

The Hill of Dreams: Re-evaluating literary influences in the northern landscape photography of Raymond Moore.

Introduction

My name is Tim Daly - I teach photography at the University of Chester and I have practiced as a photographer since the mid 1980's. Within this short paper, I'm aiming to unpick the literary influences in the northern landscape photography of Raymond Moore.

Like many art students in the 1980s, I first encountered the work of Moore through the Arts Council bookshop, buying an exhibition catalogue of his work whilst on a daytrip from Corsham where I was a student in Fine Art. Among his peers, Moore's work stood out for its strangely mute and detached approach. A kind of British Walker Evans with an eye for signage and unusual things.

Later, I was fortunate to meet Moore in person when he visited Corsham to give a talk to a group of Graphic Design students, who were, as I clearly remember thirty years on, entirely bemused by the deadpan nature of his work. After a brief postcard correspondence, (these were of course, pre-email days) Moore very kindly invited me to visit his home in Canonbie and agreed to be interviewed on tape. I made the trip in 1987, but Moore sadly died some months later.

Moore was a very generous man who took a shine to me because we were from the same part of the country and also because of a that I'd taken shown him. Back in 1985 and fully under the Moore influence, I'd been documenting the empty coastal features of New Brighton, Moreton, Leasowe and West Kirkby. By chance I'd shown Moore this picture of a curvy, 1930s public toilet block that Moore was delighted to tell me that his father had been the architect. So, obviously there was a clear rationale for a print swap, which was to my advantage entirely.

Moore was a complex artist, who felt unequipped to write about his subject matter and one who sometimes ventriloquised his motives through quotes and passages from a wide range of literary sources and was wary of compromising his work through written explanation. This reticence ensured that the same artists statements were often repeated in books, catalogues and interviews,

Confronted by the myriad relationships between objects in the visual world, I am impelled to choose or select those happenings that most accurately reflect or mirror a state of being at that one moment in time. This choice is governed by an instinctive awareness of the medium's essential power of translating and recreating in photographic terms. A new world is magically presented in the form of marks made by the optical chemical process, related to the world of everyday visual contact and yet quite apart from it. From this map of experience, hopefully something of value may be revealed.

Working outside the long-term project format common amongst his peers, Moore operated without a brief or an overtly narrative intent and was wary of being categorised as a documentary, or any other kind of photographer. His statements sometimes described the things he didn't do, rather than what did best.

If people loom too large in a picture then I don't take it. What interests me is that human beings really be brought down to size. They are probably no more significant than a tree growing or a lamppost. They are all part of the visual scene. I guess some people will be absolutely horrified by this. Raymond Moore 1987

Moore's work can be divided into two periods loosely linked to two different geographical territories. The first phase from the early 60s to the late 70s, saw Moore explore the Pembrokeshire coast as well as overseas in Ireland, Cyprus and the US. This early work saw Moore photograph with a formal, painterly approach which stemmed from his earlier incarnation as a painter.

Sadly, there's only one image of his paintings in circulation today – a dry landscape study in the style of Lawrence Gowing. Yet, Moore who did Fine Art at the RCA in the early 1950s was, as Haworth Booth records, an experimental abstract painter. Moore's earlier photographic work seems to play with the flat picture plane making optical conundrums, that conjure up a kind of visual game for the viewer. In this sense, his work wasn't about place, it was about something else.

Yet, perhaps this early work and Moore's association with Minor White, Harry Callahan and the MIT scene sent early critical appraisal down a rabbit hole from which it took some time to emerge. Moore's work was often discussed in these terms - of his virtuosity, the deft use of line, form, shape and tone – and also of his fine printing.

Yet Moore's work was much more complex than that. At a turning point in his work he stated in 1981,

I soon exhausted myself. The places didn't seem to ring true to my complete self. I moved from the coastline to Milford Haven where there were more traces of man, and sometimes took pictures in the more run-down coastal area. I was drawn to the edge of civilization.

This second phase of work from the late 70s onwards saw Moore repeatedly visit the unspectacular North of Allonby, Maryport, Silloth, Flimby and Harrington, using the landscape in complex, overlapping contexts.

As Moore recalled to me in 1987

It's difficult for me to verbalise too much on this, but I like the kind of atmosphere that one finds on the English side of the Solway and as you've noticed yourself on the Wirral. It's a sort of limbo land, looking almost as if life

had past it by. I can't quite explain why but it seems to symbolise an awful lot of what life in this country seems to be about. Raymond Moore

While Moore's own statements lock his practice tightly into a particular interpretation, they perhaps play down other, equally important aspects of his work. Later evaluation of Moore acknowledged the complexity of this second phase of his career. Graham Clarke in 1997 noted the open meanings and movement between the sublime and the banal, making the commonplace both recognised and mysterious.

