

Breathless Beauty, Broken Beauty

**The World's First Sculptural 12k Video Artwork
created by Artist Film Maker VanessaJane Hall**

'Breathless Beauty, Broken Beauty' was inspired by the artists long standing fascination with country house architecture, and over 12 months she travelled England to create video canvasses that captured the raw beauty of the country house whether sparkling or faded. The sculpture's mysterious matt black form is shrouded with walls of cascading chains, and decorated with relief detail.

The shape of the sculpture was inspired by buildings researched and visited during the project.

Observers step inside the temple-like structure to find themselves cocooned in an audio-visual environment, where immersive sound and vision plays out on three of the interior walls.



From sparkling halls to faded corridors, the interior film work, lasting 10 minutes, takes the observer on an atmospheric journey which awakens the soul to the beauty and drama of these intriguing structures.

Images of sparkling splendour shot at Castle Howard, Chatsworth, Houghton Hall & Holkham Hall.

Images of faded grandeur shot at various unnamed locations.

The work is accompanied by a rich soundscape and poetic voice over performed by Catherine McGoohan & Neil Dickson.

'Breathless Beauty, Broken Beauty' is on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum British Gallery Landing from the **13th September 2014 until the 27th October 2014.**

www.breathlessbeauty.co.uk

Background

'In the distance, from the elegant canvas of parkland, something begins to emerge. Second, by second, it grows in front of my eyes, until finally, it fills my entire view, a beauty like you've never experienced...her sheer dominance is overwhelming - so many doors and windows you lose count, and with every turn of the head there are, details, textures, shapes, carvings.....and to think, all this, for just one man.'

March 1976 - My father and I visit George, an eccentric chap who lives alone in a sprawling Gothic mansion - Somerfield', in the heart of the Suffolk Countryside.

Father and George settle by the wood burning stove in the kitchen and talk, while I am invited to explore the mansion, and investigate it's many delights.

Up vast staircases and through miles of corridors I travel, some doors are open, but most are closed - it's strange how George lives, restricting his life to just a handful of rooms - the remainder lay redundant, untouched for decades. Drawers are filled with trinkets from the past, a gold ring, a locket, a dried up perfume bottle, postcards, letters, - some over 100 years old - reminders of the days when the mansion was a family home bustling with life. This whole building echoes with voices from the past, and no matter how often I visit, I always discover something new.'

Extract from Beautiful Irony 2011 - Audio Canvas by VanessaJane Hall

These early adventures, ignited a fascination with the Country House,
and the theme has previously featured in my work.

In 2011, the story of 'Somerfield', became the central theme
in my audio artwork 'Beautiful Irony' with Catherine McGoohan.

In 2013, I decided I wanted to explore this theme further with a new work.

Many don't experience the beauty of the Country House,
or understand why one might choose to value them,
but when an emotional connection is made,
it becomes hard to ignore the beauty and worth of these incredible structures.

VanessaJane Hall
March 2014

About the Work

I began working up basic ideas for the piece in 2013, it was a work I'd been thinking about creating for some time, and as various other works became complete, the idea once again came to the fore. This piece was departure from my usual style - I normally work entirely in moving image, but this time I wanted to return to stills, I felt I wanted to freeze moments in time, let the observer study the scenes for themselves - no focus pulls, no moving camera, just the house scenes standing alone. *Breathless Beauty - Broken Beauty* uses a wide variety of digital mediums and techniques, I have always enjoyed using technology within my work, and relish putting it to use in creative ways.

I had a long standing fascination with old houses, and after much additional research on houses both sparkling and faded, I began the pre-production phase of the work. I always act as producer on my works, and as such began approaching all the houses to discuss the idea of the project.

During the pre-production phase leading up to the shoots, I also worked on costumes, styling and the script for the piece. Having worked a lot with Catherine McGoohan and Neil Dickson in the past, I knew early on that I wanted them to be involved. Neil has an amazing voice, it is magnetic, rich, charming - I knew it would be perfect as the voice of sparkling magnificence. Catherine McGoohan, like Neil has a very versatile voice, and I really felt that she could bring to the role both the strength and vulnerability of the fading grandeur. I was so happy when they both agreed to be a part of it.

Catherine came to London in 2014, we rehearsed at my home, and my partner Mark Gilbert and I recorded her at Abbey Road (using Gallery's ADRStudio). Neil and I rehearsed over the telephone (he resides in Los Angeles) and he laid down a temp track in his home studio in LA. A few weeks later we recorded him via internet link to Los Angeles. It was, as ever, such a thrill to hear the words come alive.

