

Teo and Kai, The Rond

In April 2017, following a six month sculpture residency at Husk, Limehouse, I presented nine sculptures which I claimed represented nine characters in a book I am writing. I began the book some months before the residency and, because it was at the forefront of my mind, my sculpture naturally became a methodology of research to support my writing.

Of these nine sculptures it has only slowly become apparent to me how an abstract amassment of material and object could be said to represent a character, and how the process of making these things could help me understand the inner landscape of a fictional person. I had a vivid experience of this a couple of weeks ago during a Buddhist meditation practice led by a friend. At a certain point we were asked to tune into our heart wish, our own deep longing. My mind wandering, I began to think about the characters in my story, about Emily or Dylan or Teo or Kai, and I was able to tune into, in a flash, what they each wanted on a very deep level. It was not something that can easily be communicated by words, but there was a tangible felt sense of their own individual and idiosyncratic nature and longing.

Another example of this process of discovery came in December when I realised suddenly that each of the nine sculptures in *Dressing up Bars* over time had for me become condensed into a single metaphor - an object, or creature - that best represented that character. Thus Teo is a sleeping dragon and Kai an instrument of some description. This connected back also to the genesis of the nine sculptures that, as their seed, each began with a letter from the Ogham alphabet.

Occasionally - as in the case of the character Josh - these objects or metaphors developed directly out of the ogham letters. Usually they aligned with my rough sense of the narrative arc for that character (always they have transformed it, subtly or acutely), and mostly they were merely suggested by the shapes or colours that arose in the sculptures. This kind of divinatory process is subjective, and I was not upset when Josh, who for me is a fish, was a horse for somebody else.

For completeness I present here the list as it currently stands, though it's important to note that in the book itself my intention is that none of these allusions be explicit or laboured. They form the eddies and flows beneath the surface of the text and I intend to hold them only gently if the weight of the story carries me in another direction. Also, my nine characters do not necessarily have equal balance in the narrative. Emily is on every page since it is her story. The others will come and go as feels appropriate.

Dylan	Birch	A bow
Jupiter	Alder	A shield
Teo	Willow	A coiled dragon
The Captain	Oak	The three kayas
Rene Mackleton	Holly	A spider
Josh Peesh	Hazel	A salmon
Olfan	Apple	An upturned boat
Kai	Grove	An instrument
Emily	The Sea	An island



² Coiled dragon toy found in a charity shop

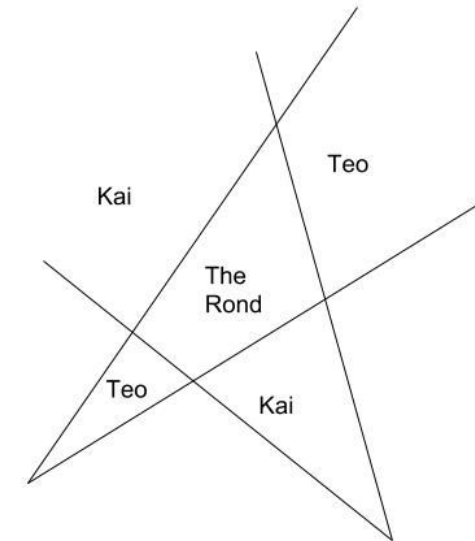
I am a slow writer, and even now I have roughly drafted only about nine chapters of a hoped for 37. And these drafts are still clunky with large portions of text missing, or paragraphs that are yet to be refined, or that don't line up properly. I expect that it will take another four, five or even six years to complete, however I feel a powerful commitment to the process of nurturing this entity. And, although I intend the end result to be a novel in the conventional sense, sculptural research projects such as this one today at Luna Elaine, that develop for me the weight and complexity of the characters and places, will continue to be close to my heart throughout this process.

Last year I applied for and was accepted onto a six month residency at Growing Underground, in Clapham, which I began in December. I feel extremely fortunate to again have had such a generous opportunity - a studio space and an exhibition or event to work towards - for this duration of time.

On beginning my residency in December, my initial thoughts were that, having begun to investigate the characters, I would explore now some of the places of my story through sculpture. However it quickly became apparent to me that any environments are necessarily seen through the lenses of the various characters, and to present them as distinct from the characters, as separate realities, was perpetuating a philosophical view that, as a Buddhist, I distrust.

