Inverted Landscapes
David Bethell

The Peak District and Ilam Park have long-been recreational destinations for city-dwellers and artisans in search of inspiration or a breath of "countryside air." Time after time, English landscapes have been used as symbols of humanity's idyllic synergy with the natural world – though, in truth, the validity of this connection is questionable. Commonly, the present-day walker, hiker or tourist encounters Ilam Hall's pleasant 19ᵗʰ century grounds with a literal "snapshot" eagerness. The Grade II listed building provides a picturesque viewpoint of the Manifold Valley, Thorpe Cloud and the estate's modified Saxon church – it is this scene, one formerly captured in a print by 18th century pioneer potter Josiah Wedgewood, that artist David Bethell also seeks to garner in his site-specific commission for GRAIN Projects.

Sat humbly on a crisp, green plateau is a wooden shelter, one which calls to mind the homely shed that frequents the margins of a garden; a friend to horticulturists or allotmenteers. As a spectator, we are drawn to this make-shift contraption which, upon closer inspection, is adorned with a structural porch, timber steeple and Saxon-esque cross – all of which mimic the ad-hoc outline of Ilam's Church of the Holy Cross. We're called in, away from the freak-April heat, into a pitch-black interior where the artist reassures us that yes, our eyes will adjust. After a dishabilitating moment, an image illuminates before us. Subtle, as if glowing, an upside-down vignette of the exterior scene emerges on a translucent tableau – it is blurry, but dense and rich in colour and tonality. Moreover, it is painterly, as though the sun has inscribed the scene onto the artist's suspended, white canvas.

The "photograph" presented before us glorifies the landscape; its mystical appearance pertaining to a stained-glass lit shrine. As a modern-day audience, habitually plagued by an onslaught of digitised imagery, we find ourselves enamoured by this unexpected, luminous picture which exists in a no wi-fi zone. As our sight adapts, we begin to observe the lightness in the clouds that pan steadily across the skyline, and the lone dog-walker – adorned in bright synthetic clothing – who pads their way through the estate. Instinctively, the audience searches for a moving image projector: instead, situated behind the rectangular screen is a tiny hole, brimming with natural light. Bethell's piece employs a camera obscura – a simple contraption in which light, when narrowed through a small opening, projects a reversed and inverted optic.

Delicate shifts in daylight provide an ever-changing picture of Ilam Park. Soon, we are confronted with two dilemmas: "to which era does this spectral scene belong?" and "from which artistic discipline does it stem from?" Much like the estate itself, the featured image touches upon multiple eras: the camera obscura's live process depicts moving, modern-day elements within a still, bygone setting. Bolstered by a pinhole-induced vignette, the tableau pulls the viewer into the heart of 19ᵗʰ century Romanticism in which painters adorned nature with a plethora of emotion. Amongst Susan Sontag's many notable quotes, she once stated that "the painter constructs, the photographer discloses." Bethell, in his staging of an image in "real-time," both constructs and discloses his scene: he assembles together the painter's atmospheric rendering of landscape with the photographer's ability to expose a visual reality.

That being said, Bethell's work is caught in the tangle of photography's nuanced heritage. While his "real-time" picture signals the exterior world's defiance at being contained in a still image, his use of a camera obscura harkens back to the beginning of wide-spread, image-domination. As a precursor to modern photography, the camera obscura is at the root of the billions of images uploaded to our digital screens on a daily basis. It is simplicity and sensuality that distance *Inverted Landscapes* from this technology. Inside the shed, the smell of freshly-sawn timber and the texture of grass beneath our feet ground our experience within an outdoor reality. Here, the audience is

invited to draw comparisons between the image they see and their firsthand experiences of the outside world.

Through its horizontally-flipped scene, *Inverted Landscapes* quite literally inverts and alters our perspective of Ilam Park: it intentionally renews our appreciation of the estate's centuries-old vista, with the Saxon church taking centre-stage. We re-emerge from the artist's temporary haven as a participant, rather than a spectator, as we begin to imagine ourselves swept into an ever-changing vortex of time. When stood between Bethell's shelter and the former-Saxon church, we knowingly become part of the landscape's narrative and the dialogue occurring between the two buildings which boast a medley of architectural styles. Stood mirrored, as though in conversation, the shelter and the church discuss their respective roles in shaping the land for the painter, photographer or tourist. We leave, satisfied with the knowledge that room has been left for the visitor's own imagination to be inserted into a scene which has not yet been immortalised in neither paint, grain nor pixel.

Selina Oakes.