

# Platform Alterations

Emily Cole

firstsite  
papers

Produced following Emily Cole's residency  
in the Artist Space at firstsite  
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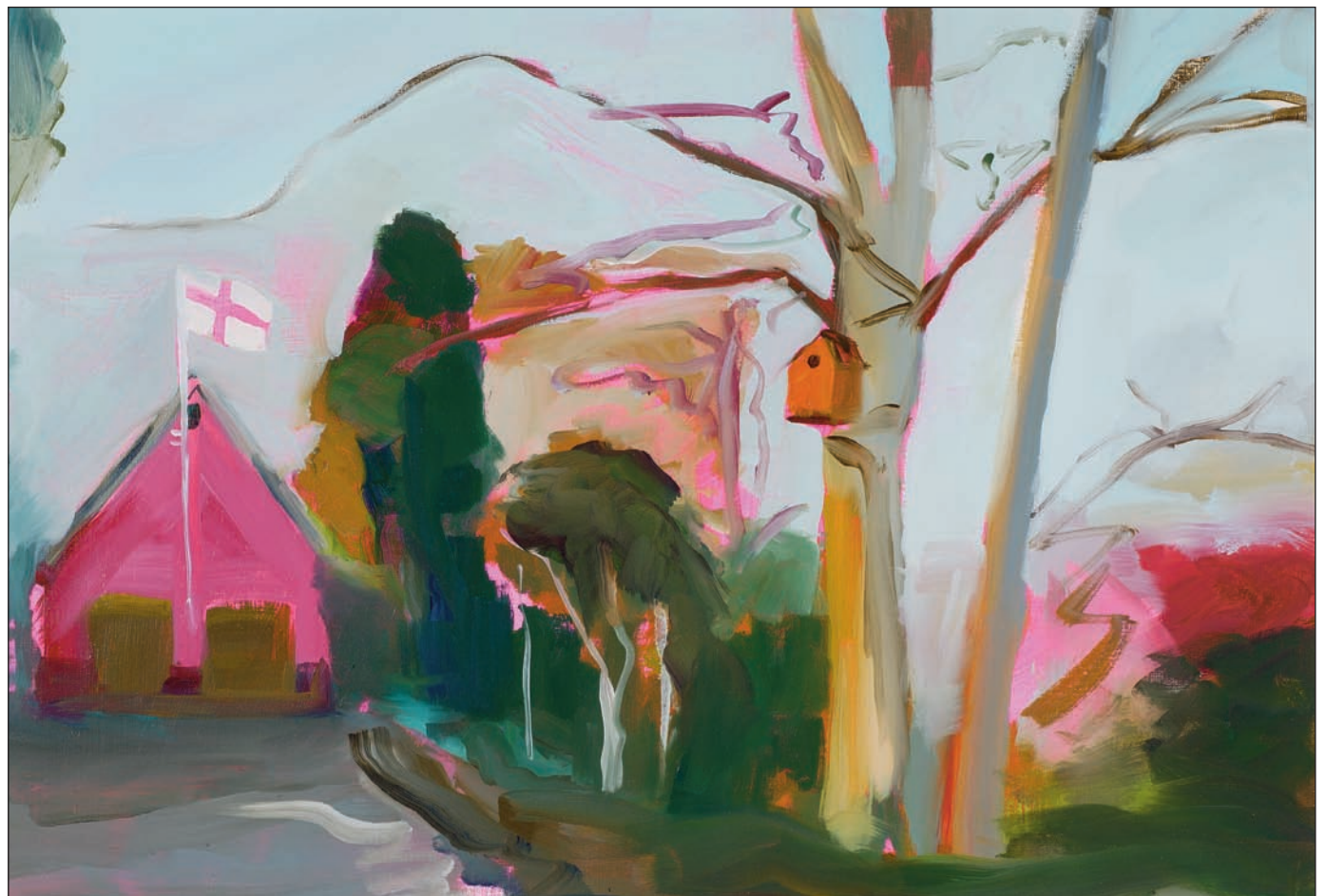
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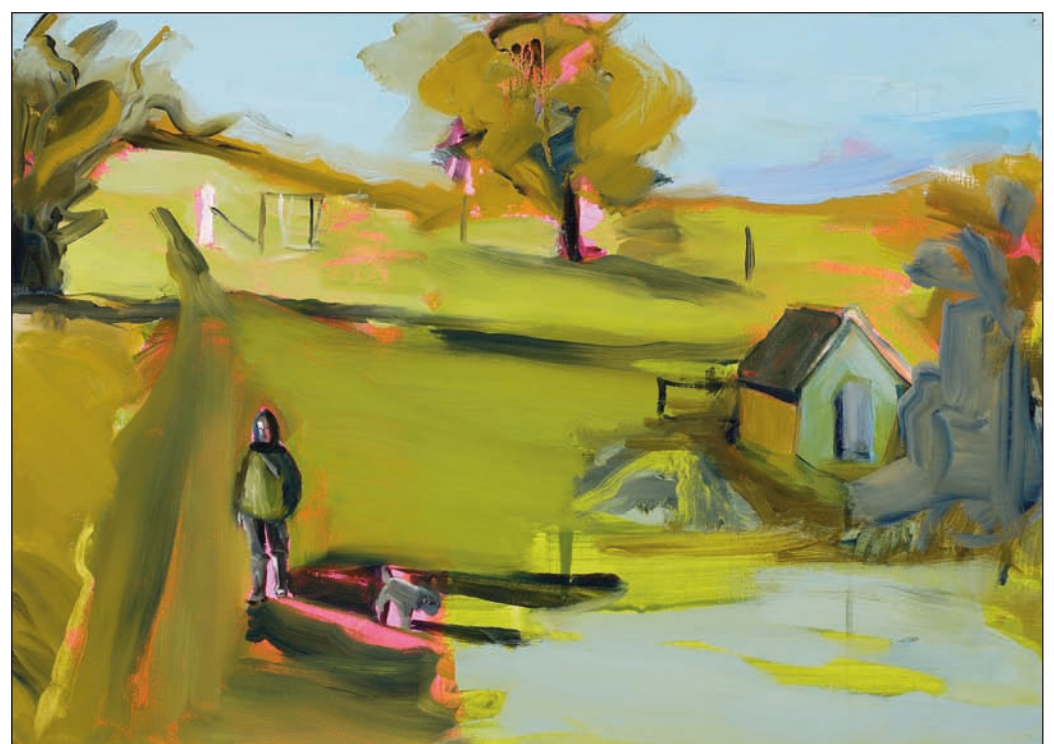
Suffolk Pink (Drifter) oil on paper, 43cm x 60cm 2006