I decided therefore to pair each of the characters into twos, and then chose a location where, within the story, they meet. In drawings over Christmas I created a schema: I thought how the perception of a person could be represented by a triangle (an eye looking outward). By intersecting two such triangles one creates a central quadrilateral where the triangles overlap. This central quadrilateral might then represent a meeting point for the two characters and be imbued with the qualities of this location. Easier said with a diagram than words (*see over*).

This gave me a physical structure or layout on which I could hang the narrative moments that I am interested in: each one an intersection of two characters in an environment. In the sculptures themselves, as soon as one takes away the framework, it is difficult to delineate where one character begins and another ends, or the space they are inhabiting - my apologies!



Teo and Kai, The Rond is a remake of sorts, of two of the nine sculptures from *Dressing up Bars*. Having created my schema I reflected on the earlier sculptures and considered how I would make them again, not this time as solo entities, but each enmeshed together with another character and an environment as well. This has, of course, thrown up a whole new array of aesthetic and spatial challenges and has also reminded me how wonderful it can be to remake something.

The story is still being written therefore these sculptures are a method of getting to know the essential qualities of these characters that in turn will influence the writing. As Paul has said more eloquently than I can, in the press release that accompanies this show, it is "a sculptural form that for Watkins, takes him one step further in increasing the reality of a world that can then be refolded back into his book."

To finish I add a few notes about Teo, Kai and the Rond:

Teo's ogham letter is *Willow*. Teo is intersex. After some research into the various options for pronouns³, I decided to use *ve/vir/vis* as it has precedent in science fiction writing. I imagine Teo, beautiful and striking, striding out across the Rond with *vis* childhood friend, Jacky Segan on *vis* arm. *Ve* is dressed in gold with dark black skin. Another image I have of Teo is after Jacky's death, completely broken, cradled into Kai on a sofa. *Vis* deep friendship with Kai hinges on their shared project, the Dressing up Bars.

Kai's ogham letter is *Grove*. In the story he is a key instigator of the Dressing up Bars. It is Kai that brings people together. The seven crystals in the sculpture are the seven trees of the grove, based on Robert Graves' assertion that seven types of tree made up a traditional Celtic grove. They are related to the seven ogham letters connected to each of the other characters (Dylan - Birch, Jupiter - Alder, Josh Peesh - Hazel, Teo - Willow, Rene Mackletone - Holly, Olfan - Apple and The Captain - Oak) and excluding Emily who is represented by the ogham character The Sea. Kai is serious, hard working. It is Kai who has found Emily washed up on the beach before the story has began, and they share a deep bond, as if he is her brother.

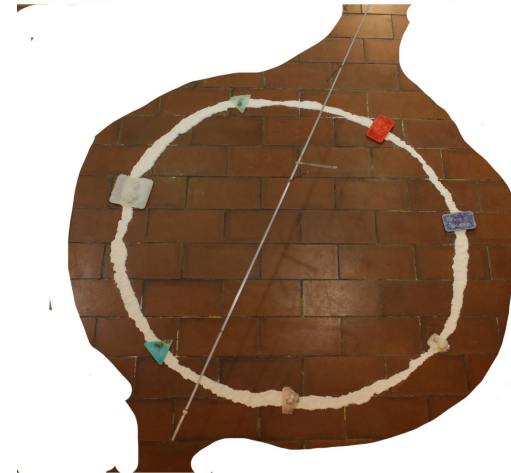
The Rond is one of the key locations around which the cult of the Dressing up Bars revolves. From the fourth chapter: "The room is massive. Six central pillars form a line down the middle. Around the edges a number of alcove spaces have been created with boards or curtains. Some are obscured also by folding screens. There are piles of clothes. In the centre, around the six pillars are low tables, shoddily constructed, and around each table, groups of people are sat on the floor or on cushions." In the sculpture, the fabric camels are representative of a nature documentary that is projected on one of the walls of the Rond. The yellow squirls of plasticine: the people watching the film, lying prone on the floor.

³ Two interesting discussions of this are at:

<https://genderneutralpronoun.wordpress.com/tag/ze-and-zir/> and
<https://www.tor.com/2014/06/03/post-binary-gender-in-sf-excitotech-and-non-binary-pronouns/>



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⁴ Teo, part of *Dressing up Bars*, installed at Husk

⁵ Kai, part of *Dressing up Bars*, installed at Husk



Continuity, discontinuity

"He had for a moment (it was a moment only) a sense of two cities."

