

Layers of texture, layers of space

House-artist of the ambient intelligentsia, **Russell Mills's** coverwork has graced the likes of Peter Gabriel, David Sylvian and Harold Budd album covers. Such a foreground obscures a 20-year art trajectory anticipating many of today's mixed media collisions, pulling the palette of painting into music and performance, through to sound, video and multimedia installations.

According to the OED, the root of the word *epigenetic*, refers to things produced on and at the surface of the earth, and have been chemically altered since their formation. In conversation, Russell Mills turns to the word repeatedly in his attempts to encapsulate how he works. Another phrase, which bubbles up to the conversational foreground is, 'the primacy of process'. Mills is perhaps best known for his illustrations and design work, particularly in proximity to various leading musicians: David Sylvian, Peter Gabriel, David Toop and Brian Eno, to name only the most visible. His cover-design work for these, and Eno's 80s 'Opal' label roster of musicians, defined a certain visual ambient realm of atmospheres and textures. Yet the lifeline of his artpath has been far broader than this, and the multiple media he has put his energies into do, in part, foreshadow the convergent terrain of today's multimedia, where a disparate portfolio seems a partial prerequisite for the current crop of art media practitioners. Mills however, was already there 20 years ago. As he says, 'I'm with the generalists rather than the specialists, every time.'

Today, this repertoire covers his continued and ongoing exploration of dense, darkly-textured, earth-bound paintings and collages, some of which see life in exhibitions, others as cover artwork, and some within stage and performance work with musicians and contemporary dance and performance groups. The latter have extended into both sound and light sculptures, and on to the *Undark* recording project. These were also midwife to another pathway further into the physical 3D world in the last decade: a series of installation

pieces both gallery and public-site based – joint projects with long-term artist/friend Ian Walton. All of these are expressions of the radically democratised art-world of found objects and fragments, where everyone is an artist, à la Beuys, and everything is valid potential as an artistic material. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that this avant-art legacy of the twentieth century – every object permitted, no material forbidden – stretching from Dada and Duchamp, on via Schwitters, to Beuys and Brian Eno – spoke to those art students into music and sound, within the formative zeitgeist of punk. It permeates Mills's work through and through.

Mills passed through the glittering tail-end of British art schools, dynamic post-war flowering, for much of the seventies, first at Maidstone, and then in, as he puts it, the 'dusty corner' of the RCA's then wholly experimental MA illustration course. The latter half of this was dominated by punk, and in the final year he appears to have slipped effortlessly into the punk rock ether, designing album sleeves for the old pre-corporate neo-hippy Virgin Records. He also made a particular connection with the post-punk outfit, Wire, who had emerged out of a particularly buzzing scene centred on Watford Art College. This connection with outrunners of, in Mills's words, 'the Watford Creatives' has continued to this day, Wire being also both ex-art students, and unusually knowing in their approach to punk.

At the same time his major final year RCA project was an extended set of obliquely interpretative images springing from Eno's playfully visual lyrics. Eno had visited Mills at the RCA and the pair had struck up a friendship. This eventually resulted in their collaborative book, *More Dark than Shark* (1986), in which many of Eno's lyrics, essays, and aphorisms sit comfortably alongside Mills's painterly collages. Before its publication Mills had expanded the live performances of ex-Wire personnel art events, which were seen either as unspeakably pretentious, or incomprehensible by the music press, and of little interest to the art media. As the energy and aesthetic which had triggered punk both continued to fade and become increasingly accepted by the wider world, Mills found himself in demand for his book and cover work, with the likes of *Radio Times*, *New Scientist* and Faber all using him extensively for cover illustrations. Anticipating the kinds of convergences, that in these days of portfolio

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Incubator#/Loop,
mixed media, 2001

careers are common place, Mills was already continually crossing the permeable borders between design, painting and working on sound and performance live events. In the mid 1980s he became for many years one of the in-house cover artworkers for the 80s ambient intelligentsia. This has included many covers for Brian Eno's mid-80s label, Land Records; CDs for David Toop and Bill Laswell among others, as well as the memorable alchemical cover painting on David Sylvian's *Gone To Earth* and numerous book covers. Alongside Vaughan Oliver, 4AD's in-house designer (the man who made the Cocteau Twins' albums such visually compelling feasts for the eye) Mills defined a certain visual reading of the oceanic ambient soundworlds, another overlay on the accepted mantra of these being movie/landscape 'journey-type' musics. These album covers, mixing both contextually appropriate exotic and mundane found materials with richly textured colourfields, vividly evoked hallucinogenic dreamstates while also alluding to the ideas that had shaped the music within.

The Opal Roster, a loose affiliation of Eno's musician friends who had known and worked with each other for quite a few years, mixed in with a handful of ex-art students, defined a quieter undertow in the history of 80s contemporary music. Ambient was in part an offspring of the post-punk years, and for many who had immersed themselves first in soundworlds, and particularly electronics, it offered a way out of the impasse popular experimental music appeared to have reached. In the mid-80s with regular Opal releases, David Sylvian re-inventing himself as a solo artist, and

Peter Gabriel's world ambient explorations, a particular high watermark in the evolution of ambient and the environmental was reached. Today this is all acknowledged; what appears less recognised is how it brought forth a vocabulary both of visual ambient and of the integration of myriad multi-media aspects. In both of these Mills's work was central.

'I describe it as an epigenetic mode of working,' he states in the course of a long rambling conversation, 'as it's concerned with and made in layers that combine a whole set of ideas, notions and correspondences which have close relationships with one other. These correspondences happen following an intuitive path. I've always been interested in how things can have multiple meanings – how objects are invested in possible readings. Think of literature, for instance Proust's famous Madeline biscuits, which led to a whole series of connected trigger associations. Objects can do that as well.'

'This is allied to research, When I begin a piece I don't know where the research is going to lead, no idea what the end result is going to be, and invariably I'm led down many unforeseen sideroads, and find many other sometimes more interesting things along the way.'

'Content drives the work in the first place. Mentally I just can't do something just for the sake of it, it must have an underlying meaning. It's like an epigenetic or an archeological dig into strata, uncovering fragments and slices of different layers. Finds may be of unknown origin or unknown function but they have an authenticity, which cannot be denied and they are full of potential clues which are symbolic as well as social. What resonance and relevance do these finds suggest now?'