

Foster Art & Wilderness

FOUNDATION

Exploring Beauty: Watercolour Diaries from the Wild

Transcription of opening remarks from the Bankside Gallery, June 9, 2016

Tony Foster:

Before I introduce Professor Sir Ghilleen Prance who's going to open the exhibition for us, I want to say... First of all I need to thank quite a lot of people. I'll be as brief as I can over that. And then I just want to say a few words about why this exhibition has appeared here and what it's about.

Firstly. The first group of people I would like to thank are my luminaries. These are the people who I went to when I decided I wanted to do an exhibition about beauty. I thought I couldn't be the sole arbiter of what was beautiful in the world, so I would go to people who were experts in their field and who were used to being in wild places. So there were scientists, climbers, mountaineers, explorers, writers, philosophers—people who thought about wild places or have spent time in them. And those people nominated the subjects that you see around you here in the gallery.

The next group of people I'd like to thank are my traveling companions. Once I had spoken to my luminaries and they had nominated somewhere for me to go to, I then had to plan how to get there and how exactly I was going to spend time doing the paintings. And this is where my traveling companions came in. They were the people who suffered with me in these wild places. They didn't only suffer the heat and the cold, and the miserable food, and the flies and the bugs. They also suffered me moaning constantly about the miserable time I was having making these paintings. So I want to thank them profoundly for having dragged me through these places and help me get the results we got.

And then the third group of people are, of course, the people who've helped to bring this exhibition before the public. My framers, John Jones in London and Justin Mitchell in Cornwall, put together the work and framed it so beautifully, I want to thank them for the care they took over it. And, I also, of course, want to thank Angela Parker, the director of the Bankside Gallery and her staff, all of whom were very enthusiastic about my show and extraordinarily efficient and proficient and professional in the way they hung it and the way they lit it and the way they looked after it. I want to thank them profoundly for all they have done.

Finally, I should talk a little more, I think, about Jane Woodward. Jane was the person who first conceived the Foster Art & Wilderness Foundation, which has been set up in Palo Alto. It was her brainchild and she saw it through after, what is it, five years since we first discussed it. She saw it through to its opening—grand opening—in Palo Alto, California, in February this year. And what a magnificent occasion that was. Anyone who was there will agree with that assessment, I think. So, thanks to Jane for this extraordinary idea that she had when we were together on the San Juan River in Utah. And thanks also to her staff, who have been deeply involved in getting this exhibition put together, in getting the catalogue made. I just want to, by the way, time for a commercial break—this wonderful catalogue, which tells the story of the show—it... All my inscriptions under my paintings, which are almost impossible to read with the naked eye, are all carefully transcribed in this catalogue, as are the wonderful statements that the luminaries all made about why they had selected those particular, or nominated, those particular places. They, all of them, wrote very beautifully about why exactly they thought these places were the most beautiful places in the world. And those are very illuminating inscriptions, so I think you couldn't do better than to spend—what is it, how much is it?—16.95—is that right? 16.95 for this wonderful catalogue, printed in Bristol, very beautifully, very carefully.

The purpose of the Foundation is to look after and promote, no, not to promote, but to look after my work and to keep together the exhibitions, which are all done on themes. This particular theme is of course about beauty, and Jane's concept was that it was a shame that these things were, generally speaking, in the past were split up between my stalwart collectors and she thought that it would be good if they were kept together and used for the public benefit. And so this entire exhibition has been purchased by the Foundation, the purpose of which is to promote the cause of art and wilderness, both causes of course very dear to my heart.

There are several reasons why I chose to make an exhibition on the theme of beauty. The first reason really, I think, was because like all of us I'm sure, I was aware of the due to the increasingly urbanized nature of our society we were becoming divorced from the extraordinary beauty that surrounds us, and I thought that perhaps it was worth making the point that not every worthwhile experience can be had from an iPad. And so I thought that it would be nice to make an exhibition which would bring that to people's attention—that it's actually worthwhile getting out there and spending some time in these places to absorb the beauty that can be found in nature.

The second reason of course is to proselytize for the defense of these places. We're used to hearing that places should be defended because of some scientific reason, perhaps there's a Natterjack toad which is very rare and therefore its little area should be preserved. Or perhaps there's a historical reason, a battle had been fought there and we should preserve it for that reason. But I am here to say that I think there is also a profound reason why we should preserve these places: simply because they are beautiful. That seems to me to be a perfectly rational reason for preserving the best of the places in the world. All of these places are under threat.

We shouldn't pretend that they are not. And therefore we should all pay attention and do what we can, I think, to preserve what we have.

The third reason—I was trying to find what the third reason is... oh yes, that's right, it struck me that the word beauty has been, has sort of disappeared from art discourse, and it seemed to me that that was a great shame. I thought that the word beauty ought to at least occasionally be used in an art vocabulary, and it seems to me that it probably no longer is. So, I thought that this was going to be my argument for bringing the word back into the art conversation, and I hope, certainly, that that will occur in the near future, as soon as people latch on to the fact that this show is here and people are enjoying it, which I certainly hope you are.

