

Leap of Faith

How does the landscapes feel to the blind? Artist Dan Shippersides has the vision.

For the last fifteen years I've developed an art practice which uses climbing to think creatively about the landscape around us. My latest project, Touchstone, takes this one step further: I've been climbing with John – a blind man from Derry – with micro-cameras attached to his finger tips.

I wanted to form a landscape artwork through the cameras, recording John's physical searching climbing activity, as if his fingers were feeling out and making the landscape. It's all based on the idea that whilst sight is crucial to making it easier, climbing isn't primarily about sight – it's as much about movement and physicality. In fact, landscape as a cultural idea is very visually based; images of landscape are rooted in painting and are usually ordered around narrow sets of framing principals, viewpoints or perspectives. But I think this can overlook exactly why people are passionate about being out there – surely landscape art has some obligation to reflect the physical experience too?

John hadn't climbed before so we began climbing indoors to build familiarity. It was fascinating to see how John was immediately climbing at a high technical level because he didn't use the

easier options that a sighted novice climber would have sought and used. John was immediately hooked: "What I found engaging was the level of concentration needed to maintain balance and make progress up the wall. As a blind person climbing I was drawn to the higher level of independence and control in the situation which enhanced my sense of freedom."

We then started to climb locally, mainly in Donegal. These trips allowed me to develop the video technology. I sourced tiny cameras and worked out how to wire and attach them to John, so that eight cameras were could simultaneously record on a lightweight MPECH system. Later we ventured further afield including a six-day trip to Costa Blanca where we climbed routes at Echo Valley, Sella and Sierra de Toix.

However I soon realised that simply recording footage was too narrow an

approach, it didn't convey the wider experience and treated John almost as an instrument. We realised that the landscape was as much about how John and I interacted (and his friend Gerard and guide dog 'boss'), and what our activity was in these places, as it was about the footage itself. This led to a shift to where we saw the activity more as a mutual partnership (after all, we were belaying each other). Until then, aiming to keep John's climbing experience 'pure', we'd agreed not to use guiding during the climbing. This was a big turning point in the project.

The conversations, the jokes, the whole experience of the place are all part of climbing, it's more than just hands on rock. There's often a lot of communication, it's part of the social experience of the activity. For us, it was even more critical when we encountered 'leaps of faith': moves where holds were beyond reach, demanding high steps and upward momentum to overcome blank sections. Information and teamwork was crucial to success here, as John explained: "No matter what two people are doing together there's an interdependence there for the activity to happen – even to sit down and have a drink. It's perhaps highlighted more if you're blind. On steeper rock I needed sighted information to help plan my moves. You need someone to tell you where the different holds are, and to me that's no different from using speech systems on computers or any aid that can facilitate my activity."

The guiding even became a game in itself and I began to really enjoy it. At Echo Valley where the climbing was very steep I was really conscious of being very precise in communicating where holds were and in working out what the moves might be. "Left hand, six inches, 2 o'clock," and other such ways of directing became interesting and engaging. But of course, unless both climbers are actually into it, it won't work. "Blind climbing is definitely a team sport," observed John.

The results of our climbs are two works, Echo Valley and A Guiding



caption, caption

Dilemma. Echo Valley is a multi-screen video work presenting John climbing Little Bootie (S). It screens in real time and comprises of close-up otherworldly footage from John's fingers and feet as well as wider footage from cameras on his backpack giving a sense of the body's vertical height, balance and movement. A Guiding Dilemma consists of video works, text and photography which include the wider aspects of the activity; conversations and the fun, human stuff.

Did it work? I'll leave that up to the visitor to decide. But John, for one is no doubt: "If any blind person asked me if they should go rock climbing, I'd say go for it. It's a real social and physical experience, a different way of experiencing a place."

Find out more

Touchstone test piece is an exploratory art project based around climbing with a blind person. Artworks Echo Valley and A Guiding Dilemma made through this activity are exhibited at the Void Gallery, Derry from 20th May to 20th June. ■

Video stills caption



“I have no sight at all – so I didn't have any fear climbing – it probably helps not to have any idea of what 20 metres looks like from above. As long as it feels safe I enjoy the climbing and I don't have any fear, it doesn't come into my mind. The only time I'm scared of heights is in my dreams”