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Jon Buck in his studio, March 2019

We are all dangerous to other species through our contemporary lives. Extended phenotype – use of signs and symbols allows us to operate en masse to become a superorganised eusocial and a threat to earth’s biodiversity. And that in the end is a threat to ourselves. There is every reason to believe that if humans had not arrived on the scene, the Neanderthals would be here still, along with wild horses and woolly rhinos. With the capacity to represent the world in signs and symbols comes the capacity to change it, which as it happens, is the capacity to destroy it. A tiny set of genetic variations divides us from the Neanderthals, but that has made all the difference.

Jon has been alive to the natural world around him all his life. He told me that he remembers, as a child, standing in the fields at Ham Green on the Avon: “Just standing and taking it in.” Later he came across the phrase ‘to commune with nature’ and he realised he knew what it meant and that it was something he’d long been busy with. Before he became a sculptor, he worked for a time as the Keeper of Birds at Bristol Zoo. He didn’t like the title or what it implied but we should remember it. Sometimes he was called away from the zoo to attend to lost and injured birds that people had come across. He once rescued a little auk – a seabird of the Arctic Ocean – that had inadvertently pitched up in the middle of Bristol. He did for it what he could. And he still communes to this day. Nowadays, he knows the otters that have come back to the Frome; but he also knows of the birds that are not at Ham Green on the Avon any longer – he feels and registers what has been called the great thinning of nature.

Two series of sculptures from Jon’s recent work explicitly address the anthropocene – this new era that we have created whereby our actions are determining how life goes and will go for the rest of our planet. These sculptures make thoughtful play around two ancient practical objects that have also long been used to signify where and how we are in the world. There are bells and there are boats – more specifically, there are warning tocsins and there are rescue vessels; bronzes made in the shape of slightly flattened Chinese-style bells; and arks, as Noah would recognise, curved at bow and stern, sea-worthy but also sometimes with legs that might allow them to settle on the land if ever the waters subside.

A patina colours and textures the surfaces of the bells and the arks and they are further marked – thickened, we could say – with crowded raised patterns of what Jon calls glyphs. These are sometimes lines that might be the representation of a wave or a cloud or a horizon or the energetic movement of basic life that we might see enlarged as medical imagery or microscopy; these are sometimes a species of runic writing; these are sometimes the icons and symbols we have become habituated to in our digital lives (there is a lovely joke in a drawing of a yellow-bright oriole in a spring green-leafed tradition. It was good business but it was also a humane calling. Very few of us can walk on water and making landfall is still the goal for all. With something like this in mind, Jon has been building arks for some time. He dates his new work that we see in these two shows back to 2015 but in many ways his whole life has prepared him for it. One three-dimensional example of this is a sculpture he made in 1988 of nature’s first pilot – a head of Noah capped by a magnificent raven. More recently, the sometime riverside boy came to boat building as something like an emergency measure, in the stark light of a global catastrophe that too many of us are still in the dark about: life is grievously wounded and all of it is under threat. The scale of the calamity is so large that
Making a Difference:
Red is for Rhino
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm

Taste for the Beautiful:
Refresh, Refresh, Refresh
2017, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm
world surrounded by the refresh symbols we know from computing); but, most of all of these glyphs are of animals – outlines that a child or a toy-maker or a Palaeolithic cave-painter or a graffiti-tagger might sketch – an ibis, a gorilla, a salamander, a rhinoceros, and many more. All these glyphs show Jon to be an arkivist, or a keeper as much as he ever was. Darwin ended his Origin of Species with a joyous panoramic image of all life living together on an ‘entangled bank’. Jon’s decorated bells and arks give us the same, with an added sense of pressing threat. These biodiverse scenes are on a bell that might toll for all of their life, or they are netted on the side of an ark that might be required to fetch their threatened forms to safety.

