

Opening Comments on the PEDAS Summer Exhibition, Poole Ecohub, August 2018

Art is a very basic human activity. If you go right back to its earliest forms, the earliest evidence we have of human communication is visual art on the walls of caves. Thinking about that strengthened my awareness of what makes human animals distinct.

It would appear that those early art forms consisted mainly of one of two types: one was the human hand, imprinted on the walls of the caves; the other was depictions of the animals which those early cave artists hunted and ate: mammoths, caribou, antelope, wild boar - and sometimes the sabre-toothed tigers that ate them! So, at the very earliest point in our attempt to communicate through art, two things emerge: an intimate relationship with our environment, and an exploration of self-awareness - what it means to be human. Art, then, has always involved an investigation of the human spirit – and, by implication, what we mean by spirituality.

I believe that, in the case of this particular exhibition – indeed, quite commonly in PEDAS exhibitions – what we experience is an interaction between the artist, the spirit of humanity, and the nature which surrounds us. And I think that this exhibition is a brilliant example of that interplay – not just in the way that it depicts, often quite evocatively, local landscapes (and those wider afield), but also the way in which the subject and style of paintings somehow brings the human spirit and our surroundings closer together.

The Ecohub provides a wonderful space, and we are all grateful to the Dolphin Centre for this initiative. This is probably a pivotal time in human existence, when we face multiple challenges to our prosperity and wellbeing. The climate is changing; it is changing faster, and in a direction which we would not expect, based on historical evidence. The planet should be getting colder, as we move into a new phase of the Ice Age – instead, it is warming at a rate of more than 1°C a century. This is due to human activity.

We are filling oceans, rivers and land full of plastics, which are slow to degrade and which pose risks to both wildlife and to human health. We are also creating air pollution, which is contributing to the early deaths of 40,000 people a year in Britain – that is nearly 200 people in Poole, Bournemouth and Christchurch every year. We have water pollution which is similarly causing problems for plant, animal and human health.

We have increased soil erosion and degradation – meaning that we only have about 35 years worth of topsoil left on our farms in Britain. We have lowering water-tables, vast areas of drought and water shortages throughout the world. This is putting pressure on both rural and urban populations – often on those people least able to cope with it – threatening food production, rural incomes and health conditions.

The pressure of soil erosion and water shortage has two consequences. It contributes to the creation of political systems which are onerous and corrupt, as elites seek to maintain and even increase their own wealth, at the expense of the general population. And it puts pressure on people to move, from areas of failing crops, deprivation, political oppression and strife, to areas where there might be work, prosperity and security. As a result, we see examples of thousands of people trying to move – from Africa or the Middle East to Europe – at huge risk to themselves; many of them dying in the process.

So, there are human and environmental costs to our actions. Therefore, I think it is very important to consider the message offered by this exhibition. To me, it implies firstly, that what lies at the core of our humanity is a love and respect for our environment – and I think that this comes out in the paintings we see in this exhibition. Secondly, it gives us hope in the human spirit – that spirit which first manifested itself in the human hand-prints on the cave walls. It is in our hands – descended from those same hands of the first artists – to respond to these problems. I hope that, collectively, we will do something. I have a lot of faith and optimism in the human spirit, and I only hope that we can galvanise that spirit in time, to tackle the considerable challenges that face our environment. Ultimately, these are a problem for human beings, because, without food, water and air, we shall simply cease to exist.

Thank you PEDAS for a wonderful exhibition. And thank you Ecohub, for this opportunity to use art as a means of sharing our joy in nature, and of reaching out to the human spirit in our fellow citizens.

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