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WHAT AM I DOING HERE... : TRAVELSCAPES

Artists:

Hawazin Alotaibi, Stuart Dodds, Joe Fox, Georgina Gratrix,
Timothy Hyman, Vivienne Koorland, Nina Milner,
Myles Oxenford, Tobit Roche, Caspar Giorgio Williams

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Hawazin Alotaibi (b. 1993, Wisconsin, USA) lives and works in London. She studied painting at the University of the Arts London before completing her masters at the Royal College of Art, London in 2021.

Stuart Dodds (b. 1995, Hermanus, South Africa) is a multimedia artist. Opting to forego a formal arts education he developed his practice alongside his artistic peers in and around Cape Town.

Joe Fox (b. 1995, London, UK) graduated from The Royal Drawing School in 2019. He lives and works in London.

Georgina Gratrix (b. 1982, Mexico City, Mexico) grew up in Durban, South Africa. She studied painting at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, where she graduated in 2005.

Timothy Hyman (b. 1946, Hove, UK) is a Royal Academician. Between 1963 and 1967 he studied at the Slade School of Fine Art. In 2007 he won the National Portrait Gallery's Travel Award. He lives and works in London.

Vivienne Koorland (b. 1957, South Africa) graduated from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town in 1977. Subsequently, she travelled through Europe, studying at the Universität der Künste (Berlin) and Ecole des Beaux-arts (Paris) before competing her MFA at Columbia University (New York) in 1984. Koorland lives and works in New York City.

Mimi Lipton (1928, Vienna, Austria) has lived in London since 1950 and has published numerous books, including *The Tiger Rugs of Tibet* (1988), *In the Oriental Style*, *Untamed Encounters*; her book on her journey through jewellery, and in 1993 a book on the Austrian art of stacking wood, called *Stacking Wood*. Making jewellery and dealing in Asian objects and furniture is the great passion of her life.

Nina Milner (b. 1988, South Africa) is currently studying at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. She is the caretaker of a historic apartment building in central Cape Town.

Myles Oxenford (b. 1977, Plymouth, UK) lives and works in rural Cornwall. He first studied at the Leith School of Art, Edinburgh before completing his studies at Falmouth College of Art in 2000.

Tobit Roche (b. 1954, Manchester, UK) spent his childhood in Hong Kong, Canada and India. After studying at the Ontario College of Art, Canada, he lived for a year in Sussex, UK, working with Charleston's collection of artworks made by Duncan Grant. Tobit subsequently completed his studies at the Camberwell School of Art, London.

Caspar Giorgio Williams (b. 1993, London, UK) is an Anglo-Italian watercolourist, curator and art professional. He lives and works in London.

Travel:

No longer has the meaning it had not so long ago.

Now it really means going on holiday — Six Senses, Four seasons, Greek islands luxury cruises- the only come back stories are the weather, the parties — and the likely travel upsets.

I was lucky enough to experience the real exciting travels from the 60's. My travels begin in '67 starting with Morocco, Sierra Leone, Gambia and Mali. Nothing was organised and booked to the nth degree. no mobile, no internet — letters and phones were sufficient. For example:

We wanted to go Petra. With the help of an eager friend-of-a-friend (with connections) in London, we flew to Eliat Airport in Israel, an airstrip in the desert with a few huts. There on foot we crossed into Jordan, Aqaba, where as promised, a car awaited us which drove us to Petra to a fairly empty hotel. In Petra we walked down through the rocks into a lunar landscape of caves, excavations, tombs and temples. After a couple of days, back to Aqaba, again by local taxi to a boat which took us to the Egyptian Red Sea Port Nuweiba. Again a car waiting and on to Sharm El Sheikh. Return by car along the Red Sea coast to Eliat Airport — to London. Never once did we meet questioning officials, nor for a minute did we doubt our arrangements would not happen.

In the early 70s we decided to go to India. A friend suggested to meet and see the Taj Mahal by moonlight, the only way he said. Some eight weeks prior, we arranged to meet in Agra on full moon and thus we did - he came from Japan, and we came fro London, none of us had ever thought this could not be happening.

How could this ever be possible now — people book flights, accommodation, weeks ahead — the element of surprise has disappeared alas — and the what-was, is now abused and dead, sterile — travel is definitely a thing of the past — but we look forward to virtual reality journeys in the near future.

In 2024, Belmacz and Isaac Benigson Special Projects will present *What am I doing Here...: Travelscapes*, an exhibition inspired by a question of travel and landscape, and the changes that occur during the alteration of location. The title *What am I Doing Here* is an allusion to Bruce Chatwin's collection of essays, and his last published work in his lifetime. Bernard Levin, the infamous and revered columnist and broadcaster, said we travel because we think somewhere over the next hill there is still mystery, there is still something to be found that has not yet been found. We travel abroad for the same reason we travel inward, for the mystery we hope to find. To travel may be better than to arrive. This presentation of paintings will bring together artists and friends to examine notions of introspective thought, pilgrimage, walking, exploration, voyage and counter feelings of tourism, the sinister and the sunburnt.

