

Turner Contemporary

Journeys with 'The Waste Land': Notes

All the artworks in the exhibition have been chosen by members of the *Journeys with 'The Waste Land'* Research Group. They have also designed the layout of the spaces, written the exhibition texts, and devised the public programme.

The Waste Land Research Group formed through an open call issued by Turner Contemporary in 2015. Ranging from people in their 20s to their 70s, the group have brought a diverse range of interests and life experiences to bear on Eliot's poem. Through weekly meetings, discussions, talks, workshops, walks, trips, studio visits and individual research, the group have developed their own methods for making decisions together and agreeing on content.

This document is made up of comments by Research Group members about their choices for a selection of works.



Edward Hopper

Night Windows, 1928

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of John Hay Whitney, 1940

“When I read the section of the poem called *‘The Fire Sermon’* I thought immediately of this work by Hopper. In the poem, ‘At the violet hour’ we have a single woman, a typist, moving through her daily chores. Despite her financial independence, she’s lonely and has an unsatisfactory sexual encounter with a ‘carbuncular clerk’. She seems detached from life, almost robotic in her actions.

I’ve been there, in that bedsit where the divan doubles as a sofa, going through the motions of existing. It reminds me, in particular, of working as an English teacher in the Czech Republic, making do and washing my jeans in the bathroom sink.”



R.B Kitaj

If Not, Not, 1975 -76

Oil and chalk on canvas

National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh. Purchased 1976

“This is a very busy image. It’s a response to *The Waste Land* and, like the poem, I struggle to dissect all the elements of it. The trees make me think of paradise but at the same time, the aftermath of a catastrophe. You realise the perspective is skewed, the figures distorted and as you start to notice things like the gates of Auschwitz, a concentration camp, you realize the horror of war. I see the collage of images as Eliot’s fragments ‘shored against my ruins’ and, for me, this is the closest of all the images in the show to the poem. The whole show could just be this! This was painted in the 1970s, at the end of the Vietnam War when yet again we’d made another wasteland – we hadn’t learnt a thing.”



Cecil Collins

The Quest

(1938)

© Tate, London, 2017

Audio point discussion excerpt:

“The first thing that strikes me is the fairy-tale feel to it, I can imagine it as an illustration in a kid’s book.”

“It’s four figures in a boat. One looks like a king and they’re very white and they’ve been illuminated by the moon, and I think that makes it seem very benign.”

“And if this is a king it looks as though he’s being protected because the two on either side seem to be holding staffs or something, and I’m just wondering are they fleeing the land or are they arriving? Are they going to get off the boat? Are they looking for something? “

“*The Quest* to me suggests that they ought to be going somewhere, but they’re going nowhere; and they’re sitting waiting for something to happen.”

“But sort of it’s indistinct. It’s almost like this is a Ship of Fools, they’re a boat on dry land — that’s a crazy thing.”

“Or it could be refugees, you know, fleeing one terrible land and not arriving in a satisfactory alternative.”

“I think this is The Fisher King, which is referred to in Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* and who Eliot credited with his inspiration for shaping the poem. So it is all about this injured king looking for rebirth to heal the land and the land is desolate. The king looks so sad, diminished, frozen and so on, so is he really going to sort out this wasteland? So there’s also a crisis of who your leader is, who is supposed to be in charge here? Which again is a kind of 1930s/2018 issue, isn’t it?”

“I think they’re having no oars is quite an important metaphor, thinking about it; because if we’re talking about having no power, having no oars, they can’t even save themselves. A life boat with no oars.”



Paul Nash

The Shore, 1923

Oil on canvas

Leeds Museums and Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery)

“Paul Nash’s painting reminds me of the beaches near where I grew up. I imagine walking through this landscape. You can see such a long way without anything to interrupt your sight or thoughts. It feels like a good place for clearing the mind. Maybe that’s why Nash came to the Kent coast to recover from his experience of being on the battlefields during the First World War.

The parallel of Eliot having also visited Kent at a time of personal crisis makes it hard not to read this image in relation to the poem. Although it’s a different part of coast it makes me think of Eliot looking out to sea as he wrote *The Waste Land*.”



Lee Miller

Portrait of Space, Al Bulwayeb, Nr Siwa, Egypt, 1941

Unframed and unmatted modern estate approved C-type print made from a digital file taken from the original negative

Lee Miller Archives

Audio point discussion excerpt:

“All of a sudden, without an introduction, I saw this image. And I was a bit cross because I thought ‘where does it come from, who chose this?’ But I really, really liked it. And I found the parallel with the poem straight away. It was like breaking the thread of reality and breaking through into another dimension, and I imagined Eliot sitting in the nylon shelter trying to break through this veil of darkness that was his depression and his mental state when he was there.”

“This was taken from inside a tent, I guess, and this little square may be a mirror. I see the element of time and of course space and this urge of transcending...”

“The key thing for me is the mirror and the way in which this is rather like the poem: you’re not sure if you’re looking out or looking in; out at this waste land, in at this inner space at the same time.”

“Because there’s nothing in the mirror and nothing outside it we have kind of got nothing connected to nothing, we’ve a picture of nothing within a picture of nothing.”



Philip Guston

East Coker-Tse, 1979

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Musa Guston, 1991

“Eliot was very important to Guston. ‘East Coker’, is where Eliot is buried and is the title of the last of his late poems, *The Four Quartets*. Even though it’s not directly connected to *The Waste Land*, we decided to include this work as it is a powerful way of showing how the entire imagination and work of a great poet provides a way for a great painter to convey his own meditation on later life.”



Carey Young

Lines Made by Walking, 2003

Looped sequence of 35mm photographic transparencies, projected with 2 second intervals

Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

"In the poem Eliot writes of the crowd flowing over London Bridge; 'I had not thought death had undone so many'. I connect Carey Young's work to Eliot's idea of people being broken and morally bankrupt; trapped in a hellish cycle and not being able to escape. This is London Bridge but it could be any city in the world, at any time. It's about the treadmill we're all on, doing the same things, and making the same mistakes, no matter where or when."



John Stezaker

Scarecrow, 2016

Collage

Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London

"It was only after choosing John Stezaker that we realized how influential *The Waste Land* has been for him. He wrote to us: 'I think I got my first inklings about collage and a fascination with the fragment from this poem.'

Stezaker wrote that 'as a child, the bomb sites of the industrial midlands were [his] playgrounds'. Bombs created strange clearings within the urban environment and the original image he used for *Scarecrow* reminded him of these spaces and 'rats alley' in the poem 'where the dead men lost their bones'."

For more information, please contact:

Gair Burton - gair@picklespr.com

Katie Hogben - khogben@turnercontemporary.org / 01843 233 020