

# Art of climbing

## Dan Shipsides, Sculptor

Originally from Lancashire, Dan Shipsides is a researcher and lecturer in art at the University of Ulster. The past 15 years have seen him devote much of his time to climbing, and experimenting combining that with his other passion – art.

**H**e began by painting abstract landscapes which featured the climbers' world - crags overlaid with lines and marks - then progressed to thinking about the gesture of certain moves, drawing through climbing. Moving away from canvas, he then considered the performance of climbing as an art form in itself, first climbing around gallery spaces then making sculptures to climb, like scale physical maps, charting specific climbing moves.

His work has developed through many forms; text, poetry, audio, video, photography, drawing, installation and sculpture. But underlying all his work is a desire to try to make artworks which relate to experiential aspects of landscape rather than just the pictorial. He is also keenly interested in exploring social and historical ideas about our relationship to the environments that we find ourselves in, and his latest work, Radical Architecture has just finished exhibiting in Manchester.

“Radical Architecture at the Castlefield Gallery, Manchester was commissioned by the Salford Restoration Office. It explored a relationship to the Peak District through climbing, and by drawing from cultural and social history, with reference to climbing locations and routes, suggested new ways of thinking about landscape. It consisted of a sculptural construction climbable by visitors, 'drawings' based on significant routes, and three historical artworks depicting the crags.

I designed the installation based on physical aspects of certain climbs at places such as The Roaches.

Combining my love of particular climbing routes with the spatiality of the 6m height gallery, I aimed to engage and evoke the two spaces. I was particularly keen to emulate a move on Valkyrie, where you're delicately moving on steep slabs, then step over an airy gap and shuffle around a hanging arête. It's very spatial. A beautiful moment, hanging in an airy, precarious space.

The resulting 'sculpture' offered a new climbing route which I called Hanging Slabs, which, thanks to the Manchester Climbing Centre, was opened to the public for some very popular climbing sessions. Whilst not a precise replica of the Valkyrie move, Hanging Slabs offered an abstraction of that climbing situation, in itself creating a memorable and real physical experience. I'm really interested in this as an thing of beauty - which in climbing might be through the "event" of (for example) that move - more than in the way the landscape looks or is pictured. Beauty as a spatial event, and in this case quite a radical event.

The seven drawings attempt to poetically locate the shape of different routes - the space inhabited or created by climbing it. Rather than just a line indicating the direction of the route I wanted to emphasise the route as an embodiment of the rock and climber's bodily interaction. Some of the routes I had a climbed knowledge of, but some were beyond my ability so the drawing exists as a mental projection. The effect is maybe as if the heat of the climbers' moving body has evaporated a line of mist.

They chart developments through the last century – almost with the birth of rock climbing with Puttrell's Zig Zag

to the modern day bouldering developments of Brad Pitt. Throughout this period the cutting edge development of climbing in the Peak District was driven by urban climbers from less gentlemanly backgrounds. This changed the demographics of climbing and underpinned an already established relationship between the cities and towns and their local landscapes which corresponds with a social movement which opened up more of the landscape to the public.

Yet the aim of the project is not to re-create the experience of climbing the routes but rather to distil and expand some of the elements of the climbers' landscape into a gallery space in order to imagine a type of "landscape" space.

In terms of architecture, the exhibitions' title ludicrously suggests the scenario where these spaces (routes) fell into an architects' brief and imagines the radicalism required to construct these spaces in a societal sense. It puts forward the idea of the landscape being constructed – but part of that construction would need to embrace a risk-taking element, so it carves out a waiver in relation to the landscape being orderly, benevolent and tame and asserts the potential for a wildness in this place. ■”

Dan is currently working on an AHRC funded project called Touchstone Test Piece. This involves climbing regularly with John, a blind man and using micro video lenses to produce 'fingertip footage'. For more information see [www.danshipsides.com](http://www.danshipsides.com).



*Drawing of Valkyrie at The Roaches depicting the interaction of the climber with the route. And (inset) the Hanging Slab - a recreation of the airy shuffle around the Valkyrie arete. Both: Dan Shipsides.*