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An artist's mind is not bound by the same conventions and limitations as that of a scientist. **Jon Hughes** meets the Harrisons, activist artists with a radical vision for lifting the world out of environmental disaster



stocked with catfish, which the Harrisons intermittently electrocuted and fed to the masses. It was a comment on sustainability and man's ability to feed himself, with obvious religious inferences. The late Spike Milligan was moved to throw a brick at the gallery in protest at the perceived cruelty. The fledgling tabloids had a field day. Lord Goodman, who had recently resolved the crisis in Rhodesia, was asked to judge whether it was offensive and would disturb children.

'He arrived at the gallery and said "We have a problem that needs to be ironed out"', recalls Newton. 'So I said, "You think we're the problem and you're the iron?"'

The show went on with all the ubiquitous warnings we are so used to today. With the world shaken by the barbarism of the Vietnam War and living in the shadow of the Cold War, the irony of the situation was not lost on the Harrisons.

An elegant retreat

I met the Harrisons at an event hosted by CIWEM (the Chartered Institute of Water and Environment Management) called 'Art in the Environment'.

I had little appetite for proceedings having left the office with the news wires buzzing with warnings from scientists such as

Tim Flannery and the IPCC that climate change was accelerating faster than any of the climate models had previously envisaged. As though artists could change the world in time. Fiddling. Rome. Burns. Whatever.

Yet earlier in the day the Harrisons had addressed the conference about their conceptual triptych, *Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom*. It was the talk of the great and good that night at the Millbank Suite of the City Inn Hotel, Westminster.

The work details an elegant retreat. What a striking image those three words conjure up in these exhausted and threatening times: a retreat from unsustainable global economic model; a retreat in the face of climate change; a retreat into a new world.

The Harrisons' is an inspirational response to the fatalism that paralyses a great many of us, prevents us confronting the truth about the point at which we have arrived, and they have articulated the problem with the timeless precision of poets. The notion resonates with the possibilities that naturally occur at pivotal moments in history, when battle's done – in this case our battle to control the environment lost and our battle to save the planet joined. What a perfect distillation of where we're at. And theirs is a perfect response.

'It's [climate change] happening. Better we prepare for an elegant retreat than wait for a panic,' observes Newton. 'We suggest that existing plans for greenhouse

What if life imitated art?

Percy Bysshe and Mary, Rodin and Camille, Sidney and Beatrice, Sartre and De Beauvoir, John and Yoko. Couples all; original thinkers all. Add to that pub-quiz pantheon of connubial collaboration

Newton and Helen Mayer, the Harrisons. They are not well known in today's celebrity circus but are world-renowned. As? Conceptual artists. Not your typical White Cube gallery conceptual artists, though: activist conceptual artists.

'Too self-referential, not enough activism,' is their opinion of the current 'modern' art scene in Britain. Chimes with me. 'Maybe you need an activist arts council,' they suggest. You sense they are disappointed with Sir Nicholas Serota, the UK king of conceptualism as the head of Tate Britain and the Turner Prize.

One of the young Mr Serota's first jobs in the art world was working as an assistant to the Harrisons back in the early 1970s, when they were among the first artists invited to exhibit at the then-cutting edge Hayward Gallery.

Fish Feast caused a furore. In the most simplistic terms it involved a series of interconnected fish tanks

emissions control will be insufficient to keep the temperature rise at 2°C or less. In fact, we believe the tipping point is past. In this context, the rising ocean becomes a form determinant.

'By that we mean the rising ocean will determine many of the new forms that culture, industry and many other elements of civilisation will have to take. There is another piece of this picture that we wish to give voice to; that is, up until this present rising of the world's oceans, the creators of Western civilisation have held and enacted the belief that all limitations in the physical world, particularly in the ecological world, are there to be used and overcome.

'We think that the rising ocean is an opportunity for transformation, but it is exactly the reverse of a new frontier to overcome from civilisation's perspective; now, from the ocean's perspective, its boundary is perhaps a continuing, evolving, transforming new frontier. Therefore, assuming a rapid rise of waters, even for a modest 5m in 100 years, there are apparently no models of precedence, no information, design nor planning on the table, with the exception of ocean defences and typical development models, albeit more energy-efficient ones. It is the intention of *Greenhouse Britain* to begin generating the thinking, the design, perhaps the new belief structure, perhaps even indicating new economic structures that may be required for the democratic dispersal of support for an upward-moving population within the context of a gradually shrinking landmass.'