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This exhibition was born out of a conversation during Isaac Benigson's visit to Mexico City, to attend Georgina Gratrix's 2023 presentation of paintings. He began thinking about how artists record their travels. The exhibition's basis is rooted in the two foremost travellers in his scrapbook of references, Bruce Chatwin, the extraordinary thinker and writer and the fictional film character, the journalist, David Locke, from Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger*, from 1975. In London, *What am I doing Here...: Travelscapes*, has been realised through further conversations and with the support of numerous agential friends; including Julia Muggenburg, whose ongoing dialogue has helped form the tenues of the thinking explored here, and a special thanks to Silka Rittson Thomas.

This exhibition's title *What am I Doing Here* is an allusion to Bruce Chatwin's collection of essays, and the last published work in his lifetime, before his death from AIDS in 1989. Chatwin, who began his career as a specialist in art and antiques at Sotheby's, before moving into the domain of archaeology, and then later into journalism and writing, was throughout his life endeavouring to make sense of the visual and material world through traversing and travelling the globe. The collection of writing was titled after the question posed by Arthur Rimbaud in the Ethiopian desert: "What am I doing here?", when in December of 1880, the mercurial French poet entered the ancient walled city of Harar, after a journey that had involved crossing the Gulf of Aden in a wooden dhow and some twenty days on horseback through the Somali Desert. Chatwin, whose first book, *In Patagonia* dealt with his time in the uttermost part of the world, was he said piecing together a ridiculous story of a distant cousin who had been shipwrecked in South America. Yet the book turned out to alter the way some think about travel, with Chatwin's creation of a fantastical landscape, going to the furthest place he could think to travel to - on a quest he had invented, and writing as if he was shooting a Cartier-Bresson series of photographs. The book was precipitated by a chance meeting in 1972 with the famed designer, Eileen Gray, "That's one of the places I've always wanted to go to," he said upon seeing a map of Patagonia on the wall in Gray's Paris apartment. "Allez-y pour moi," replied Gray.

Chatwin was, until the end of his life, fascinated with a strange, romantic, idealised vision of the nomad. And his novels and writing reflect his magnificent obsession with wandering and the longing for imagined homes. He believed the journey acted as a metaphor for life, with a beginning, middle and end. Chatwin continually questioned what travel is, exactly? Does it depend on the form or method, whether one was bipedal, backpacking, ultralight, in a vehicle or on horseback? Or perhaps dependant on one's objective (light amusement, adventure, a quest, journalistic, academic, making a pilgrimage or simply wandering... Or finally does the destination lay claim to travel's meaning? Bernard Levin, the infamous and revered columnist and broadcaster, said we travel because we think somewhere over the next hill there is still a mystery, there is still something to be found that has not yet been found. We travel abroad for the same reason we travel inward, for the mystery we hope to find.

The film character, the journalist, David Locke, from Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger*, from 1975, is asked by the girl he is travelling with what he is running away from, he answers by telling her to turn her back from the front of their moving car. *The Passenger* is a sequence of lucent scenes in which man and the landscape interact, Locke on a directionless journey in an effort to escape his reality. As the camera crosses Saharan Africa, then London, Munich, and through Spain, one almost feels one is watching a documentary from the BBC archive. It is a treatise on what it might be like to travel as someone else, and in that travel become someone else...

Where Chatwin and Antonioni's Locke are united most centrally is the questioning of objects and one's personal effects. Both figures are seemingly 'bound by his belongings — without them, he has no identity to others or himself, but with them, he is boxed into an identity that

does not fully encompass the vastness of his true self'. Locke leaves behind his camera, tape recorder, and luggage, as he is one step closer to freedom by escaping himself. He bids farewell to his London home and collection of objects. Similarly, there is a significance in Chatwin's writing when he pits sedentariness and travelling against each other through the use of objects. Nomadism is characterised (in Chatwin's use of the term) by the possession of as few material things as possible and by constant movement. The ownership of objects, however, is equally important in defining personal identity, and for Chatwin, in some cases, the acquisition and ownership of objects was a substitute for travel.

In *The Songlines*, Chatwin's book from 1987 about his travels in Australia, there is a brief encounter with a character called Alan Brady, a conduit whose identity highlights the uneasy relationship between possessions and travel. A travelling salesman, Brady visits England when on leave from his job in Africa. In England, he has a safety deposit box of personal possessions which inform his identity, and Chatwin explains that: "each time he brought back one new thing, and chucked out one old thing that had lost its significance". The vital importance of these possessions to Brady is balanced by the importance of his ongoing nomadic lifestyle. Chatwin underlines this by claiming that "Alan Brady had only one fear: that soon they would make him retire". Chatwin's nomadism does not mean the absence of possessions, but rather that the qualities of these possessions must be subject to movement and travel in order to contribute to a sense of self.

Chatwin, as the wandering explorer, and the character of David Locke, as a silent passenger upon a voyage, both act as the frontispiece for this exhibition. The artists presented in this show sometimes gesturally, and sometimes more pointedly consider travel in the broader sense; to travel both through time, space and the mind, journeying, mapmaking, pilgrimage and transportation. Travelscapes are the land/cityscapes of movement. The artists are *strangers on a train*, in a state of navigation, through objects, flowers, conditions of transportation and fleeting moments of interior thought.