

SHOLTO BLISSETT

Arboreal at Peres Projects Milan

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Before Sholto Blissett even thought of himself as an artist, but rather as a geography student who – as he always had – painted in his spare time, a few of his landscape paintings were exhibited at Stourhead, an English countryside estate celebrated for its impeccable landscape garden. This setting proved fitting in obvious and less obvious ways. For one, Blissett’s landscapes seemed to mirror the same ideal of Arcadian beauty that the meticulously kept gardens also strove towards. Adorned with Neo-Palladian temples and Gothic wells placed upon artificial hills and lakes, Stourhead evolved into the epitome of pastoral idyll. However, his work would eventually unveil these very landscapes as an anthropocentric construction inextricably linked with Western imperial expansion.

I met Blissett over Zoom, on what is a rainy day in both London and Berlin. We start at the beginning, he tells me about growing up in the countryside, fishing, hiking, and his early fascination with the natural world. Sitting in an unusually empty studio, Blissett explains that his recent works have travelled to Milan for his first solo presentation with Peres Projects, from which he has also just returned. Titled *Arboreal*, a wordplay on “boreal,” describing Nordic biotic areas, and “arbor” (lat: tree), the show brings together eight new signature large-scale landscapes. In vast unpopulated plains, the eye follows horizons for what looks like miles to meet distant

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mountain ranges, then as if led back by streams of water and wind, come to rest on the centered neo-classical ruins. As suggested by the title, an ensemble of majestic oak trees assumes the role of protagonists of the series, their forms seemingly pruned to echo the architectural elements. Here, the artist's primordial infatuation with the great beauty of the landscape prevails, albeit now with a layer of suspicion. A sense of eeriness has taken over the depicted scenes.

“On a superficial glance, they may still look like beautiful landscapes, but the longer you look, the more you realize something is off,” Blissett explains as I ask him about his use of water. The way the streams permeate the land, their translucence almost rendering them invisible, plays tricks on the viewer's perception, making them look fantastical and almost haunted. Having studied both geography and later art, he started to question what the landscapes he had been painting all his life meant. “I realized that these landscapes I loved weren't just static but are actively being created. And that the human relationship to the rest of nature is often falsely pitted as a dichotomy.” Traditionally, the landscape was perceived as a representation of nature as something Other, something pristine and innocent, separate from humankind. Yet the rise of landscape painting in the 17th century coincided with the annexation of “new” land as part of Europe's imperial expansion. In recent decades, numerous scholars argued that the rise of the genre is, in Britain, inextricably tied to the enclosure of the commons and in the Americas, the idea of manifest destiny that was seeping into the cultural consciousness.



Blissett found himself in somewhat of a predicament, torn between his admiration for the picturesque landscapes and his growing suspicion of their underlying constructs. How, he asked, growing up marvelling at Turner, Constable, and Poussin, to grapple with the paradoxical feelings of awe for the natural world, after learning about the contested history of its depiction? Gradually, Blissett's work has come to play into this ambivalence by using the toolkit of landscape painting to subvert the medium and reflect back on it. “My paintings are about how the landscape is something that is done, it is a verb, not a noun,” Blissett quotes W.J.T Mitchell's *Landscape and Power*. In his seminal work exploring what he calls the dark side of landscape, Mitchell writes: “This dark side is not merely mythic, not merely a feature of the regressive, instinctual drives associated with nonhuman “nature”, but a moral, ideological, and political darkness that covers itself with a sort of innocent idealism.” Far from romantic idealism, the uninhabited biomes in *Arboreal* conjure a sense of alienation. “I wanted to convey that your senses can't quite be trusted in these landscapes,” says Blissett. Looking at the desolate ruins, it is unclear if we find ourselves in a distant past or future. The barren landscapes

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render the scale unreadable, distorting any sense of spatial or temporal orientation. This distortion is further reinforced by the deliberately centralized focal points Blissett uses. Departing from the traditionally preferred golden ratio, the strangely monolithic follies seem to pull all matter towards them, becoming the epicenter not only of the painting but also seemingly commandeering the entire terrain. As a result, the landscape becomes even more superficial, and the constructed nature of the frame is exposed.

Equally steeped in artifice and contributing to the surrealism of these images are the sculpted trees. “I started using topiary to explore the relationship between humans and the rest of nature and how nature was controlled and contorted.” In *Arboreal*, the tree goes from being a framing device, as it is usually used in classical landscapes, to being the central element, complementing the neo-classical ruins. Blissett likes the ambiguity of this gesture. Reflecting on our own anthropocentric assumptions, one is forced to ask how this came into play. Has the tree been pruned to mimic human creation? Does cultural production overtly imitate the shapes of the natural world? Or perhaps it is just an illusion, an obscure angle in which the trees seem to complete the buildings as they themselves gradually erode.



The depicted decaying structures all seem to be remnants of ornamental elements instead of actual, functional buildings: follies, facades, and arches leading to nowhere specific. Blissett holds a massive book, the *Encyclopaedia of Architecture, The Classic 1867 Edition*, up to the camera to show me. The buildings are modeled after Italian basilicas, the library at Oxford, or even the 18th-century pantheon at Stourhead, which from its inauguration was already anachronistic, mimicking ancient pastoral ruins. Today, this kind of revivalist Greek or Roman architecture has become synonymous with power almost globally, supposedly representing morality, human progress, and enlightenment. Think only of the Trump administration’s executive order titled (no joke) *Make Federal Buildings Beautiful Again*, which mandated all new federal buildings to be constructed in classical styles that “represented the values of America.”

Given the symbolic value of these structures, it makes sense that Blissett thinks of his paintings “more as symbols or as an idea than as something with inherent narrative.” In acknowledging the artificiality of the

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landscape, he points to how the places depicted never exist as such but are shaped in and for the human eye, breaking the innocent illusion of pristine nature. I'd like to go so far as to say that Blissett's paintings don't really depict landscapes but are eclectic simulacra of the idealized essence of landscape painting in the Western imagination.



The title *Arboreal* could also be linked to Hyperborea, an ancient Greek myth that describes a utopian society, said to be a “realm of eternal spring” located in the far north. Blissett only learned about this take late in the process of conceptualising his exhibition, but the parallels are astounding. “But I also didn’t want to take this too far,” he says, “because unsurprisingly, the idea of a Greek myth in an idealized Northern European landscape has been done by some pretty bad people.” Well aware of the conflicted connotations of such symbolism and the dark side of the landscape, there is something to be said for an artist who openly acknowledges their own entangled relationship with their medium of choice. Evidently, the great British countryside has a sour aftertaste when its history of conquest and territorial expansion comes to light. Is it possible to take pleasure in something “beautiful” when we know it is too often a product of imperial violence? And because this idea of beauty stems from colonial, capitalist expansion? Is beauty in this case itself culturally and historically coded? Rather than providing definitive answers, Blissett inevitably asks himself these questions in an ongoing exploration of the boundaries and biases ingrained within the anthropocentric gaze.

Arboreal runs at Peres Projects Milan until 29th September.