A graceful philosophy

Newton and Helen are in their seventies and have been collaborating since the late 1960s, when they both arrived at the University of California, San Diego, Newton as Professor of Art and Helen as Director of Educational Programmes. Newton is a sculptor, apprenticed in New York at the age of 14 to Michael Lantz – 'he was a fascist sculptor, all muscular horses and strong men'. By 16, Newton was an accomplished artist; he had already mastered hands, which are a perennial stumbling block for many. Helen comes from an 'intellectual family', a Chaucer scholar who studied philosophy of education, sociology and anthropology.

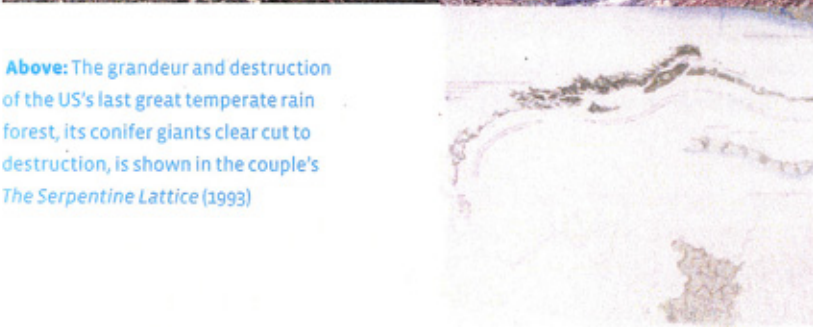
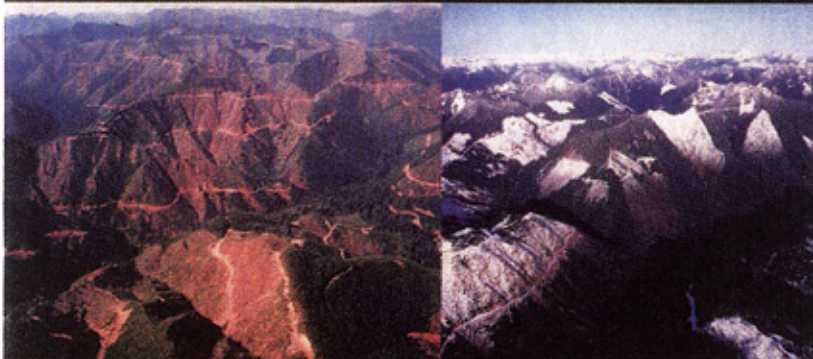


Above: A square tank, the 'Second Lagoon' in *The Lagoon Cycle*, was used to home mangrove crabs and chart their progress. The artists consider it a metaphor for alienation, for violation, for breaking the integrity of an ecological system

The catalyst for their decision to become eco artists was the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Carson's seminal work detailed the environmental destruction that was occurring as a result of the industrialisation of agriculture – the green revolution – and consumerism, and which posed a lethal threat to mankind. 'Carson's book haunted me constantly,' recalls Helen.

'It was then, around 1970-1971, that we decided not to work if it didn't benefit the life-web,' adds Newton.

And so they became, uniquely at that time, eco artists – activist eco artists. Even in those radical times it was a decision that was considered revolutionary. The issue of the day across the Western world at that time was 'class struggle'. The Harrisons were accused of selling out by their then-colleague Herbert Marcuse, a revered theoretician of the left. The exchange between Marcuse and Newton is



Above: The grandeur and destruction of the US's last great temperate rain forest, its conifer giants clear cut to destruction, is shown in the couple's *The Serpentine Lattice* (1993)

recorded in a pamphlet describing the Harrisons' work, entitled *From There To Here*.

'Marcuse said
with some force and at much greater length,
"Your work on ecosystems is a form of repressive de-
sublimation
which takes energy away from the real issue
which is the class struggle."

'I said,
Improvising quickly,
"The whole ecosystem can be seen as an
unacknowledged
endlessly exploited
underclass."

Such stylised conversational language is a hallmark of the Harrisons' pieces, following in the tradition of 'reportage' that runs from Plato to Pinter, via Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* of course.

The works the Harrisons did in their formative years as collaborators they refer to as the Survival Series, and include the infamous Hayward *Fish Feast* and others such as *Portable Orchard*, where they grew citrus fruit as an ironic response to the destruction of local orchards by massive development in Orange County, a plush satellite of Los Angeles. While some of the Harrisons' trees still survive intact in their original form outside the gallery, the vast acres of orchard that gave Orange County its name are now only a memory.

