

The bog is a characteristic feature of Mark Alexander's works in his series **Ground and Unground** (2012) and **American Bog** (2013). All are executed in the deepest, earthiest hues of brown, their unique painterly surface resembling the tanned and wrinkled skin of excavated bog people accidentally discovered by peat-cutters in the twentieth century. These extraordinary figures were human sacrifices to the fertility gods worshipped in Northern Europe between 8,000 and 2,000 years ago, whose bodies-sometimes trussed, noosed, or hooded- were naturally mummified by the peat-bogs where they were killed and left to the God of nature.

## Background

The seed of Alexander's fascination with bog people was sown in the fertile soil of childhood, spent wandering ploughed fields in search of Iron Age flints. As an adult he was captivated by their macabre, mummified beauty, their remarkable history and the wide-ranging philosophical and scientific implications of their survival over ten millennia.

The unique surface of Alexander's Bog Painting evolved from his experimentation with thick paints for **The Shield of Achilles** (2008), and was developed during his work on **Via Negativa** (2009), when he began using paints so thick that as they slowly dried, the surface



wrinkled and moved like molten lava. This unpredictable, continuously evolving process was not unlike the timeless consolidation of perishable flesh in the peat bogs' preservative alembic.

Via Negativa X (2009)



Shield of Achilles IX (2008)

Alexander's signature impasto was further deployed in **Mocking Christ** (2012) and **All Watched Over by Machines of Infinite Loving Grace** (2011). In this triptych based on Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Alexander's human flesh seems to be shrivelling up and rotting. His speculative question - "What would be buried under the *Garden of Earthly Delights*?" - finally found its answer in **Ground and Unground** and the present collection.



Mocking Christ (2012)



(Top) Mocking Christ (2012), detail view

All Watched Over by Machine of Infinite Loving Grace (2011), detail view

## Works

Works in **Ground and Unground** (2012)

**Adam and Eve** (2012)

**Sower** (2012)

**Reaper** (2012)

**Garden Boy** (2012)

**Blind Garden Boy** (2012)

**Hands** (2012)

**Narcissus** (2012)

## Thoughts

Work, Body, Nature, Alchemy, Animism, Bog Bodies

There are a few thoughts and ideas that run through Alexander's bog paintings.

From Seamus Heaney's *Digging, Death of Naturalist* (1966)

*My Grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell no right away*

*Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods*

*Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.*

*The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.*

*Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.*

Work is one of the key concepts in *Ground and Unground*, in which Alexander initiated his bog paintings. Alexander's sentiments echo those of Seamus Heaney's first bog poem, *Digging*. Generation after generation of our ancestors, working with their hands, motivated Heaney to grab the tool of his trade, his pen, to touch the reader's hear. Similarly Alexander, working with his paintbrush and thick paints, creates a surface that evokes the somatic, spiritual, and unconscious in us. What he wants to achieve in painting is alchemical in spirit. He believes that, like a medieval alchemist trying to transform base metal to gold, his painting should grow, brilliantly, from the

tip of his brush, mesmerizing the eyes of the beholder. The familiar images he employs in his bog paintings are intended to mystify and engage us, prompting us to look beyond the moving surface and question the greater scheme of things. Just as the laconic economy of Minimalist art prompted instinctive and untutored responses, so Alexander seeks to open up a mental space for the viewer to contemplate and explore. This is important for Alexander, as for him the answer to the great question, "why are we here?" lies in mankind's primal and abiding impulse - to work, with this belief of work. This is why Alexander chose to use certain images by his predecessors, like Jean-François Millet's and Vincent van Gogh's *The Sower*, and Albrecht Dürer's *old man's Praying Hands* seeing in them a celebration and sanctification of timeless toil.

The aesthetic of Alexander's *Bog Bodies* triggers several notions - the power of nature, the passage of time, the human condition. The miraculous transmutation of the historic remains of northern European peat bogs shocks us because these prehistoric figures are instantly recognizable: we can acutely identify with them as members of our own kind. The timeless maturing of this biochemical fluke puts us in awe of the unfathomable capabilities of Mother Nature. By attempting to reproduce the soil of the peat bog and its harboured dead, Alexander celebrates the organic divinity driving the processes of nature. In his bog paintings, subject and background are so entangled it they are indistinguishable, because we are all part of one germinating whole, co-sharers in an animistic universe.

From Seamus Heaney's *Kinship from North* (1975)

*... their bronze.*

*This is the vowel of earth dreaming its root*

*In flowers and snow,*

*Mutation of weathers and seasons,*

*a windfall composing the floor it rots into.*

*I grew out of all this like a weeping willow inclined to  
the appetites of gravity.*

Mother Nature - however hard we try to work, we are acutely aware that there is something much greater and more beautiful than we. The sublime exists and it is nature. In Jungian terms, nature occupies our consciousness in its entirety and beyond. The outer panels of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* depicted the creation of the world, showing a pristine unpopulated Earth, with neither animals nor men and women, in greenish grey grisaille. The Earth is encapsulated in a transparent sphere floating in darkness. Bosch painted in these eerie tone, no doubt to maximize the impact of what the sphere concealed within it. Humans merely exist, with limited abilities, within this sphere, eclipsed by encompassing Nature, the greater whole. Mythology may appear a tired resource but it is never far from artist's heart. Alexander's work is dominated by the notion of Gaia (the Earth in Greek Mythology) as an active entity that transmutes elements, affects the present and effectively shapes the future, and his conviction that we are part of this greater whole. Our earth has a place in our galaxy, and a home in our universe. If these bog paintings can give us an intimation of where we are and where we are going within this vital vastness, then their function will have been fulfilled.