



New American Scenery
Flint, Belle Island & The Ghost Gardens of Detroit



Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Ghost Gardens of Detroit No:2. Transferware collage on salvaged Syracuse China with pearlware glaze, 30cm dia. Paul Scott 2019.

I grew up in Birmingham, Britain's 'Motor City', where the local economy relied on car manufacturers.... Austin, Morris (later British Leyland), Mini, Rover and all the associated motor suppliers. As a student in the early 1970's, holiday working included 'industrial cleaning' in the huge Austin works in Longbridge... then two summers were spent in an engineering factory in Balsall Heath, assembling brake pipe adjuster clamps (amongst other things). When car production eventually ceased in the city, unemployment, and the impoverishment of communities swiftly followed. I clearly recall the dereliction, then later demolition of huge industrial sites, and the yawning empty spaces. A few years later, similar scenes also became familiar to me in the Staffordshire pottery towns as the British ceramics industry all but collapsed. I was thus well aware, from first hand experience, of the effects of de-industrialisation on urban environments and communities. A series of early *Cumbrian Blue(s)* artworks reflected the ruin and decay of my home town in prints and tiled panels... Years later, in 2010 film maker Julien Temple produced an extraordinary documentary movie *A Requiem for Detroit* for the BBC, about another 'motor city', this time in the United States. Later

that year photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre published the deeply depressing, but beautiful book, *The Ruins of Detroit*. Both intrigued me, because they echoed my own experiences in Birmingham and Stoke, but the depopulation, dereliction and decay seemed of a different scale. Thus began my longer term interest in a far-off city and its surrounds. I learned about urban farms, ambitious plans for re-development, and as in so many post-industrial areas, the resurgence/proliferation of visual arts, generated by artists attracted to empty buildings and cheap housing.



Urban Agrihood on Custer Street Detroit, September 2017

In September 2017, as part of my *New American Scenery* research I was able to visit Detroit for myself in person. My friend and fellow artist Scott Rench,¹ drove us (in his BMW Mini) from Chicago to visit the city that had so intrigued me through the images of Temple, Marchand and Meffre. Rench had previously worked on a film project in there so he already knew a number of interesting sites, but we also arranged to meet with his guide on that previous visit, Tony Detroit² who took us to diverse districts, from dereliction to re-development. Born and raised in the area, Detroit is well known as a photographer documenting the city's decline, today he advises film & TV companies looking for movie locations....

¹ <https://www.behance.net/yosoh/info>

² <https://www.instagram.com/tonydetroit/>

Whilst I expected a post-industrial familiarity, nothing really prepared me for my real life experience of Detroit. The farms and art installations were hopeful signs of community, but elsewhere it was difficult to assimilate the sheer scale of loss and devastation that simply dwarfed my experience of the ruins of Birmingham & Stoke on Trent. Whole districts of housing appeared raised to the ground, whilst the numerous skeletons of giant factories loomed large in others.

As a long time gardener, one of the things that intrigued me were the ‘exotic’ plants growing amongst the wilderness of demolished neighbourhoods, as well as the trees and shrubs sprouting through concrete or up a height on the remains of buildings. I later learned that journalist Charlie Leduff, interviewed by Anthony Bourdain for 2013’s *Parts Unknown*³ had referred to them as *Ghost Gardens*, and it seemed the perfect title for one of my Detroit themed *New American Scenery* series.



Abandoned house & Garden on W. Robinwood Street, Detroit, Sept. 2017

The two *Ghost Gardens of Detroit* works feature a floral border harvested from a 19th century transferware pattern *Arctic Scenery* by an unknown maker. The original frames incongruous vignettes of exotic animals from warmer climes surrounding scenes from the arctic. The engraver drew heavily on Sir Edward William Parry’s accounts of travels around the northern part of Canada.⁴ Described once as a “glorious perversion of geography”, the scalloped edge

³ Co-incidentally, I was introduced to Bourdain’s documentaries by Rench on this visit

⁴ Parry, William Edward, *Journal for the Discovery of a North West Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific; Performed in the years 1819-20 in His Majesty’s ships Hecla and Griper*. London: Murray, John 1821.

Parry, William Edward, *Second Voyage for the Discovery of a North West Passage. From the Atlantic to the Pacific; performed in the years 1821-22-23 in His Majesty’s ships Fury and Hecla*. London: Murray, John, 1824.



Arctic Scenery, transferware plate (maker unknown) c.1840

plates featured cartouches of tropical wild cats including ocelot, jaguar and leopard whilst other wares included goats, antelopes and stags. Sources included Thomas Bewick, William Jardine and Oliver Goldsmith⁵



Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Ghost Gardens of Detroit No:1/3. Decal collage on pearlware plate, 30cm dia.

