



Pixel landscapes and grey ecologies

In Conversation – Susan Collins and Sean Cubitt

With her webcam series **Glenlandia**, **Fenlandia**, digital artist Susan Collins created the beginnings of a pixelated landscape tradition. Collins talks with new media theorist Sean Cubitt about the digital domain's relation with the natural world through the remote frame of these works

SEAN: The Chinese seem to have come to landscape quite early – certainly by the time of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) when the idea of a private retreat from the troubled world, and of landscape as an aid to self-cultivation seem deeply entrenched. By contrast the Europeans seem to have been reluctant to enjoy landscape for itself.

Though there are works like the *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* as early as 1412–16, according to the art historian Martin Warnke, the European tradition in landscape is marked by its politics – by allegories and historical associations that invariably overwrite the landscape as such with claims to patriotism, ownership, control or religious belief, a tendency which postcolonial writers also see in the exotic landscapes of early explorers, and ecologists see in wilderness photography. Which if any of these traditions most closely resembles what you are doing with *Fenlandia/Glenlandia*?

SUSAN: If asked where it comes from in terms of what it relates to historically then I do see *Fenlandia* and *Glenlandia* as coming out of a European Landscape tradition. In a sense the work is deliberately trading on convention – or rather the perceived convention – of how a Landscape image might be composed. However instead of historical allegories, the layers embedded and woven into this series are technological.

One layer is that of technology embedded seamlessly into the landscape. With *Fenlandia* the work is

looking out and recording the minute changes in the view over a reclaimed land of sluices, ditches and drains. With *Glenlandia* the view is instead of Loch Faskally, a manmade loch that services a hydro dam in Pitlochry, the water levels in the loch rising and falling according to the demand for electricity.

A second layer is embedded into the construction of the images themselves: tight horizontal weaves of pixels with each second or moment in time – as represented by the pixel – moving inexorably forward continually overwriting the image of the previous day with the broad black band of nighttime interrupting what at first appears to be a very familiar landscape view. A further layer is that of the remote viewer, with the piece most often experienced at a distance and mediated by a screen – the frame.

Another aspect of the work is that of endurance, scrutiny and repetition. The calendar structure of the work does relate to much earlier works such as the *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* or Bruegel's paintings of the seasons, however whilst these works foregrounded the customs, labour or agriculture of the time, in *Fenlandia/Glenlandia* people and animals are depicted by stray pixels, often present but abstracted by the process itself. What becomes visible instead are slight fluctuations and variations in light and movement and the enduring, underlying architecture of the landscape itself.

The images are saved at two hourly intervals leading to a collection of over four thousand archived images for each location over the course of a year. Working on these has for me rekindled a respect and interest in Monet, in particular works such as his haystacks and Houses of Parliament series exploring the effects of time on light and colour, and Cezanne whose Mont Saint Victoire landscapes explored the same subject repeatedly but without repetition.

Something that concerns me is the irony in a sense of working with technology (as I do) and yet still having concerns about the environment and issues of sustainability. It isn't something that I address directly in my work – though issues of the relationship between technology and landscape are clearly embedded in *Fenlandia/Glenlandia* (and the hydroelectric dam at

Left and throughout: *Glen/Fenlandia* series webcam stills