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The Apocryphal Archive

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1. SUPPORTING STATEMENT

Output title	The Apocryphal Archive
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The Apocryphal Archive is a research project and creative body of work on aquatinted steel plates. Developed over ten years, the work stems from the experience and family photographs of Benington's grandmother, who fled Germany as a young woman in the winter of 1944/45 in fear of the advancing Russian army. The project was further developed by Benington's research into geographically and historically diverse incidents of forced displacement, and his use of photographs that either record the dislocation or record lives before deracination as the basis for artworks.

Research into the education of Native Americans, a visit to Pripjat in the Ukraine and a discovered photograph album of a Bulgarian family informed the development of the archive. The resulting body of work is a monument to events neglected by history, particularly relating to displaced young people. Four works have been produced and exhibited from the Apocryphal Archive in the period 2014-19: *Untitled* (2015); *Hide* (2016); *Simultaneous Events* (2017) and *Gathered* (2019).

Benington works from family, found and location photographs with an unusual labour-intensive aquatint process of hand painting acid-resistant varnish directly onto steel plate, building each tonal layer to create the image, which is then inked and printed but also inked and sealed with acrylic matt lacquer, so the plates themselves can also be exhibited. Moreover, the size of the prints and composite plates, represent an innovative contribution to the subject and enhance the effect of the work. The works excavate the experience of the displaced by contrasting the lost narrative of the family album with images of refugee migration. Benington acknowledges that those who have not lived through such things 'can't understand, can't imagine' the experiences such images represent but presenting these histories both highlights, and increases empathy for, the plight of contemporary refugees.



Fig.1 Hide, installation in the Unstable Monuments exhibition

2. RESEARCH PROCESS

The Apocryphal Archive started with Benington's grandmother's remembered experiences and family photographs. She fled Bublitz (once Poland, then Germany, now Poland) in the winter of 1944/45 to escape the advancing Soviet forces, which subsequently destroyed the town and used the town swimming pool as a mass grave. She did not speak of this journey and her former life until she was in her seventies. This family history led Benington to research other instances of displacement, including the deracination of Native Americans as part of programme at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, Pennsylvania from 1879-1918, during which time over 10,000 Native American children from 140 tribes were sent to the school to live. Benington met and interviewed a Hopi Tribal Elder in Northern Arizona with knowledge and experience of this. A family photograph album found in a fleamarket in Sophia led to research into this unknown family's history. Benington also visited Pripyat in the Ukraine to research the disappearance of a city founded in 1970 and evacuated after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986.

The Archive is informed by JL Borges' 1941 essay *The Library of Babel*, with man as the imperfect librarian, a parable of the failed human quest for meaning and by Susan Sontag's final essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003).

Benington outlines aspects of his research process in a short film made about *Hide* (2016):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MG58c4QSWk&feature=emb_title
(accessed 12 March 2021)



Fig.2 Bulgarian photo album source material



Fig.3 Bulgarian family aquatint 140 x 200 cm (Eight 70 x 50 cm plates)



Fig.4 Carlisle Indian Industrial School plate detail



Fig.5 Carlisle Indian Industrial School plate in process



Fig.6 Carlisle Indian Industrial School plate in process



Fig.7 Etching plate midway through process



Fig.8 Acid bath immersion



Fig.9 Constructing *Hide*



Fig.10 *Untitled* (2015) 200 x 140 cm



Fig.11
Carlisle Indian Industrial School plate 1 of 4
100 x 70 cm

3. RESEARCH INSIGHTS

The Apocryphal Archive represents Benington's research into displacement, deracination and loss experienced through these images and memories of a former life. Images of refugees, particularly of the largest population movement in European history toward the end of World War II are contrasted to images from family photograph albums and memories.

Benington has developed a variant of the aquatint process that does not use the melted resin stage as he works in asphaltum directly onto steel plates, sometimes adding resin before the final immersion in acid. Once prints are taken the plate is inked and sealed with an acrylic matt lacquer. The Apocryphal Archive is the collection of these plates and the prints taken from them. The plates themselves are exhibited as well as prints taken from them. Moreover, the size of the aquatint prints and composite plates represent an innovative contribution to the subject and enhance the effect of the work.

The four exhibited artworks explore connections between images, memories and places, including a permanently installed monument to the displaced: *Gathered* (2019). The work also recovers lost, forgotten or concealed histories and reflects upon the naivety of living in ignorance of these histories. For Benington the process of making the work in aquatint embodies this recovery: 'Working from light to dark, painting each tonal layer and repeatedly dipping the plate in acid is a 'communication in the blind,' with nothing visible until the plate is submerged in white spirit and the varnish lifts. This manual process of concealment, erosion and revelation is viscerally evocative of the way we encounter the world of images, particularly our self-image: we construct follies of ourselves from which we can simultaneously hide and interact with the world.'

Untitled (2015) Aquatint 200 x 140cm. The work is a hand-painted etched image from a photograph of pupils of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, Pennsylvania. The programme forced Native American children to leave their families, changed their names and give up their indigenous cultures, languages and spiritual beliefs with the aim of assimilating them into White Culture.

Hide 2016, Bedsheets, timber, and aquatint steel plates. 340 x 220 x 260cms

The work uses many images from the Apocryphal Archive (including Untitled) on over thirty square meters of handmade steel etchings into an architectural installation. The structural form of *Hide* references the temporary architecture of childhood, the bedsheet fort or play tent - covered in a collection of children's bed linen with action-adventure figures. The interior space of the installation hosts numerous plates from The Apocryphal Archive. The viewer moves between the fantasy adventure of children's constructed play spaces and the documented reality of lives left behind and childhood displacement.