'We made portable fish farms, worm farms, orchards — we made soil for one installation,' explains Helen. 'They were done in part to teach ourselves, as urban people from New York, how to grow things, principally our own food. However, the process involved in doing so quickly revealed ethical issues and ecological contradictions; the interconnectedness of things and causal relationships.'

This gave rise to a new 'deeper conversation' between the two artists and resulted in the vast, semi-autobiographical work *The Lagoon Cycle*; a 300ft-long mural, 8ft high, in more than 60 parts, commanding 5,000 sq ft across seven rooms. This epic work, now in the Centre Pompidou collection, was to take 10 years to complete, between 1974 and 1984, and was the couple's first wholesale cultural assault on systems management and the hubris of man in thinking he could do nature better. Even then the couple were talking about a 'graceful' recognition of our errors, as the noted art historian and critic Carter Ratcliff observed in his introductory essay to the book recording the piece:

'Everything is in flux, as few have failed to notice since the time of Heraclitus. The question is how to envision change; then what to do with one's vision. Modernity begins with belief, first articulated by 18th-century philosophers and revolutionaries, that cyclical

change can be converted into progress, a straight-ahead advance to the perfection of humanity and the world. The Harrisons' Cycle responds to the failures of all our visions of perfectability.'

You can't square the circle of nature.

From there to here

While developing *The Lagoon Cycle*, the Harrisons produced another work that was to prove integral to their developing philosophy and is evident in their approach taken in *Greenhouse Britain*. *The Sacramento Meditations* was the Harrisons' response to the condition of the land in their own back yard, and centred around the San Francisco delta. It was, however, the first work they did that had no central image, unless, as they observe in *From There To Here*, 'one could consider the repeated use of images of the state and of the central valley within it as a central image. Our presentation took the form of nine hand-worked maps from various resources agencies and several regular maps of the state of California with the central valley coloured in. These variously represented the state of the farming, the soil conditions, the systems of land division and the water use in the

'Modern-day Homers on their own green odyssey, the Harrisons are looking at what is possible and sustainable, using the land and its natural resources as a guide'

central valley.' In that sense it was very Warholian and equally as iconic as that artist's Marilyn series.

Deriving an iconic image from whatever landscape they are in has subsequently become central to the Harrisons' pieces – as has the desire, as they put it, 'to create works of art to leap out of the gallery and into reality', something that was also evident in *The Sacramento Meditations*.

In 1976-1977, at the height of the punk explosion in the UK, they were overt in going far beyond the gallery walls of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

'There were TV and radio presentations of the dialogue and a city-wide poster campaign asking questions such as "For instance, if..." and ending with "What if all the irrigated farming isn't necessary?" And a graffiti campaign was mounted with various comments such as "Somebody's crazy – they're draining the swamps and growing rice in the desert" and "He who builds on a flood plain must be prepared to be visited by water."

In the process of making these works, the Harrisons developed their concept and quickly came to realise that the installations alone simply were not adequate to carry all the information required to present whole systems.

So they began to use text, photographs, drawn or painted images and latterly maps, satellite images

and climate models to drive the pieces. The narrative comes from the conversations between Newton and Helen, the engineer and the poet, the lagoon-maker and the witness, modern-day Homers on their own green odyssey, looking at what is possible and what is sustainable, using the land and its natural resources as a guide. *The Lagoon Cycle* is variously described as being a Hollywood storyboard or book, with its seven chapters, powerful dialogue and philosophical commentary.

The acclaim they received for these two works launched the Harrisons on to the international stage, and they were subsequently invited to address ecologically troubled areas around the world – 'too many' – including, among their prolific output, *Breathing Space for the Sava* in Croatia, *The Mulde Watershed* in Germany, *Peninsula Europe*, *The Serpentine Lattice* in the US, *Vision for the Green Heart of Holland* and now *Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom*.

A new settlement

'We only go where we're invited,' says Newton.

'And we only go where we are welcomed by the

community leaders of wherever we may be,' he continues. 'The authorities.'

Defra, that sprawling, incoherent, overwhelmed department of government responsible for environment, food and rural affairs, has funded *Greenhouse Britain*.

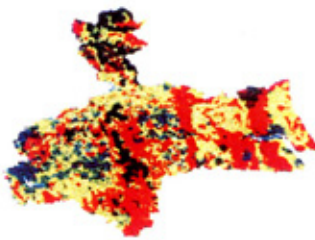
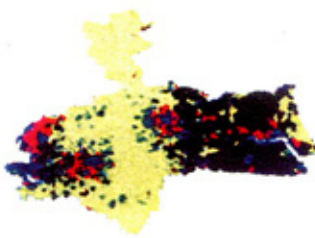
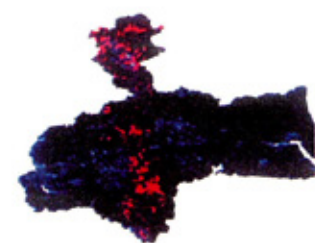
'We are sadly never short of invitations, but initially we agree only to go and think,' says Helen.