A Storm of Wings, M. John Harrison

Mad Max

There is a disconnect in continuity across the Mad Max films. I had forgotten this, and last year, rewatching the franchise in quick succession, the uncanny differences in the environments and landscapes as the films progress caught my imagination. In Mad Max (the first film - 1979), Max Rockatansky is a cop who still has a precinct to go to. In this world, not yet gone over the edge of apocalypse, there are trees and bushes and, at least at the beginning of the film, he lives with his wife in a house on a hill above the city. In Fury Road (2015), Max is a similar age, there is only blood red desert, a vast wasteland that is populated by gross post-apocalyptic settlements. He is a different Max and yet he is the same Max.

Rafael Hernán Gamboa puts it succinctly: 'Like all oral traditions the details never line up. Sometimes he was young, sometimes he was old, sometimes he had a son, sometimes a daughter. No matter how many times his Interceptor is destroyed, somehow it keeps coming back.'⁷

⁶ Mad Max (1979)

⁷ *In Focus: Myth and Fury Road*, video essay on the YouTube channel *The Long Take*

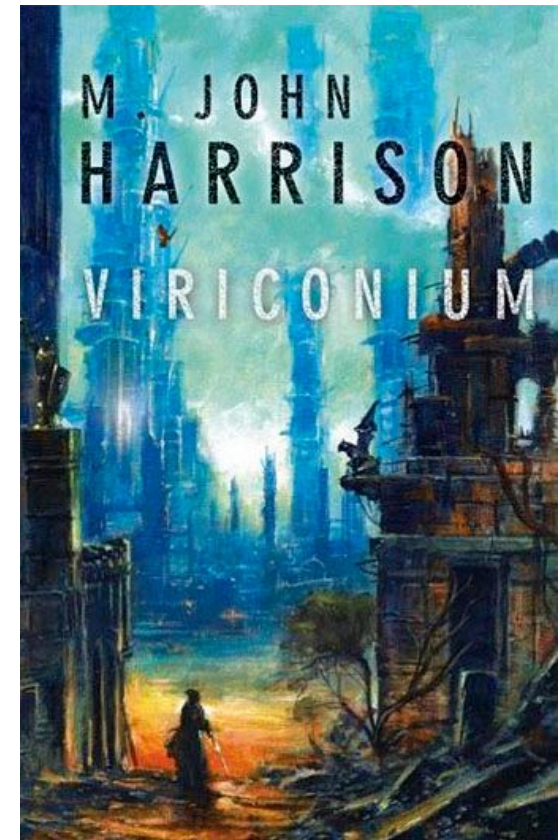
Each time that there are these breaks or shifts in Max's world and in Max, the shifts are taken for granted as a part of the background texture of the films. When small logics of continuity are broken it is usually a glaring error in cinema. In Mad Max however, because the films are so saturated with mythic symbology, the breaks in continuity only add to the sense of epic narrative, guiding us to the deeper truth behind these tales. That these films are, as director George Miller has said in interviews, 'campfire tales,' is made explicitly clear at the beginning of the second film, as the unknown narrator opens: 'My life fades. The vision dims. All that remains are memories. I remember a time of chaos... ruined dreams... this wasted land. But most of all, I remember The Road Warrior. The man we called "Max."'"

With Fury Road, a thirty year gap after the first three films, Max is recast as Tom Hardy. This Max is more beaten down and wild than ever before. He doesn't just look different, he is a different Max, and yet we have no doubt it is also the same Max from the previous films. It reminds me of speaking to a friend in a dream who has the appearance of somebody else, and yet we *know* they are our friend. Max Rockatansky transcends both Mel Gibson and Tom Hardy because he is the archetypal Road Warrior.

Viriconium, Uriconium

The Viriconium books by M. John Harrison also rely on shifts in continuity. To gloss four novels is impossible and problematic. Nevertheless; *The Pastel City* (the first of the Viroconium books) is constructed from familiar tropes of fantastical fiction. It is post apocalyptic, but much further into the future than Mad Max, so much so that vast cultures have risen and fallen many times over. The technology of the current culture, that of Viroconium and surrounding lands, has been dug from the great rusty deserts, artifacts of a distant past. The story concerns a Knight - Lord tegeus-Cromis, two warring Queens, an iron dwarf, and a perhaps immortal birdmaker. Already there are hints of something more difficult and nuanced than a more prosaic fantasy novel. The heroism of the protagonists, instead of being glorious, is gritty, accidental, and weighted emotionally. John Coulthart expresses it neatly: 'the early books critique the lazy assumptions of the fantasy genre.'⁸ As well as this, there are also already faint allusions to our own reality: the reborn men - strange ancestors reawoken - utter singular sentences, without context, about Venice or Blackpool.