On a bright and blowsy morning in the winter of 1811, John Constable walked out towards Flatford Mill, a kilometre to the southeast of his home in East Bergholt, Suffolk, and set up his easel to paint the oil sketch subsequently entitled *Flatford Mill from the Lock*. This composition of architectonic certitude, modelled on a seaport study by Claude, anchors a wild sky via receding lines of farmhouses and foliage that surround a diamond of motionless freshwater. Its tenor is quietly tempestuous; the rapid dashes of paint that we read as greenery in the forefront skid across a deep brown ground that also glints behind the clouds. This is a study in vivacity but also in provisional coherence, the speedy medium privileging an undertone of Constable's art: that the vista he is painting barely hangs together, is bound by energy, and is both frozen and recognised as fluctuating through the painter's art.

One hundred and ninety-five years later, Emily Cole descended from a train at Manningtree Station, on the eastern periphery of what images like the one described above helped to define as Constable Country: a realm, now, of changeable proportions of concrete and clover, only limitedly accessible by a railway line built a quarter-century after the painter's death. From Manningtree a bus route chugs towards Flatford, but the bus didn't arrive that day and so Cole, whose art is enmeshed in both landscape and the contingencies of those transportation systems that determine our movements through it, tramped off the road and across the marshes, ending up somewhere close to Flatford Mill, down the road apiece, near a car park and a characterless suburban house flying a St George's flag. Here she took a series of photographs that later gestated several paintings, collectively entitled "Suffolk Pink" after a traditional wash put onto houses in the area.