'And there has to be an urgency,' says Newton. 'Without urgency the vision stays on the gallery walls.'

Which is not the case in Holland, where, with minor modifications, their *Vision for A Green Heart* has all but been adopted, while *The Serpentine Lattice* has been in and out of the Oval Office. Ultimately, however, 'forests don't have a vote or campaign funds and vested interests do'.

The Defra project was an invitation to the Harrisons to create a work that increased awareness of the global warming issue.

The Harrisons' response is the monumental triptych *Greenhouse Britain*. In this they propose three solutions: the upward movement of peoples, retreat and defence, and defence, and they have modelled their iconic installation on three areas: the Pennines, the Thames Gateway and Bristol – vast, illuminating portraits of where we are, what we as people have become as a result of our urbanisation, and the societies



Above: Bounded by Roman roads and estuaries, a mythic creature is mapped out in Transpennine soil, forestry, pasture and population statistics. *Casting A Green Net: Can It Be We Are Seeing A Dragon?* (1998)

we can and need to create. These three areas were selected as representative of the UK demographic: rural, urban and under particular threat.

The Harrisons are dismissive of the current development plans being pursued across the Pennines and Thames Gateway. In the north of the country, Defra proposes the creation of a super-city, a vast homogenised 15-mile-wide sprawl running from the Humber to the Mersey along the M62. In the south, it envisages simply dumping 200,000 homes along the Thames flood plain. The bulldozers have already moved in, albeit in piecemeal fashion.

'They seem dumb proposals to us,' says Newton. 'We tend to ignore what's happening on the ground – it changes everyday. If you take heed you just end up accommodating it, whereas a vision has to offer a choice. Very often when we argue about "A" or "B", the

resettlement as a series of new villages that respect those that are already there, adhering to their history rather than subsuming them in a concrete corridor. In this instance they have been guided by patterns created by lost dry-stone walls and past settlements, which naturally were created in areas where there was a water supply and fertile soil. These new villages will be built in a way to harness the power of the water courses in the area and stimulate the return of open-canopy forests, which in turn act as a buffer against climate change by sequestering 45 per cent of the carbon emitted by the 8,000 settlers envisaged.

'We only need to sequester half,' explains Newton. 'Any individual or household [through efficiency or conservation] can cut their carbon use by half.'

Integral to the piece is a respect for soil and water, the heart and lungs of the biosphere. Increasingly, both

'The Harrisons' work raises huge metaphysical questions. Evident since *The Lagoon Cycle*, on the most direct level theirs is an environmental audit without compare'

answer is to look at "C".

'Water rises gracefully,' he continues. 'The question for us is, can we withdraw with equal grace? What would we withdraw into? What would this place look like? How would we behave? Could we invent a new environment, a village-type life that sequesters more carbon than it uses?'

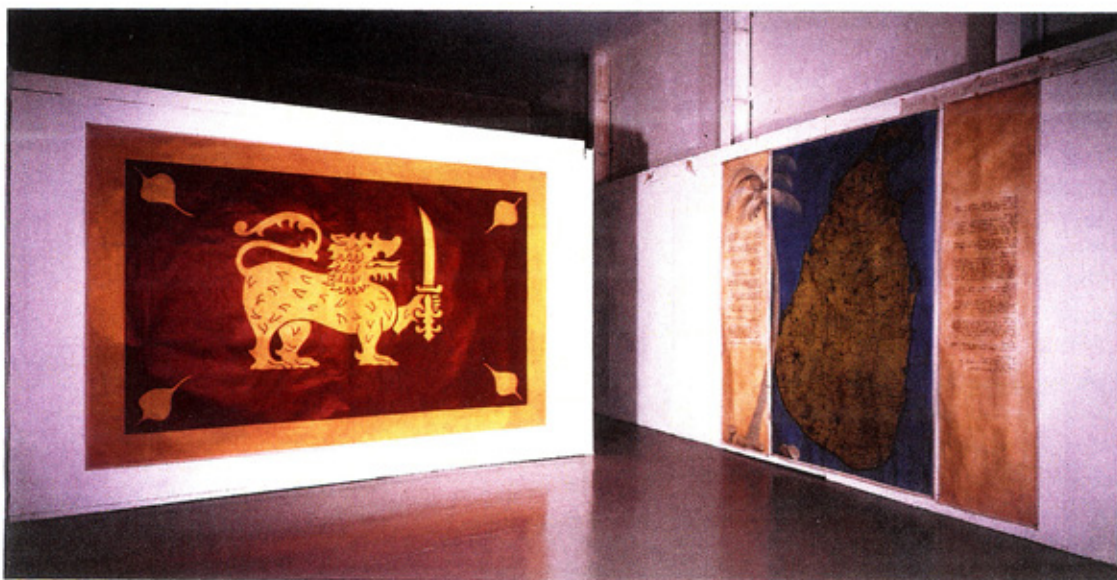
'We use the word "settlement" rather than development – that is important,' says Helen. 'A settlement is where someone puts down roots; people put down roots, animals, plants, trees, insects put their roots down. The different lengths of roots are important to any sustainable ecosystem.'