Jon has previously said that he thinks of sculpture as ‘the silent song’. His new work is articulate in a new way for him, perhaps, and it will speak to all who encounter it. The bells that Jon has made do sound – bluesy plangent doomsday chimes – but we should think also of the navigating bells on the River Severn, tolling as the tide turns, when the silt of all the land is run out to sea, and think of an ark rocking on the waters there, the slap of the waves against the hull, and from within its hold the fantastic riot of noisy life, that marvellous party, awaiting a haven and first steps back on to the land. The raven Noah released never returned to the ark, but a pair now breeds in the Avon Gorge and they fly over Jon Buck’s old haunts most days. They weren’t there when he was a boy. Some stories out of the ark make for happier news than others and Jon’s bronze life-boats are loud and freighted with good things that we must try to keep.

Will there be – asks a poem by Bertolt Brecht – singing in the dark times? Yes, it answers, there will be singing about the dark times.

Tim Dee

Tim Dee writes on birds, nature, people and places. He wrote The Running Sky and Four Fields. His last book Landfill was about gulls and rubbish and the organising of both; his next book, Greenery, will be about the spring.

(Argentum Vivum) 2016, Sterling Silver
Edition of 10
22.5 x 10 x 10 cm

(Ark: High and Dry) 2017, Bronze
Edition of 3
212.5 x 363.5 x 93.5 cm
Installed at Chester Cathedral from July - October 2017
“We have to regain our experience of connectedness with the entire web of life.”

_The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision_, Fritjof Capra and Pier Luigi Luisi, 2014
Wellhead
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
50.5 x 66 x 23 cm
We are anxious these days about what it means to capture something: we worry about representation, about ownership, about appropriation. Having our hand in things seems to have wrecked the world for the rest of life. Having, one way or another, caged our planet, we now feel ourselves a species adrift – we have become unnatural in nature.

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Taking the Toll
2019, Bronze
Edition of 5
200 x 140 x 64 cm
Up and Over
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
40.5 x 35 x 22 cm
Sculpture: Melting Point
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm

Matrices: Webs of Diversity V
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm

Matrices: Webs of Diversity VI
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm

Matrices: Webs of Diversity I
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm
The Whole Caboodle
2018, Bronze
Edition of 10
45 x 54 x 27 cm
Full of Life
2018, Bronze
Edition of 10
28.5 x 69.5 x 23 cm
In Ferment
2018, Bronze
Edition of 10
74 x 52 x 16 cm
Ringing the Changes
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
62 x 38.5 x 38 cm
A World of Difference
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
22.5 x 41 x 11 cm
Transmutation
2011, Bronze
Edition of 10
44.5 x 49.5 x 30 cm
Bigger Beast
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
27 x 34 x 8 cm
Sculpture: Strange Fruit
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm

Sculpture: Bigger Beast
2019, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm
Standing By
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
30 x 48 x 13 cm
Touch of Nature
2018, Ceramic
Unique
62.5 x 45 x 16 cm
Lexicon
2008, Sterling Silver
Edition of 10
18 x 13 x 8 cm
Strange Fruit
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
50 x 63 x 18 cm
Ark: High and Dry Maquette
2018, Bronze
Edition of 10
41.5 x 71.5 x 19 cm
Taking the Toll Maquette
2018, Bronze
Edition of 10
59.5 x 43 x 17 cm
Catatonic
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
33 x 27 x 7 cm
Less Than No Time
2018, Ceramic
Unique
48.5 x 30 x 30 cm
Man Oh Man
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
29.5 x 19 x 7 cm
Lachrymal Vase
2018, Bronze
Edition of 10
52 x 34.5 x 33 cm
Barking
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
28 x 39 x 7 cm
Cast Adrift
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
24.5 x 39 x 14 cm
Repository
2012, Bronze
Edition of 10
70 x 38 x 17 cm
Eidos XIV
2012, Bronze
Edition of 10
26.5 x 36.5 x 5 cm

Eidos VII
2012, Bronze
Edition of 10
30 x 38 x 5 cm

Part of the Puzzle
2012, Bronze
Edition of 10
60 x 71.5 x 15 cm
Marked Cat
2015, Bronze
Edition of 10
28 x 45 x 20 cm