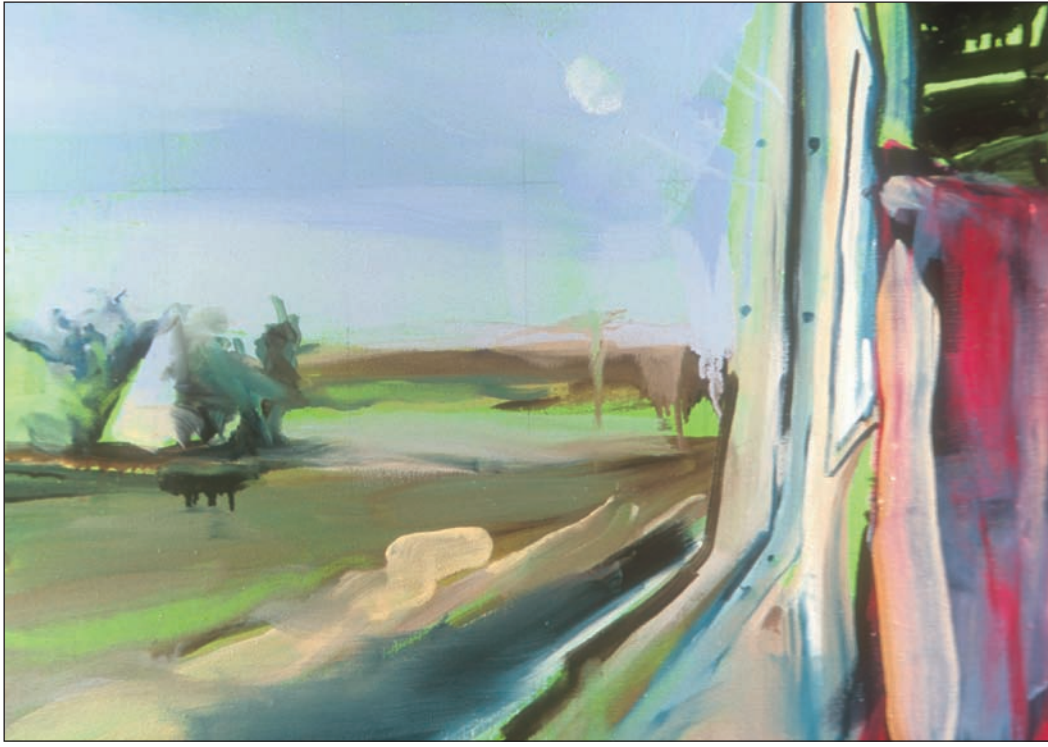
The eponymous tone, a neon intensity that sits uneasily within traditionalist conceptions of landscape, is Cole's dependable base colour in these paintings just as warm, natural brown had been Constable's. The

façade of the house is pink, though of a discomfortingly high-keyed variety; so, too, are the national flag's once-crimson crossbars. In the foreground is a wavering tree, its purpled branches arcing across the picture plane, painted wet-in-wet and dissolving into the cloudless sky. A wooden bird-box hangs halfway up the spindly trunk, to the left of which the painting plunges into a vegetal chaos of half-recognisable trees, topiary, and thick swipes of deep green that might be foreground flora. But there really is little foreground or background here, certainly nothing of the alternating bands of light that Claude used to inject recessive spatiality into the flat technology of the painted landscape. Cole's painting originates in a photograph, a secondary mediation of a nature already thoroughly mediated by humankind, and it feels like it: as in Cézanne, but without any imbued sense of modernist mastery, everything is pressed up onto the surface. To some degree, however, for all the indexical qualities that their evident origins in photography infer, Cole's against-the-clock technique causes her paintings to sing an old song: for here again is a world charged by changeability, its constituent parts constantly rearranging in relation to each other, sustained on a wing and a prayer. What was implied, a couple of centuries ago, in a sketch has become overt in an avowedly finished painting, albeit one that is still partnered by similar images seen from a slightly different viewpoint, which suggest that there is no definitive reading of this environment.



Pond (Suffolk Pink) oil on paper 43cm x 60cm 2006





Images such as this travel simultaneously at several implied velocities. There is shutter speed. There is the speed of painting, slower but still relatively swift. And there is the speed of looking at a painting that enfolds a snapshot of disequilibrium between chaotic nature and the phosphorescent fingerprint of culture, in which two rapidities and a fundamental, faintly melancholic instability are subsumed in the unhurriedness of an observer's gaze. This effect is more strongly felt when Cole paints, as she often does, views of the mutable landscape between Manningtree and London's Liverpool Street Station, photographed through the window of a moving train. The 2005 *Hinterlands* series consists of 20 paintings, they have a taxonomic spine that clarifies Cole's affinity with the American artist Ed Ruscha: simply by pointing the camera, it seems, she constructs an essay on the tectonic shifts in this region's landscape. This hour-long journey, which Cole asks us to read, anticlockwise around gallery walls, as from London outward, takes one through a steadily thinning but never extinguished dominance of land by industry: rail workers clad in bright orange (the base colour, along with an acidic lemon, of a number of these images, here revealing a wry structural purpose), signal boxes, factories, waiting jetties nosing into silent creeks, and wide panoramas of pale green fields.

