



# Prospect and Refuge

## Artist Q&A:

### Ian Gouldstone

David Surman: I have a couple of questions that I'd like to ask each artist in the show and then some more specific ones. The experience of artists has diversified greatly in recent years so it's always intriguing to get a sense of where and how they're working.

The exhibition is inspired by the ideas of Jay Appelton, particularly his observation that our ingrained comprehension of the landscape influences our aesthetic sense. Could you describe your journey to the studio or place in which you make your work, the place itself and your view from that place.

Ian Gouldstone: I can see my studio from my living room on the 24th floor. As the crow flies, it's less than a kilometre away, but my journey is double that distance because there is a big abandoned wharf between the two. I enjoy the walk to the studio; it passes through old parks filled with crows and roses, a small triangle of largely run-down shops flanking street drinkers and ejected gamblers, and what is rumoured to be London's oldest cobbled street. As stimulating as this is, sometimes I wish I could just throw open my window, clip myself to a zipline, and whizz all the way to work instead. I just want to avoid the cars—I don't like how people behave behind the wheel.

My studio itself is within a Victorian riverside factory that historically made everything from boilers to paper to eggs. It's a big beautiful building off the beaten path where I have a comfortable mix of close neighbours and private space; I'm energised by the company of other artists, but largely prefer to experiment in private. Our unit's double-storey front window looks out to a park where you can see a heron stalking carp in the late afternoon. My studio is the upstairs one; I can easily hear when someone is coming up to visit.

DS: Should a studio be a comforting place or an antagonistic zone with potential artistic hazards? Do you clear away obstructions to make a clear way toward opportunity or do you trap yourself in order to find new intensities?



IG: Right now, my studio is filled with experiments at various states of completion because my practice is in an exploratory phase; I'm playing with drawing, sculpture, computational systems, mechanical systems, and chemical processes. I love experimentation, but the results can be very uncomfortable—ugly, embarrassing, broken, immature, weak. It's tempting to hide the supposed failures away and only keep the successes, but when we keep the failures and the disappointments around us, we're better able to interrogate our desires, and find pleasure in the multidimensional space between failure and success. In order to do this though, it is pretty helpful to have heating that works and a comfortable place to sit.

DS: For several years you've been working with small single-board computers like the Raspberry Pi and various projectors to power and display your simulations. Do you think of these technologies as a material or just a means to an end?

IG: I consider them, and computation as a whole, as a material because I want to look at them and better understand what they are really doing. It's in technology's nature to become invisible; a new tech comes along, we momentarily marvel at it, then another tech builds on that original tech, and we shift our attention to that, blindly accepting that the original one is now embedded in our lives. While this process produces wonderful things, I also worry that it happens at such a pace that we not only forget what's buried beneath our feet, but become addicts of technological novelty. When I use Raspberry Pis in my work, I do it consciously because they have a graceful modesty to them, a comparative weakness that contradictorily gives them the strength to resist the boring tendencies of things to be bigger, better, faster, cheaper. I feel like so much artwork out there, particularly new media artwork, feels like an inevitability and that the artist who made it was just some person who just hitched a ride with it. I don't want to indulge technology's desires like that, I want to take it somewhere I want to go, and if it cries the whole way, that's fine.

DS: Many artists who work with computers emphasise the spectacular potential of digital images, to create a sense of wonder. You decided many years ago to travel in a different direction, making more subtle, minimal and 'efficient' work. Could you talk a bit about your choice to work this way in the context of digital art?

IG: Most digital art hits me like a spotlight. It turns on with a clunk, it shines indiscriminately on my body, blinding my eyes but warming my skin. Momentarily, it feels great, but the longer I look at it, the more it blinds me. Even when the light is switched off—clunk—it still floats around my vision as a blunt after image. To me, the best art hits you like a laser beam that drills into your body through your navel and then once it's there inside you, it splits into a hundred beams that bounce around triggering a million



different imagined sensations, thoughts, and memories. It warms the underside of your skin and your body, itself, becomes a heat source for others. I want my work to be like that.

DS: In your work time is clearly important, and many pieces have a durational quality, though it's different to film in that the work doesn't simply repeat or loop, it simulates time through visible actions or processes. When you're fine tuning your work how do you find the right 'time'?

IG: Normally I come up with the framework for a piece relatively quickly and then let it live in my studio for several weeks. Over that period, I make adjustments to the parameters that constitute it. Those choices are fairly intuitive, but sometimes I have a set of systemic behaviours that I want to occur more often than others. Sometimes, that might be a simulated physical behaviour like the toppling of a stack, or an aesthetic one where slivers of two complementary colours momentarily kiss. At a conceptual level, my work occupies very large, sometimes infinite, possibility spaces, and I see it as my job to find a way to explore and exploit that void with grace, even if no one is watching. Sometimes I imagine it as a troupe of ice dancers skating on a huge expanse of ice. The arena is dim and the seats are empty. They go off into the void one by one, dancing their dance, only occasionally coming back together to perform the big number that exists in all our memories.

DS: I've heard people often describe moments of frustration when watching your work. They see something slowly build up only for it to fall down, or an alignment of forms seems to be building only for it then to break apart at the last moment. Is this something you seek to include or is it a natural consequence of the processes you set up in the work?

IG: I love to play with disappointment, frustration, anticipation, alienation because they're the flipside to pleasure. I don't think you can have one without the other so as I tune my work, I look to create potent juxtapositions of pleasure and pain. I don't dictate how or when that will happen, though. I just create the opportunities for it to happen and then tweak the probabilities. It's a loose way of representing our quantum universe which itself is probabilistic and not deterministic like we had thought for so long.

DS: Thank you for your time!