So the Pennine element of the triptych envisions its

have a recognised economic value, as does carbon, which is why the Harrisons' visions are gaining currency around the world.

The couple number-crunch too, in this instance working with experts such as Professor Robert Nicholls at the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change and Paul Selman, head of landscape architecture at Sheffield University. They calculate that the Pennines can accommodate 70 settlements of 8,000 people. Each would command approximately 40 sq miles, of which 40 per cent would be forest and the remainder diverse meadowland, enough to allow for local sustainable agriculture to deliver on about one-quarter of the community's protein needs, while sequestering carbon.

Below: 330ft-long, 8ft high and in more than 60 parts, *The Lagoon Cycle* mural was the Harrisons' first assault on humanity's hubris to think we could improve on nature. It took a decade to complete and resides in the Centre Pompidou collection



The vision doubles the population of the area, accommodating 560,000 people – substantially more than is envisaged by the M62 plan and at no greater expense. We are going to have to build homes in this number to accommodate current and projected shortages, let alone a mass exodus.

'With a sea-level rise of 5m [which some, such as Jim Hansen at NASA, are now predicting by the end of the century] two million people in the UK will have to move upwards.'

In the Thames Gateway the core principles remain the same. Rather than the suburban flood-prone sprawl currently being pursued, the Harrisons see the creation of an open canopy and wetland park between the river and a notional 5m-high flood mark, surrounding 'green statues' and high-rise carbon-neutral buildings (they are well above the 5m mark and unlikely to be flooded) sequestering their own carbon. Basically, they are high-rise towns.

Further, they propose foresting the Lea Valley watershed in order to enhance London's water supply. Like the Pennine proposal, this plan is more financially robust than that which is proposed, and which also benefits the biosphere.

In Bristol they have arrived at a third solution. To save Bristol old town from disappearing below the waves they have reviewed the area's historic water courses and devised a system of damming to hold back rising ocean waters, while redirecting the River Avon itself to above the city, draining off the flood waters and releasing them back into the River Severn above Bristol. The economic imperative is obvious.

The culture of planning

The sheer brilliance of the Harrisons' vision and its presentation is astonishing. The methodology they have devised over the years is inherently democratic


and can be applied universally.

The Harrisons' work raises huge metaphysical questions, but, as has been evident since *The Lagoon Cycle*, on the most direct level theirs is an environmental audit without compare, but with many imitators wearing emperor's clothes. Think of the mystifying way corporate social responsibility reports and environmental impact assessment reports are presented.

Investigators are told to follow the money. The Harrisons follow the water and the earth. Through their conceptual art, the couple give the biosphere voting rights and harness its power, rather than fighting against it.

The Harrisons' process exposes a fundamental flaw in how we have grown and threaten to grow as a society. Planning is seen as a bureaucratic issue, when it is inherently a cultural issue, as anyone knows who has seen a superstore open on the edge of their town or a block of flats infilling a local green space. Such events change landscapes and have a cultural impact on where we live and how we conduct our daily lives.

Conversely, the settlements of which the Harrisons speak inherently promote the support network and self-regulation of community that all governments profess to desire. What they do seems simple, as all brilliant things appear to be. They have made available to everyone the ability to see the trees, to become part of a process that is currently impatient, short-term in outlook and clouded in jargon.

It is often the case that original thinkers are only recognised after they have shuffled off this mortal coil. We would be well advised to listen to the Harrisons before we're dead in the water. 

Greenhouse Britain is currently touring the UK. For exhibition dates, visit www.greenhousebritain.net Jon Hughes is Deputy Editor of the *Ecologist*.

