

Things Held Fast, Helen Johnson
Brixton Station
20 May – November 2021

Helen Johnson Q&A with Jessica Vaughan

How did you arrive at the metaphor of a garden as the central image of *Things Held Fast*?

The form of a garden was first prompted when walking around Brixton during a visit in November 2019, gardens and outdoor spaces are often depicted in the local murals, sometimes as spaces inhabited and cherished by people; and sometimes as empty vistas opening up like promises, or memories, on an otherwise unremarkable wall. Both of these seem like forms of hope in their own way. I felt particularly connected to the idea of depicting people in green spaces; a garden can be a shared space that gives, and that you can give back to. I thought this energy would be a nice thing to pass under on the way into the station, which is like another sort of root system.

On my return home the following month Australia experienced the worst bushfires in history. The fires didn't reach us in Naarm (the Wurundjeri name for the area now called Melbourne), though the smoke did, and many people were wearing facemasks that summer, a precursor to the Covid reality that was still a few months away. Some of the most severe fires were ripping through the southeast coastal region that I had driven through recently. Millions of hectares of forest and bush, and innumerable townships obliterated. Billions of creatures killed and injured. Prior to colonisation, this continent had been sustainably managed using controlled burning, for millennia. Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate* is an interesting book about colonial depictions of landscape from the Australian continent, and how these late 18th and early 19th century paintings evidence controlled burning alongside other forms of estate management. Gammage quotes from the journals of numerous "explorers" observing different parts of the continent, who repeatedly liken the environment to "gentlemen's parks", i.e. cultivated spaces; because they were observing carefully managed Country. Colonisation disrupted these cyclical processes, leading to the build-up of scrub and these conditions allowed for more severe fires each year, exacerbated by climate change. The only way I could think my way through the devastation and despair of that summer was to think about growth, return, cycles restoring balance.

Thinking about *Things Held Fast*, I started with questions of positionality - aware that this work would be very visible for a community that I am not directly part of, what would be appropriate? I wanted to honour the energy of local communities, and decided on the fragmentary nature of the archival material because I didn't want to reduce these histories to a set of hard symbols, but rather wanted to keep the feeling of these shared histories as something open, dynamic, breathing - making things closed off and hardening things into something too fixed or static felt like it would imply an anaerobic state, to extend the gardening metaphor; whereas that impulse towards collectivity, and to resist and protect what is valued locally seems very much continuous and alive.

Could you tell me about your relationship to Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature* and how this informed *Things Held Fast*?

Once the Covid lockdown started in Naarm, which ended up continuing for many months, *Modern Nature* was one of the texts that held me together; being transported into the space of Jarman's garden, a thing of beauty and the fruits of a great deal of energy and labour, but also a space for contemplating ethics; what does it mean to bring huge sea-kales from the nearby shore and introduce them to a cultivated space, alongside Edwardian roses and Californian poppies trying to hold their own against the bitter winds, in the shadow of a nuclear power station? What does it mean to establish a microcosm? Can it be a space of learning and a space that holds the history of its own development?

How did the context in which you began and completed *Things Held Fast* impact the content of the work?

During the Covid lockdown, getting my hands into the earth felt like one of the key things that made being confined to the house feel ok, particularly with a toddler in tow - our veggie patch was flourishing last year! It's gone to pot now that things are busy in the world again. The shapes of our little patch of garden form some of the shapes in the painting. I thought a lot during that time about how difficult it would be to endure a prolonged lockdown without an outdoor space, and felt keenly aware of the privilege of having even a little garden. For a long time, playgrounds were closed here, which also really heightened my awareness of the importance of shared green spaces, not just for the pleasure of being among green life forms, but for social reasons too, especially for kids - for negotiating with others, for feeling a sense of shared responsibility, for an awareness of other forms of life. All these things fed into my thinking about the work. The figures in it including the children, are chatting away, or lost in their thoughts, and it is that mode of conversation and thought that emerges when you are engaged in a shared task, rather than having a conversation across a table for example, where you are two minds bouncing back and forth. When you are working on a shared task the conversation feels more like you are minds in parallel; heading somewhere together. This quality of connection is central to the work, to my mind.