Fig.12 Digital Plan for *Hide*



Fig.13 *Hide* exterior



Fig.14 *Hide* interior View



Fig.15 *Hide* interior close up

Simultaneous Events 2017 Aquatint 210 x 150cm, photograph album and recorded sound

The work uses images from the Apocryphal Archive, photographs from the Museum's collection, family photographs and a recorded memory to bring together disparate experiences occurring in different geographical locations around the time of the outbreak of World War II in September 1939: the artist's great-grandfather catching butterflies in Northern Ireland, his grandfather, his mother outside her house in Manchester, HH Tansley's photograph of a ship's lifeboat on the North Norfolk coast, a photograph of a mine washed up on Sheringham beach, a recorded memory of going to the Kroll Opera House in Berlin and seeing Hitler arrive as well as hearing his speech broadcast into the streets around the opera house.



Fig.16 *Simultaneous Events* installation shot



Fig.17 Image from Norwich Castle Museum collection in the photograph album of *Simultaneous Events*

Gathered 2019 TIG welded hematite treated steel, glass, screen printed bitumen on steel

Intended as a monument to the displaced. The form of the work references the now virtually defunct photographic negative drying cabinet. Each cabinet combines images carried by the Benington's Grandmother when she left her family home to walk across Poland and Germany with images of Flüchtlinge (refugees from Germany and Poland) from same area of Pomerania.



Fig.18 *Gathered* permanent installation



Fig.19 *Gathered* close up

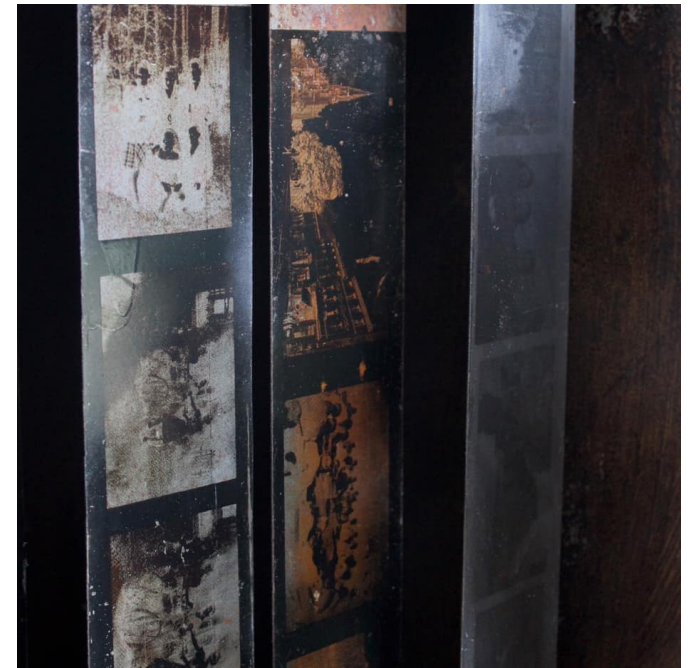


Fig.20 *Gathered* interior

4. DISSEMINATION

Untitled (2015) was exhibited in the 'Thirty for Thirty' group exhibition in September 2015 at The National Theatre, London and subsequently for three months in Buro Four's Head Office in London.

In 2015, building project managers Buro Four celebrated thirty years in practice by running a competition for thirty emerging artists. Each was invited to produce a work responding to one of the projects Buro Four had helped deliver during this time, with the results presented in an exhibition and an accompanying book. Benington was partnered with Wentworth Castle. Benington discovered that the 18th century Anglo-American botanist, John Bartram, had sent plant samples to Thomas and William Wentworth. Bartram was based in Pennsylvania where the Carlisle Indian Industrial School would be founded 100 years after his death.

Hide (2016) was first exhibited at 'Unstable Monuments', an exhibition in an ex-industrial warehouse in Truro, Cornwall (April 2016). As curator of the show, Benington selected work from fourteen artists from England, Germany and Denmark and installed thirty pieces of work spread out across a vast site alongside his own work. The exhibition was partnered with the Truro festival and was open over one weekend. Benington was awarded £7000.00 grant from Arts Council England to commission new site-specific work and the exhibition was supported by Totally Truro, the Town bid, Truro Festival, The Old shoe factory, and by student volunteers from Falmouth University.

Hide was also exhibited at Benington's home and studio in London in July 2016. The exhibition was closed to the public but opened to members of the artist's mailing list, and open on request for two weeks. It was visited by approximately 50 people, including Kingston University students and lecturers from the Royal College of Art.

Simultaneous Events was exhibited in the group show 'We Came Here to Conquer' Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery, September 2017 to March 2018. Eleven artists were commissioned to produce new work in response to the modern and contemporary print collection at Norwich Castle Museum & Art Gallery. <https://www.artrabbit.com/events/we-came-here-to-conquer> (accessed 12 March 2021)

Gathered has been on permanent display at Tremenheere sculpture gardens, Cornwall from June 2019. The work was initially exhibited as part of the Sol Force Summer Solstice exhibition (40 artists) curated by Jesse Leroy Smith at Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens. The event raised funding for Freedom from Torture, a UK based charity providing specialist psychological therapy to help asylum seekers and refugees who have survived torture and rebuild their lives in the UK. It was then sited permanently in the Sculpture Gardens.

<https://www.tremenheere.co.uk/artworks/> (accessed 12 March 2021)



Fig.21 Exhibition Poster, 'Unstable Monuments', Old Bakery Studios, Truro, 8th- 9th April, 2016



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