At 70mph some of these facets are evanescent flashes, barely registering on the naked eye; but a camera can catch them, and paint can embed and complicate them. The ominous twin structures of *Silos* would share something of Bernd and Hilla Becher's deadpan categorising of industrial landmarks had Cole not painted them with buttery slipperiness; had the sky's tone not been echoed on



the siding of an outbuilding so that the fields around it seem suddenly, weirdly, to disappear, air and ground reversed; were there not a radioactive yellow glow behind the overpainting. In transit we don't quite see the oddity of such structures in the landscape, because we barely apprehend them; but we know that they, or something like them, are there. Cole asks us to look at a meeting of the half-seen and chancily grasped with the manipulating possibilities of her final medium: her images, in this respect, merge the frailties of perception with the countermanding potential of painting. They also ask us to consider how we see what we see, and what has determined its specificity. The price of corraling such images is the regularly present framing device of the train's window-bar; and, often, the flattening and the particular slanting viewpoint, as keyed to a modality of looking as is Ruscha's oblique perspective, that come from photographing a vista at an angle through a window.

Whereas her Romanticist forebears, who engaged the encroachment of the Industrial Revolution into the landscape, reflected the temper of the age – which was, as has been remarked, to deplore the temper of the age – Cole additionally seems drawn, if not fully to view industry's traces as beauties, at least to recognise that they are central to modernity's warp and weft; and the materials with which a contemporary landscape painter, dealing with our changing experience of the subject, must contend. Diametrically opposed, meanwhile, to the practice of an earlier painter such as Constable's key influence Jacob van Ruisdael, who would manipulate and collage his views in the pursuit of a contemplative ideal, Cole's tendency is to begin with the defective real and pursue it as it modifies. During her residency at firstsite (2006), she asked visitors to describe their favourite day out and their preferred mode of transport, which she used as the basis for excursions of her own. The most popular destination, it turned out, was that supposed shopper's paradise, Oxford Street.

It seems possible at this point to suggest that landscape in Cole's artwork may be a cynosure for other concerns. Here is a very public and even performative project that asks where painting's boundaries are – where it should be considered to begin and end – and to what extent the painter should submit to (and, to the extent that it is possible to do so, systematise) an evacuation of autonomy. While undermining the primacy of her ostensible final platform and revealing the stratagems that led to its generation, Cole indicates a desire not only to reflect but to channel attributes of the modulating world around her: witness *High Voltage*, the woozy view of railway



workers on a siding – the green organic disarray around them organised (a compositional gift to the painter, if not to ecologists) by the network of electrical cables strung through it – that she initially hung, unprotected outside and lit at night by an ultraviolet strip-light, highlighting the florescent paint incorporated into its surface. The painting is both an endpoint for a sequence of procedures (travelling, photographing, remaking) and the instigator of encounters which, as in Cole's polling of the public, overtly realign her ongoing productivity in a feedback loop. The art slips outside the artist's purview not only when the camera steals a barely-glimpsed speeding view, not only when liquid paint fortuitously mutinies as it is manipulated, not only when a new silo appears on the old horizon and not only when the bus doesn't turn up. These processes, tinged by happenstance and each with their own inbuilt capacity to angle the result, evolve Emily Cole's art; arguably they *are* her art.

And then, as Constable would tell you, there is the weather to contend with.

## Martin Herbert

Martin Herbert is a writer and critic based in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. He is a London correspondent for Artforum and a visiting lecturer at the Royal College of Art, and his art criticism has appeared in numerous publications including *Frieze*, *Art Monthly* and *Modern Painters*.

## Emily Cole Biography

## Education

2002-2003 MA Fine Art,  
Norwich School of Art and Design

1999-2002 BA (Hons) Fine Art,  
Norwich School of Art and Design

1990-1994 B Ed (Hons) English,  
Homerton College Cambridge University

## Exhibitions

2006 *Outside*,  
Danielle Arnaud, London

*Cities,*  
Philips Contemporary Art, Manchester

2005 *Stay,*  
Great Eastern Hotel,  
Liverpool Street London  
Escalator Visual Arts East Commission

2004	<i>Kettles Yard Open</i> Cambridge
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*Locus,*  
Vision's Gallery, Tokyo Japan