How did you use the Lambeth Archives?

Being in lockdown for such an extended period at least furnished the benefit of time. I was (fortunately, I would say) on maternity leave from my teaching position until mid-2020, so I did not immediately have to grapple with the issue of work space blending into home space, which has since firmly taken hold as a condition of existence. One way I used this time was by working my way through the Lambeth Archives, looking at every single digitised image. Knowing that I would not have another opportunity to visit the UK before completing the work, this presented one way of engaging with the history of the area, roaming through this wide-ranging sea of images connected by their association with the Borough of Lambeth. I was surprised to discover an image of Captain William Bligh's house in the archives; he is a figure who looms large in the history of so-called Australia, having served as an early Governor of the convict colony here, but I was not previously aware that he was a long-time resident of Lambeth. It felt important to acknowledge that in the work, as a marker of colonial return.

How did you come to choose the images from the archive, you looked through a huge amount, was it a difficult process of selection?

It was indeed; in the end it was such a tiny fraction of the archive that I directly drew upon for the forms of the painting, though it also felt like the process of soaking in the energy of the archive went into the painting in a latent way as well. In particular I was gathering images of green spaces; images of shared community work; markers of collectivity and solidarity; as well as decorative motifs derived from local plant and animal species. Along with green spaces I gravitated towards images of public events, taken in public spaces as the locus of the work; there are a lot of beautiful, intimate images in that archive, but I don't think it would have been appropriate for me to draw upon them.

Can you tell me more about your painting style and practice? Your technique appears extremely labour intensive and the results are very distinct, intricate and beautiful, *Things Held Fast*, as with many of your works, foregrounds some images whilst almost completely obliterating others.

I am interested in creating painted surfaces that have the quality of a slow reveal, or that are complex in a way that means you can look at the same painting on different occasions and see different things emerging; destabilising the idea of any image, and by extension ideas of 'history', as something fixed

or 'true'. If the painted surfaces serve a metaphorical function, I like to think of them as porous; that information advances and recedes, and fragments reveal themselves over time, or meaning emerges because in the viewer they meet a particular subjecthood. This feels like a more useful form to me than a linear or direct narrative, because it can at least gesture towards complexity. The physical process of producing these kinds of surfaces involves a lot of masking; putting down layers and then masking them out, and building up subsequent layers. By the end, only the final layer of paint is visible, and then all the masking tape is peeled away to reveal these relationships that have been forming underneath the surface; it's a gratifying part of the process.

Although your work deals with the history of Brixton, it feels incredibly prescient in relation to colonial legacies and their continued impact on present life. As we've been corresponding the UK Government have published 'The report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities', how do you think this impacts the very public context of your commission?

That the UK government could be so aggressively tone deaf on these issues speaks volumes, and is symptomatic of a continuing denial of what empire and colonisation really mean, and where they sit both today and historically. This whitewashing is a well-worn trope engaged in by the Australian state also, and has been at the centre of the project of Australian nation building since federation. I have recently been reading the Hansard transcripts of the first sitting of the first Australian Parliament, which is a raw testament to the centrality of racism and white supremacy, and their brutal implementation, to the colonial project here. This blinkered and patronising attempt by the British government to present colonial dispossession as a form of cultural enrichment is in itself a clear instance of colonial continuity; positioning dispossessed peoples who have struggled to make a place for themselves in the UK as a useful *resource* for feeding the British cultural fabric. Trauma dismissed out of hand.

As a white woman, and a beneficiary of colonisation, I don't think it's my role to represent the suffering of others in my artworks, of those who have borne the brunt of colonisation. I think that as a white person I should do the work of understanding my own history, and its relation to colonising processes, and how these things shape the present.

This painting is intended to focus on the idea of a community creating space together, and holding fast, against forces that seek to undo or erode it; to mark something about the fabric of the community here, what it stands for, what has fed into it and continues to feed it. Property speculation is, in my view, an extension of the colonial project; and with it the winding back of public resources. These processes are operant in Brixton, as they are in Collingwood where I live. In both places, there are communities that hold their own, people who hold space for one another; collective growth against individual self-interest. The garden metaphor comes full circle in this.