

30/03/07

Broxfield first impressions

Arrived at Alnmouth last night to be picked up by David, a farmer and also the North East manager for Farming & Countryside Education.

Later we went on a Mad Cow Hunt. Actually I think it was described as a "wild" cow hunt. Two cows had escaped. Was struck by the process of trying to do a very simple thing: get cows back.

His method is: use Nice Cows in next field to where Nasty Cows have escaped, to encourage Nasty Cows, which won't be handled easily, to come back. David has moved the Nice Cows earlier so "all we need to do" is take silage for enticing. This requires 1) tractor 2) silage bale 3) cage for silage. It takes longer than you'd think to put trailer on back of tractor, put together cage thing (must find out proper name), load silage bale and take all this down to the field – a mile away as the crow (or mad cow) flies, but much longer by the road / tractor. And then, when we got there, and put the bale down for the Nice Cows, all we did to get the Nasty Cows back was to leave them an armful of silage on their side of the fence. It's going to take a fair amount of teasing; David aptly described the process as of the song, 'There's a hole in my bucket'.

01/04/07

Loving it

Loving it.

Continually amazed by the beauty on the farm. A couple of images:

in one of the cowsheds this morning, about 8:30, the steam rising, white against the thick brown, dark wet shit-carpet: from fresh manure, fermenting silage, the cows' breath and our own

silage bales, wrapped up like blown-up sweets, the evening light playing colourful havoc on the surface of the black plastic: soft purple-grey stain of dried mud; stretches of glistening, fecund aubergine skin; light blue streaks; at the centre a golden spot, a pool of yellow light; the glitter of expensive orange

I get carried away.

The evenings are infinitely longer than they were a week ago, which is perhaps one of the reasons for my excitement. I was outside drawing well after 7pm. But this in itself is important. It may have been beautiful but it was also freezing. I sometimes wonder whether going to an art school, which was traditionally for 'Drawing and Fine Art', killed drawing for me; in my third year I found that I was no longer drawing, and couldn't. I've looked forward to a time



when I would feel free to again, on my own terms. I wonder now that I might have re-found those.

A couple of footnotes:

getting the website online has been like getting the mad cows back (mending the hole in the bucket). It would be boring to explain how. It may be pointless for me to apologise for this, seeing as to read it will be to find the website updated... but here it is. I'm sorry it has taken me so long!

04/04/07

Time

One of the reasons I started this project, one of the reasons it made sense, was that I saw a connection between art and farming. It doesn't seem obvious at first (and I admit that I don't know of very many other artists today who are working with or on farms) but I've felt it to be confirmed by my experiences, as well as by the fact that I've met a surprising number of artists from farming families. Two of the five hosts I've stayed with have had children at art school, and a researcher I met at the conference in Leicestershire remarked to me upon the number of farmers' wives as artists. We talked about why this might be. They seem different: farming can be stereotyped as a very 'hands-on', physical and matter-of-fact profession, whilst artists are thought of as contemplative and sensitive, their work abstracted from the necessities of life such as food production. This is true, and

the outcomes, uses of their time and energy are vastly different. Yet it is certainly no longer fair to think of artists as fussy and ethereal (welding farm machinery yesterday smacked of 'macho' American sculptor David Smith), nor farmers as exclusively physical. Much of what they do is both scientific, and, I believe, creative. There's a lot of problem-solving, and entrepreneurship, not unlike the work of an artist. In addition, farming and art are alike in the way that they demand independence, strong self-motivation and bloody-mindedness. Farmers and artists both know what its like to be alone.

But I love it. I love the feeling of satisfaction after a long day's work. It doesn't matter if it's 9:30pm by the time I finally get in, or if I've been on my feet all day since 7:30am. I love not having to get in a car to go to work. I love 'hours' not being relevant; I love that time isn't a measure of success. I love having first-hand experience of the seasons changing. I love walking back at night between the main farmhouse and the cottage I'm staying in, and popping into the cowshed to see if everything's okay. I love that my life is in one place, that I do what I do where I am. It's straightforward.

I think that above all, farming and art are alike in the way that they are all-encompassing activities, in that the line between work and life is a very thin one: artists can't switch off; farmers are on call 24/7. They don't make a lot of sense financially; a farmer works the hours of a city banker for a fraction of the pay; almost all artists depend on other income to make possible what it is they do. But they are



both activities, which, although consuming and exhausting, are justified by the sense of satisfaction they bring after a long day's work. There's a profound connection with the surrounding environment – in the widest sense of the word – and you'd be hard pressed to find a farmer or an artist who didn't think that what they were doing was a good thing. Both are involved with the production of what they hope are quality goods for a consumer. They believe in what they do.

05/04/07

Time Again

Another thought about time: farming takes a lot of time.

Simple activities take a while. To be safe takes time, and whereas, for myself as an artist, to be hasty and to make a mistake might only result in a cut finger from a scalpel, the risks are a lot greater in farming. When the calf was born two days ago, the nervous temperament of the cow demanded the use of a metal pen on the back of the tractor to catch it, rather than to just go in the shed unguarded. It probably would have been okay – it always probably would be okay – but if it's not okay, then you're really screwed. People do die on farms. So you want to be careful. All the time. So all these simple jobs become complicated: bring the pen – where is it? – behind X – move X with Y tractor – get Z tractor to pick up pen... A couple of activities like this a day, and that is your day.