⁸ John Coulthart's excellent blog post, *Covering Viroconium*, can be found here: <http://www.johncoulthart.com/feuilleton/2012/06/11/covering-viriconium/>



⁹ Cover art for Viriconium (*Laser-books*, 2011). Illustration by Edward Miller

The style of the prose shifts dramatically in the second book - *A Storm of Wings*; there is markedly less dialogue and the descriptions are densely poetic. Although familiar characters recur, 80 years have past: Lord tegeus-Cromis is dead, and the iron dwarf an old man. Viroconium is under threat from an accidental invasion of alien winged creatures. The insect-like aliens are ensheathed in their own metaphysical assumptions, (they have flown for millenia through space), but as they meet Viroconium, the underpinnings of both realities buckle as the two worlds collide. The insects change the world but they are also changed by it. Small chunks of text empathetically express this experience for the alien colonists, as simultaneously the protagonists stagger on the edge of madness attempting to deal with this threat.

It is *In Viroconium* (the third book) where for me Viroconium truly becomes all cities. The prose no longer baroque, the storytelling is quick and sharp. Now dizzy with the echoes and cadences of the previous books, the city is even more unmappable, characters recur but they are like misremembered dreams, the timeline is difficult.

The fourth book - *Viriconium Nights* - is not a novel but a collection of short stories. M. John Harrison has said that the Viroconium books can be read in any order but that the final short story - *A Young Man's Journey to Viriconium* - must always come last. For this story we are in our world - York, Huddersfield, London - but there are bridges to Viroconium: through the reflections of an old man Mr Ambrayses (the narrator's friend and neighbour) but also materially, through a mirror, or a tree that is both there and here.

And it provides us with a metaphor for these bridges (In the story it is Mr Ambrayses' answer to the perennial question: 'where do all these flies come from!'): 'As Viroconium grinds past us, dragging it's enormous bulk against the bulk of the world, the energy generated is expressed in the form of these insects which are like the sparks shooting out from between two huge flywheels that have momentarily brushed each other.'

John Coulthart comments that, 'the later books recast the earlier stories as myths or half-remembered dreams.' The progression of the Viroconium books is unlike anything I know. They are novels that take as their subject matter a deeply questioning, varied, and humorous, investigation into the nature of reality. The stories undercut themselves and this discontinuity somehow harks at a deeper truth.

As I think of the strange arc of the series, I am amazed that M. John Harrison is not restricted by the parameters he has set himself in the first work, or in the second or third, but instead constantly reinventing and undercutting, searching for something deeper and more meaningful.

Dressing up Bars

Like one of the short stories in *Viroconium Nights*, *Teo and Kai*, *The Rond* provides an askance glimpse into the world of the Dressing up Bars. Emily, the constant protagonist necessarily in every scene of my novel, is not present. The language of sculpture provides a very different route of access than text might to the fragmented reality that Emily traverses.

In both my writing and sculpture I hope, like Mad Max and Viriconium, not to be overly concerned with solidity, to create strange things that are multifaceted and unreal in their entirety, but also intricate in their details.

Emily finds herself by turns either a key part of the youth cult the Dressing up Bars (embedded in the wider culture of the Hemmed City), or on the spaceship-like L'enfant, or a part of other more fleeting landscapes. Wherever she is the immersion is complete, and any memory of other environments non existent. And yet between these worlds there is some resonance or overlap, for example in the Hemmed City the character Josh Peesh is a studdish male in his early twenties, whereas onboard L'enfant he is an eight year old boy that Emily and the crew find hiding in a cupboard.

None of the locales in Dressing up Bars are materially existent places in their own right. Crucially they are experienced only through the lens of Emily, (or we can presume, in the experience of the other characters in the environments that Emily migrates through). The emphasis is not on mapping an exhaustive world but highlighting transitory, alive, corners of experience that may or may not link together.

Teo and Kai, *the Rond* is another one of these transitory, alive, loci of experience that form the flesh of Emily's journey. It is a scribble or doodle that I have made as I find my way in the peculiar challenge of making up characters and seeing how they interact.