fish' is a photograph of the Cathedral floor as the sunlight streams through a blue glass window. This image is superimposed with drawings of traced journeys which become, in the artist's mind, crop circles: crop circles being impermanent architectural markers and Cathedrals permanent architectural markers.



Mapping his own inner experiences of a meditative methodology onto widely divergent languages and practices Biswas has fostered a very broad, research-led arts practice spanning and drawing together great expanses of history and geography including deep ecological readings of the web of living things.

He has thus responded to the Cathedral in a contemplation of the resonances between The Book, the building, and the net by writing an epic poem about the birth and growth of man-made 'earth' calligraphy from watery beginnings to permanent structures.

With one sheet of movable white card to guide the reader through glimpses of ambiguous text printed on acetate sheets Biswas wishes to increase the balance of the felt experience.

I will read out loud an extract from his poem because Biswas would also prefer the word to be heard and spoken rather than to be enshrined in a book:

The stains of light on the grass are blueprints  
for the heaped stones I found last night,  
gathered at the wind's instruction,  
and accumulate here in circles and lines.  
I am the first, I think, to gather to me  
the bodies of the billion dead  
who came before and secreted themselves  
into water and earth and stone.  
And with their sacrifice now I mark  
the geometry of our sojourn.

### **RoadPeace – Jimmy Symonds**

From the beginning Symonds knew that his book would be central to a RoadPeace national service of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims. He also worked closely with a bereaved mother of Roman Catholic upbringing. It was therefore but a short leap to make the working structure of his book follow the 'chapter' headings of a requiem mass and to include within his work, unusually for Art and Sacred Places' commissions, overt religious imagery.

Being text inspired Symonds had intended to explore new ways of using photography to illustrate words and phrases in the sacred world into which he was to be placed. This has translated into a visual dictionary of ideas relating to road deaths using a variety of digital media:

from Bridget Driscoll, the very first road casualty,  
to crushed coins from the pocket of David the son of the lady most closely  
associated with the project

The beautifully made book resides under glass and we are treated to its contents by the use of a video recording.

Research led Symonds to discover that Roman widows' collected their tears in jars as a measure of grief. He imagined the tears collected from those grieving the dead from one

single afternoon of contemporary road crashes. He discovered that yew trees were planted to commemorate pilgrimage deaths. He imagined the yew forest that might be planted between junctions 22 and 23 of the M25.



You will see as the pages are turned the anguish of Britain's roads swimming with blood, children innocently holding toy cars, wilted flowers from wayside wreaths, and luscious poppies of remembrance.

The most jolting image for me was inspired by a personal story related to Symonds. He was told by his hairdresser (snip, snip) of his childhood experience of losing his father in a road accident on St Peter's Day whilst he (the hairdresser) sang in a Church of the same name. The resulting image is a kerbside row of tiny, fragile, paper cut-out figures.

### **Newport Quaker Meeting – Sam Winston**

Winston's work is always about text – whether it's inside language, in typography or even in the structure of a book. He finds that looking at how words behave can give an insight into their underlying messages. He has worked on many different texts: starting with the dictionary and then with fairy tales and myths.

He found working with the Quaker group that there was much emphasis placed on the meeting and that the actual physical space wasn't important. To experience a meeting, says Winston, you have a real sense of spirit and this comes across especially when someone gives ministry. Meetings are held in silence until someone rises to give ministry and speaks.

Winston finds that words on a page can lack the energy of the meanings that they hold. In speech language seems to carry more character. So investigating the use of language in Quaker meetings he has examined the particular resonances carried by the spoken and the written word.

Entitled 'One Thinks of Another' conscious thought is attributed to an exquisitely encased three act play which is attempting to remove every bit of itself in order to become part of every day life. It seemed to Winston that the Quakers' worship held certain similarities with this art form.



Large folded black sheets each bear the scant, reducing script in one corner. The remainder of each page is taken up by two huge, hand drawn, swirling spoken extracts either side of a central fold reading, for example, "This is what you said". The eerie drawings echo those of Arthur Rackham.

On a single loose white A4 sheet there is an open invitation to perform the play repeatedly.

Angela Peagram  
13<sup>th</sup> July 2007