Paul Scott 2020

⁵ Bewick, Thomas, *A General History of Quadrupeds*, Robinson and Diley London 1790. Jardine, William, *The Naturalist's Library*, London, Edinburgh, Dublin, 1833 - 1843. Goldsmith, William, *Animated Nature* Poole, Philadelphia, 1824.



Joseph Stubbs *Upper Ferry Bridge Schuylkill River* (after Thomas Birch) c.1830 225mm dia. (left), with *Cumbrian Blue(s)*, *New American Scenery*, *Belle Island Bridge, Detroit*. In-glaze screen print (decal) on pearlware plate, 28cm dia. Paul Scott 2020 (right)

Further Detroit works include images from Belle Island Park. *Belle Island Bridge*, references a Joseph Stubbs 19th century transware plate *Upper Ferry Bridge Schuylkill River*. A number of *Sampler Jugs* also feature the bridge, including the 'Stay Dirty' roundel graffiti featured on No:7 (below)



Cumbrian Blue(s), *New American Scenery*, *Sampler Jug No:7*, (After Stubbs). Decal collage on pearlware jug, 390mm x 350mm x 50mm. Paul Scott 2021



View of Fairmount Philadelphia, Staffordshire transferware plate by Joseph Stubbs, c. 1825, 264mm dia.

New American Scenery, Flint, near Detroit:

Typical of many American transferware subjects, Joseph Stubbs' *Fairmount Near Philadelphia* (c.1830) features the newly constructed Philadelphia Water Works in its central vignette. Libraries, prisons, hospitals, public buildings, were all beneficial civic projects and transferwares celebrated 'civilisation where there had been wilderness and harnessed a burgeoning sense of national identity'.⁶



Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Flint, near Detroit. In-glaze screen print (decal) on salvaged Syracuse China, pearlware glaze with melted lead, 25cm dia. Paul Scott 2019, Alturas Foundation Collection.

⁶ *On the Threshold*, Dr Jo Dahn 2019.

In 2014 nearly 200 years later, in a cost-saving move, authorities in Flint, Michigan switched its drinking water supply from Detroit's system to the Flint River. Inadequate treatment and testing of the water resulted in a series of major water quality & health issues for Flint residents. Foul-smelling, discoloured, and off-tasting water piped into homes for months caused skin rashes, hair loss, and itchy skin but complaints were ignored, overlooked, & discounted by government officials... The Michigan Civil Rights Commission, later concluded that the poor governmental response to the Flint crisis was a "result of systemic racism." Studies would reveal that the contaminated water was also contributing to a doubling (in some cases, tripling) of the incidence of elevated blood lead levels in the city's children. *Flint Near Detroit* depicts the Flint water works, within a border pattern created from an original Stubbs tissue transfer found in the V&A archive. Melted into the glazed surface of the plate is a small lump of lead; at its centre the metal has burnt completely through the glaze, and created a watery pool over the foreground around it.



Cumbrian Blue(s), New American Scenery, Sampler (after Stubbs), Detroit Souvenir/6. Transferware, collage on pearlware plate, 305mm dia. Paul Scott 2021

Sampler (after Stubbs), Detroit Souvenir/6.

The large pearlware jugs and *Sampler (after Stubbs), Detroit Souvenir/6* reference industry 'sampler' plates and collages. In the early nineteenth century copper plate engravings were created for specific tableware forms. In order to decorate large (or very small) forms that did not have a specific transfer pattern engraving, a collaging of tissue prints was a common method of filling vitreous surfaces. These methods were also used to create 'samplers' for colour/pattern/

glaze testing reasons, or sales purposes, and continued to be employed (with decals) well into the 20th century.

Footnote:

As an English artist, I follow in a long line of visitors to America who've written about and depicted the country. Early American transferwares imported from Staffordshire were confectioned by adapting popular book illustrations and repurposing them for tableware designs. Of the British pottery manufacturers, only Adams, Ridgway and Stephenson, actually traveled around the United States themselves. Stephenson employed artists to paint selected views. John Ridgway ('Potter of the Cauldron Place Works, Shelton, Staffordshire') arrived in Boston in 1822, then traveled through New England, New York, Philadelphia, Washington and Baltimore sketching and composing for a new set of transferwares himself. These were subsequently released as Ridgway's Beauties of America. ... Although I did not actually visit Flint myself during my New American Scenery research visits, my use of newspaper reports and harvested imagery from the web for the central vignette of the plate are very much in keeping with the way in which the original 19th century transferwares were confectioned....

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Lip-Pan TV, Chene, Detroit Sept. 2017



Detail, *Cumbrian Blue(s)*, *New American Scenery*, *Ghost Gardens of Detroit No.2*. 02/02/02/20, showing *LipVan TV* and *This is not the Heidelberg Project* border cartouches, Paul Scott 2020.

Paul Scott,
Jan 2022.