Red Queen Rules
2012, Bronze
Edition of 10
70 x 51 x 11 cm
Symphysis
2011, Bronze
Edition of 10
32.5 x 39.5 x 16.5 cm
Animal Glyphs
2019, Glazed ceramic
Unique
Heights ranging from 9.5 to 26 cm

Curved Cat
2019, Bronze
Edition of 10
16 x 26 x 19 cm
Preserving Vessel
2018, Ceramic
Unique
38 x 31 x 31 cm
Arks for the Anthropocene: Standing By
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm

Arks for the Anthropocene: Seeds for a Future I
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm

Sculpture: Cast Adrift
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm

Arks for the Anthropocene: All Adrift III
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm
JON BUCK
b. 1951

1970-75 
Employed as Keeper of Birds at Bristol Zoo
1975 
Fine Art Foundation Cardiff University
1976-79 
BA (Hons) Fine Art, Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham
1980-81 
MA Fine Art, Manchester Polytechnic
1980-81 
Fellow in Sculpture, Gloucester College Art and Technology, Cheltenham
1984 
Artist in Residence, Borough of Thamesdown, Swindon
1984-85 
Elected Member of Royal West of England Academy
1991-2011 
Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Southampton Solent University
1991-2011 
Elected Associate of Royal Society of Sculptors
1995 
Artist consultant for Caerphilly Town Centre Enhancement Scheme
1998 
Artist consultant for the refurbishment of Deal Pier
1999 
Wins Rouse Kent Award for Public Art
1999-2011 
Three projects with Ruwenzori Sculpture Foundation, Uganda
2004-09 
Elected Fellow of Royal Society of Sculptors

RECENT SOLO EXHIBITIONS
2015 ‘Coded for Colour’, Pangolin London, Kings Place
2014 ‘Without Words’, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire
2011 ‘Making a Point: the Point of Making’, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire
2009 ‘Behind the Lines’, Pangolin London, Kings Place
2005 ‘Odd Birds and Other Selves’, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire
2000 ‘Intimate Connections’, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS
2019 ‘Sculpture Open’, Royal West of England Academy, Bristol
2018 ‘Sculptors’ Maquettes’, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire
2017 ‘ARK’, Chester Cathedral, Chester
2016 ‘Jubilee’, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire
2015 ‘Toro’, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire
2014 ‘Sculptors’ Prints & Drawings’, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire
2013 ‘Sculptors’ Prints & Drawings’, Part of Impress ’13 International Printmaking Festival, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire
2011 ‘Making a Point: the Point of Making’, Gallery Pangolin, Gloucestershire
2008 ‘Sterling Stuff II’, Pangolin London, Kings Place
2003 ‘BLOK’, Festival of Sculpture, Canterbury
2002 ‘Fantastic Animals’, Donjon de Vez, Paris, France
2001 ‘The Shape of the Century: 100 years of Sculpture in Britain’, Salisbury Cathedral & Canary Wharf
1999-85 ‘Superhumanism’, Nicholas Treadwell Gallery

COMMISSIONS
2018 ‘In Man’s Nature’, 240cm high bronze, Uniciiti Sculpture Park, Mauritius
2007 ‘Ship to Shore’, 300cm high bronze, Portishead Quays, North Somerset
2005 ‘Family’, 170cm high bronze, Centre for Sport, Exercise and Health, Bristol University
2004 ‘New Age’, 90cm high bronze, Goodwood Godless, Cass Sculpture Foundation, East Sussex
2000 ‘Embracing the Sea’, 200cm high bronze, West Quay Shopping Centre, Southampton
1999 ‘Returning to Embrace’, 150cm high bronze, Milton Keynes General Hospital
1998 ‘Embracing the Sea’, 300cm high bronze, Deal Pier, Kent
1996 ‘New Age’, 90cm high bronze, New Consulate General Building, Hong Kong

JON BUCK
b. 1951

Few and Far Between
2016, Bronze
Edition of 10
34.5 x 58 x 18 cm
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Gallery Pangolin
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GALLERY PANGOLIN
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(COVER IMAGE)
Fractured: Cracked Earth II
2018, Pastel on paper
Unique
49.5 x 65 cm

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