So I now would like to hand over to one of my greatest luminaries and a close friend, Professor Sir Ghilleen Prance. Thank you.

[applause]

Professor Sir Ghilleen Prance:

Thank you, Tony, it's a great privilege, and an honor to be here tonight with Tony, whose work I have admired for quite a while. I've never been called a luminary before, so I have another title I can put in my CV, luminary appointed by Tony Foster. So, a good addition to things. Well, I wondered when I got a phone call from Tony some years ago inviting himself to lunch. So I didn't know what the agenda was, but it was, as you can see, and I think he did this with other luminaries, ask 'which area in the world do *you* think is the most spectacular, beautiful, and wild?' So, as a specialist in the Amazon rainforest I think he was a bit surprised when I said Borneo, as I had spent less time in Borneo but I really saw the majestic forest in Borneo.

I got to know Tony when we had an exhibition at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, when I was director, I think it was 1995?—about then—and he had an exhibition of arid plants. Now, the focus of our development of plants at that time was the arid regions of the world, trying to develop crops for them. And so you couldn't have an art exhibit and the scientific program of an institution fit together well, better. I was pleased about this, but when I saw the exhibition I saw that it was something else; it was something wonderful, and it was just about beauty and wilderness. And, since then I've followed Tony's work very closely.

So, these paintings that we have here have taken about ten years, I think, to complete. I sat in a chair there this morning for about 25 minutes and just looked at them and meditated. Take time, come back, and really enjoy them because they do have such a wonderful message of beauty and of the wilderness. That's what I really like about Tony's paintings. They are indeed beauty that are diaries from the wild—the title of this exhibition. But, can you imagine the effort to get all of these? Tony is not just an artist, he is an explorer, and I know what you go through to go and make a painting in the rainforest or high up a mountain. I've never experienced the other thing that he's done, under water, on the recommendation of Sir David Attenborough, but it's quite remarkable that he's been in all these places. Now I think of things

that have happened to *me*, how *I* struggled. The notebooks, where I'm putting all these valuable notes about plants, get wet, and then you can't read what you've written. I soon learned that you needed an indelible pencil to write all your notes, but even so it's not easy. How Tony manages in the rainforest and some of these other habitats I don't know. The other thing he does is he sits on his tiny stool for hours, just looking at, taking in the wilderness, the wildness, the beauty. When you do that, and you stay still in any natural habitat, strange things happen, as I know. I spent hours in the top of a Brazil nut tree once, and I was looking for the bee that comes and pollinates it. Eventually, after several times up there, I discovered that it only came at 5 AM in the morning. [laughter] So I spent many hours up in that tree, but one day I felt something on my leg, and I looked down and I saw this green snake clambering into my trousers. Well, Tony has been through many of these adventures, he could recount them himself. But I know. I've been through capsized canoes, airplane crash landing, a camp struck by lightning, malaria several times. So, to get these paintings has been a wonderful sacrifice of a notable explorer. Now, many explorers who do this keep diaries, as Tony has, write books about all this, but Tony has another skill that many of us don't and that is to be able to put it onto paper in watercolor. What a wonderful talent to be able to do to bring us all this beauty. It's something that I just admire Tony for very much. His goal, he says here in this exhibition, is to spark a discussion about the nature of beauty, so I hope that you're not just discussing anything tonight, but you're discussing the nature of beauty, you're contemplating on the different paintings. There's so much variety. I had on my bucket list to go to the Atacama Desert and by accident I got there in February of this year, and it is so beautiful. And so we see from the rainforest, to the desert, to the high mountains, to the ocean where you can find beauty.

I would like to add my congratulations to Jane Woodward because what a wonderful thing to do for an artist, to buy an entire collection like this and put a museum together. The Foster Art & Wilderness Foundation is something that brings great joy to me to see that this is happening. I said to Jane, 'when you've got them all hanging there, you must use this for education, to bring schoolchildren, get people talking about the different things that they hear, because what a wonderful tool this is.' Jane, you have just done a remarkable thing for art, for the environment, and for beauty. And so I thank you for that.

[applause]

Tony also mentioned the last thing that I had on my list to say tonight and that is: anyone who travels in places like this begins to see the destruction and what is happening to them and is concerned about it. And so the big message here is, the big challenge to you is, to do something to stop the desecration. Will these areas be beautiful for our grandchildren or not? It will only be, if we put all the efforts in, so don't just go out here thinking you've seen beautiful paintings, go out and see what you can do for one of these ecosystems that we've seen tonight. So, now the exhibition is open, and enjoy it, and contemplate on it. Thank you.

[applause]