Photography for the piece began in February 2014 and ended in July. The houses were spread up and down the country, and I made several trips to the faded grandeur houses over a period of months in order to get all the material required. The piece inside the sculpture lasts around 10 minutes, and with the 3 screens in use, I needed around 30 minutes of material in all. Shooting on location is always a family affair, so I travelled the country with my partner and cat, (who very much enjoyed his walks outside Castle Howard, and the attention of visiting tourists). The country houses of faded grandeur were shot in varying ways, sometimes fully lit, sometimes with little lighting. The quirks of working in faded grandeur environments are many, there isn't always be a piece of floor where you need to put a light, so you have to take each house as it comes, and work with it. Long exposures can be tricky, as often the floors have a lot of movement in them, and even though the camera is nicely weighted down, the movement is still very much there. In one space I was working in, so much air was being drawn through the glassless windows, that when the door slammed, it did so with such gusto that the whole floor moved quite dramatically. It was rather unfortunate that the door of the room had no handle, and I did wonder if I'd ever get out, but after navigating a rather large chasm that dropped 20 feet to the floor below, I finally managed to gain access to another room and navigate my way back round to the 'handle-less door' room. Suffice to say, on re-entering my work space, I swiftly located a make-shift door stop! Wildlife is also very much a feature in some of the faded houses, and the sudden arrival of a swooping and diving crow, can take you a little by surprise.

In between the work of capturing stills, I worked on the studio still life shots and the 4k moving image. I have worked with actress Josie Dexter for many years, (she has acted and performed voice over in many of my prior works) and I knew she would be perfect as the ice princess that appears in the Houghton Hall Stone Hall scene, the butterfly girl with ribbons, and the rose beauty over the Castle Howard scenes. Josie and I certainly had a lot of fun with wind machines and ribbon in the studio - it took a while to get the final shot I wanted, but it was lovely to be under the wind machines during some of the hottest days of the year.

4k moving images such as the flying ribbons, the textures, the photo album, and the gold hands were shot in my studio. The wheat field with butterfly was shot in Suffolk, as was the beach. Much searching was done to locate the poppy field that appears in the piece - friends who flew light aircraft even took to the air to see what they could find!

After much searching country wide, I finally located the perfect poppy field in the far south west, and contacted the owner to arrange shooting - it was an absolutely beautiful spot.

When all the shots were captured, I entered the post production phase of the project, working in Adobe Photoshop with the stills, Adobe Premiere and After Effects - for the 4k moving image edit, and Pro Tools - for the sound-scape, dialogue edit and mix.

4k picture editing 3 screens at once is quite a demanding task for both me and the computer, especially as I was sometimes editing up to 12 layers of 4k at a time on the timeline. Much computer power was needed to perform this technically, and I was lucky enough to be able to use a super powered Apple Mac Pro.

When the weeks of picture post were finally complete, I set about work on the audio. For the fading souls section of the work (the faded houses) I wanted to create a sound-scape that reflected the past life of the house, a kind of

'ghost track', so I incorporated sounds such as children laughing, people talking, telephones ringing, soldiers performing drill - reflecting military occupation, and that kind of thing. At some of the faded house locations, I had recorded the sounds of the house, capturing wood being nibbled by insects, footsteps, and the creaks and bangs of the building as the wind entered and buffeted around, to use within the ghost track. For the sparkling houses, I wanted to keep the sound-scape light, elegant, simple and stripped back - let the houses speak for themselves.

The last 2 months of the project was spent juggling final post production with the sculpture build. All of the technical ground work for the build had been done months in advance by my long term technical collaborator Mark Gilbert, but this would be the time when everything finally came together as one. After completing the final sculpture design and finalising the visual appearance, Mark built the structure almost single handedly, I then began working on all the paint and decoration with my assistants.

We had help for the heavy lifting needed to raise the pediments - it was great to see them go up, and see finally see Breathless Beauty, Broken Beauty smile at us for the first time.

All in all the project took around 10 months to complete. I was working very long hours which probably constituted 13 months condensed in to 10, but this was the kind of project that you couldn't really tear yourself away from - I just wanted to keep going.

'Breathless Beauty, Broken Beauty' was a fascinating journey.

Technology

Contribution by Mark Gilbert

Breathless Beauty, Broken Beauty was an ambitious project which would push the boundaries of Tech-Art to deliver a work with the integrity of traditional fine-art, whilst embracing a raft of modern technologies to enhance the creative process.

Many technologies have played a role in the creation of the artwork, at the core of the process is a fine-art vision used to produce a work with true integrity and longevity. Once immersed in the environment, the technology melts away and the artwork connects the viewer, evoking an emotional response in a traditional artistic engagement.

Breathless Beauty, Broken Beauty is a sculptural video-triptych installation.

The piece comprises a physical temple-like sculpture welcoming viewers inside where 4k - UltraHD screens fill three interior walls, and wraps the user in a controlled visual and audio environment whilst the moving image and sound artwork plays out.

Breathless Beauty, Broken Beauty contrasts the awe-inspiring presence of England's best preserved architectural treasures with other once-great buildings which have struggled to survive in the modern era. The interiors of these architectural environments are rich with detail, and attempting to bring these intricate spaces into the artwork soon revealed the limitations of existing video standards. The choice of 4K video allows four times the detail of HD, and helps preserve the subtle, and beautiful features of these interiors.

The work uses as sophisticated mutli screen playback system, that requires one Mac, one Gallery Virtual VTR, and one AJA io 4K per screen. All units are synched with an AJA GEN10 sync generator.