Moore too, in later years talked about more personal motives, recounting in 1981,

In recent photographs I have been making some kind of a return to Wallasey where I grew up in the 1930s. Whole tracts of the Cumbrian coast where I work nowadays remind me of those childhood areas. They also provide me with structures and images which allow me to comment on life in general.

Throughout his career, Moore was fond of quoting classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, which on occasion could sound gnomic but in other times set the context for his highly personal approach to his work.

In the essay for Moore's book *Every So Often*, Clive Lancaster briefly described how Moore had sent him a copy of a 17th century Japanese poem - Matsuo Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Intended as helpful background reference, Lancaster chose not to explore Moore's prompt further. The poems describe Basho's northern meanderings in an attempt to connect with his past and renew his own creative practice. Surprisingly this is one Basho's early lines,

Last year I spent wandering along the seacoast

A similar literary clue to Moore's thinking can be found in Arthur Machen's *The Hill of Dreams*, also mentioned briefly in a 1981 interview with Ian Jeffrey.

Moore stated,

I remember thirty years ago or so coming across and feasting on the writing of Arthur Machan, author of The Hill of Dreams. His writing may seem stilted and archaic now, but I was fascinated by his attention to penumbra and to the half-tones around a shadow -seemed to be describing meeting places between two ways of being. He helped focus that sort of thing in myself.

Raymond Moore

For Moore, reading Arthur Machen's fantasy novel *The Hill of Dreams* was an epiphany – yet it is hard to think of a more unlikely source of inspiration.

Machen's text gives further clues to Moore's broad assimilation of literature bridging and connecting with his own work. Indeed, Moore's use of these unexpected references suggests an artist seeking to build a contextual framework for his work which hovered outside the recognised practice silos of his day.

For Moore enthusiasts, reading *The Hill of Dreams* can provide new insights into his work. Although the book is remembered as a late Victorian drug-fuelled dream fantasy, there are many parallels between Machen's would-be writer protagonist and Moore's own interest in responding to his environment. There's a common sense of journey to strive to practice, but the most interesting connection is the use of the landscape as a fantasy playground.

In *The Hill of Dreams*, Machen's writer protagonist Lucian Taylor wanders in South Wales and later yearns in grey, bleak unnamed outer suburbs. The writer seeks out triggers from these local wanderings, conjuring sophisticated outcomes from banal, repetitive experiences. There are passages which read as if he's walking within a Raymond Moore photograph,

[The landscape was] full of hidden meanings and the sense of matters unintelligible to the uninitiated

The fact that sensations are symbols not realities hovered in his mind, and led him to speculate as to whether they could not actually be transmuted one into another.

[Ancients] had mistaken the symbol for the thing signified. It was not the material banquet which really mattered, but the thought of it.

excerpts from The Hill of Dreams

Lucian Taylor has an epiphany when he realises he could make literary works that appeal to the subconscious, a literature borne out of his own internal dialogue rather than wordy observation.

For me, the no-man's land between the real and the fantasy – the mystery in the commonplace. Raymond Moore

This duality, I suspect was a practical stance that Moore shared too. It wasn't the place or indeed the symbols that were important for him to transmit, it wasn't about technique either – but it was about a landscape for his own personal use.

As he stated in 1981,

But really I'm a loner, a reflective pessimist, and I look for signs of finality and the end of time, impending departure and desperation.

Moore used the Northern Landscape as a kind of fantasy playground to project his internal narrative onto the bleak, grey sites of his Solway towns. Formalism, the optical unconscious and fantasy are all elements within his

work. Drawn to liminal spaces and deserted edgelands, Moore had a fascination with the nondescript.

His banal, distanced and reductive view of the North was his way of recapturing a sense of his childhood. As he recalls,

'I suppose that in recent photographs I have been making some kind of a return to Wallasey ("the bedroom of Liverpool") where I grew up in the 1930s. Whole tracts of the Cumbrian coast where I work nowadays remind me of those childhood areas'

In conclusion, Moore was a mute chronicler of the mundane and proponent of the detached observational genre so familiar today. As Haworth-Booth alluded to in 1985, Moore was compelled by 'the phase of aftermath; ideas of loss, poetic reconstruction....'

Perhaps a more rounded reading of Moore's later work is to view it as a literary infused practice - a pleasure in ruins shot with a late, very late photography-style distance and detachment. A bleak lust that had found it's Shangri-La in the Solway Firth.

Finally, there's a key concept developed by Rose Macaulay in her 1953 book *The Pleasure of Ruins*, which could easily describe why we find Moore's later work so compelling. Macaulay suggests that when confronted with decay, absence and loss, we build the ruin in our own minds,

The deserted spaces and ruins provide but a partial story, yet their incompleteness allow us to speculate and project our own personal narratives upon them.

Rose Macaulay, 1953

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