Dan Shipsides, Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray, Co. Wicklow
Coinciding with ‘Figuring Landscapes’.
Introduction by Catherine Elwes, September 2009

It is a pleasure for me to see Dan’s work as an installation, where we, as a selection panel of Fig Lands, only ever experienced it as a series of short vignettes, performed actions in the landscape.

My initial reaction to the work was a delight in the absurdity and iconoclastic nature of the gesture: I’m sure you already know Dan’s technique: He uses his climbing skills to access remote landscapes. He chooses what looks like a conventional view, then ties a camera to his body by an 8-meter rope. Dan allows the viewer an ‘establishing shot’ of a rugged landscape and then swings the cameras energetically around his head, so that the image breaks up into a vortex of abstractions.

What a way to treat a delicate piece of electronic equipment, I thought, how wickedly anarchic and what a glorious mess he makes of the view. My colleagues on the panel were equally delighted by the way the work established the classic framing of landscape, with the sky above and the earth below and then proceeded to explode it with vertiginous movement.

As Eu Jin Chua wrote in the catalogue: ‘It’s as if the monopoly that traditional European landscape has held on our imaginations for some three centuries is once again being broken.’

It is possible to draw parallels between 360 degrees and the irreverent conceptual works of Tony Conrad in the 1970s. Conrad created what he called cameraless films that could never be projected because he had subjected them to pickling, baking and hammer attack. This approach Conrad wrote at the time, was designed to avoid the ‘inextricable bind to the commercial process.’

It is also possible to identify a link between Dan’s work and the films of William Raban and Chris Welsby in the 1970s. They made films in which the landscape was instrumental in creating the image. Using a time lapse technique, they allowed the
sun, wind, rain and the rotation of the earth to make its mark on the imaging process – for example, in Wind Vane 1972, Welsby attached a small sail to the tripod, which caused the camera to swivel and point only where the wind dictated. We might see Dan as combining these two conceptual traditions in early experimental film, in that the work arises from what he does to the technology, how he acts upon it, and what the landscape allows him to access, both physically and in terms of visual, and sonic recorded material.

It is only now, with the images multiplied across several monitors that we get a true sense of the imprint of each landscape in the technology. Each iteration of the formula produces subtly different results because the landscapes, Dan says, “create different colours and textures depending on the light, weather, and the particular features of the terrain.”

Here, we might take Dan’s work as evidence that landscapes act on those that witness and even exploit them, as well as landscape being understood as a totalising social construct, or a ‘product of the mind’ as Simon Schama would have it.

Harvey O’Brian wrote, "Places have a special individual character that influences those that live there, a character which inevitably features in their acts of self-representation".

Although Dan’s work is held by a strict regime of structural decisions, I still feel that the videos represent his response to particular landscapes, and are to some extent, a portrait of the man himself. There is a long tradition of men seeking out Edmund Burke’s dark sublime in the most inhospitable regions of the earth, places in which men have tested their metal since time immemorial. But Dan’s work, in both this exhibition and in the other pieces he has made in the context of his skills as a climber, cannot be reduced to expressions of machismo.

Instead they create subtle, poetic dialogues with the elements that determine a particular environment, and his actions are as measured and as carefully choreographed as those of a dancer.
The dance analogy introduces the concept of 'physical creativity' in which balance and agility are more important than brute strength. Balance means knowing how to use your weight and movement efficiently, Dan says. You need to create what he calls a ‘flow of movements’ that anticipate the unfolding of future moves along a proscribed route.

Although Dan seeks ‘the aesthetic potential in non-art activities’, in his case climbing, his works are not, as one might expect, predominantly ocular in nature. He has worked with a blind climber and he emphasises the importance of touch, of using the experience of the rock through hands, legs, feet, through the whole body. Dan has asked “what is landscape when sight isn’t involved?” Although sight is indeed implicated in the current exhibition, it is inextricably bound to all the senses involved in a focused physical activity, and to Dan’s ability to problem-solve in order to make the initial climb.

Dan says there is a ritualistic aspect of climbing. It creates a heightened awareness of geological time, of ‘deep time’ and of our individual insignificance in the greater scheme of things. Dan likes to look at pebbles embedded in sandstone that travelled from elsewhere, on the moraines of glaciers. As Ruskin said, rocks stand as a ‘perpetual memorial of their infancy.’

Dan describes his presence in the landscape as fleeting and insignificant and the films are all he can bring back from the experience. Dan also travels with a light footprint. Like that of Michael Snow in Canada, his filming leaves no mark on the landscape. What Dan has brought back from his journeys into our local wilderness is a tantalising set of glimpses of a landscape in a state of flux. His work also embodies an artistic tradition in the process of re-invention, as both a product of human imagination as well as athletic prowess and physical engagement with the environment.

I will give the last word to Dan himself, who takes responsibility for those actions, those anarchic gestures in nature. ‘We form the landscape by what we do’, he said, ‘by how we consume landscape’.
I hope you will join me in congratulating Dan on his exhibition. It is a wonderful achievement, beautifully installed by the curatorial staff here at the Mermaid, and, from my point of view a perfect complement to the other work in *Figuring Landscapes*. 