



The Nelson Touch

Helen Maurer & Sarah Woodfine

Curated by Victoria Preston

Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth

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The Nelson Touch derives its name from Nelson's imaginative naval tactics and the "common touch" he had with his men, leading them bravely into battle and empathising with their predicament. But does Nelson "touch" us today? What is his relevance in post-colonial Britain? *The Nelson Touch* invites two contemporary artists, Helen Maurer and Sarah Woodfine to make new work on the theme of the Bicentenary Trafalgar Celebrations and Nelson's death. What is the connection between history and contemporary art? Why are contemporary artists interested in a historical figure? To what extent is a historical figure relevant to contemporary practice?

The exhibition takes as its starting point the Nelson phenomena, characterised by the plethora of events planned under the umbrella title, "Sea Britain: Trafalgar Festival". These events commenced in June 2005 with the Fleet Review and re-enactment of the Battle of Trafalgar on the Solent near Portsmouth Harbour, continuing until the weekend of the anniversary itself 21-23 October 2005 and beyond to the re-enactment of Nelson's funeral cortege. The catalyst for these celebrations comes from the navy, the various Nelson yacht clubs and sailing enthusiasts. These groups have regularly celebrated Nelson's achievements over a period of two centuries, typified by the annual Trafalgar Dinner in which Nelson's "immortal memory" is revered. For the Bicentenary Celebrations leading figures in the Admiralty have joined forces with yacht club commodores and naval historians to spearhead a series of events designed to capture the general public's imagination and reinforce Nelson as a "household name".

Commissioned projects are taking place in the Royal Naval Museum, which houses the Lily Lambert McCarthy Collection of Nelson paintings, artefacts and memorabilia and also in Portsmouth Historic Dockyard where Nelson's flagship HMS Victory is located. The contemporary works will be added as complementary to the existing displays. The artists have been selected owing to their interest in working with historical context. Helen Maurer plays on the concept of "turning a blind eye" and has created a telescope functioning as a "camera obscura", reproducing images in the Nelson Gallery of encoded flags located outside in the dockyard. Sarah Woodfine has constructed a three-dimensional drawing of the Battle of Trafalgar, meticulously detailing its formal decay and providing the viewer with a narrative experience.

Helen Maurer has created a telescope acting as a "camera obscura" - projecting a small image of a scene outside the building on to a flat surface inside the museum. In Portsmouth Historic Dockyard she has hung a Nelsonic message encoded in flags. The camera obscura turns the projected image upside down, so the flags are inverted - a symbol of distress. She has collaborated with a nautical antiques specialist, who provided telescopes for her to work with and original source material on naval tactics and flag codes. The installation is complemented with archive footage of events and marches shot in Trafalgar Square, the site of Nelson's Column. Helen's practice is a process-based, experimental one that links time, place and memory, challenging our way of seeing. Much of her work involves the use of lenses playing with refraction, reflection and magnification. For *The Nelson Touch* she extends these techniques and references historical methods of image production.



Initially Helen Maurer was interested in how Nelson is remembered, his namesakes: pubs, street names, pets and other small objects commemorating his death. She investigated the flags in the Royal Naval Museum collection, encoded messages, the role of the telescope and researched activities taking place in Trafalgar Square especially the “peace marches”, and the idea of “turning a blind eye”.

Helen Maurer is engaged in the presentation of other worlds by means of illusionistic devices and she relies on found (photographic or printed images) as starting points for her work. She saw *The Nelson Touch* as an opportunity to extend her practice and using lenses was able to experiment with the effects of light and glass in a different form. She has immersed herself in the history of Nelson and the physicality of the experience, seeming to transport herself back in time to harness an authenticity about the event. Her work operates on a number of different levels: it references the past, it returns to the past, it is concerned with the physicality of the past and it intervenes in the museum display.

Sarah Woodfine has constructed a three-dimensional drawing based on the Battle of Trafalgar, meticulously detailing its formal decay whilst exploring her own imaginative interpretation of the event. She has drawn her inspiration from the Lily Lambert McCarthy collection of Nelson paintings, artefacts and memorabilia which is displayed at the Royal Naval Museum. Fascinated by models of 19th Century sailing ships and the physicality of shipbuilding as well as the naval tactics and battle formations, her work explores the phenomena of war and the post-battle situation, referencing the maquettes used by chiefs of command planning battle strategy. It is inspired by an engraving, *Battle of Trafalgar – Conclusion of the Battle* by James Walker, based on a sketch by Midshipman George Herbert, who fought at Trafalgar.

Sarah Woodfine’s practice of drawing bears an uncanny resemblance to the etchings and engravings of the period. She does not seek perfect or accurate representations of objects, but is concerned with suggesting just enough detail for the viewer to complete the narrative. Her recent works reference sculpture, she is concerned with the illusionistic representation of three-dimensional form. The drawings are meticulously delineated, emerging millimetre by millimetre as the details of surface and form are mapped out. Seeking to create surfaces that look printed rather than hand drawn, she creates the illusion that the image has been embossed into the surface. She repeatedly produces sharp incisions with her pencil, incising but not tearing the paper, in a process that is slow and painstaking, bordering on the obsessional.

Victoria Preston