

Artist **John Goto*** describes how his work is disseminating ideas around flood risk management.



MAKING FLOODSCAPES

Like most good opportunities, the enquiry from FloodScape came out of the blue. Egon Walesch, the Project Manager, and Rachael Hill at the Environment Agency, had independently seen my previous 'High Summer' series and felt that my work might suit their project. They had done their homework by image-googling such terms as 'deluge' and 'climate change' and picked up on my pictures. But crucially, they trusted their own judgement regarding art.

The artist's CV discloses quickly whether or not they have a track record in delivering the kind of project anticipated, to budget and on time. But what it does not tell, is whether they will make a suitable ambassador for the organisation. So we had our first meeting, and Egon and I hit it off from the start.

Walesch reasoned: 'It was clear that although a central aspect of FloodScape was to stimulate and involve communities in deciding how we manage flood risk in the future, we were using predominately verbal, rational mechanisms to engage them. It struck me that the visual arts could provide a complementary perspective, another

mechanism to encourage participation.'

To begin with my interest was in the aesthetics of landscape - why, historically, we have certain expectations of how our countryside should look, and how these assumptions might alter given the impact of social and climate change. For example, we find the windmills in seventeenth century Dutch landscape paintings picturesque, but feel uneasy about wind turbines appearing within the groomed terrain of the Home Counties.

Initially I had to research the technical side of the FloodScape project. I made visits to the project sites along the Thames and met with engineers, landscape architects and ecologists. I attended public meetings and conferences and read about flood management and, more widely, those concerning the politics of water usage and supply. But I was also aware that I could spend half-a-lifetime reading around these topics and still remain a layman. So, once I had a good enough grasp of the issues, I made a start on the images.

A river offers a marvelous narrative form, which can be developed in one of two

directions, up or downstream. I determined to use both. Arguments around flood risk management are often couched in terms of choices. I had the idea of traveling down the river using one set of assumptions and outcomes, and then reversing the journey and showing alternative ways of relating to the same environment. On one level I felt that we as a society are facing ethical choices, and the grand master in depicting such issues, was of course, William Hogarth.

Hogarth's use of satire and sequence led me to the idea of having a group of young people crewing a punt on an increasingly-perilous journey towards the estuary of the Thames, passing en route the FloodScape sites. By using photo-digital technology I was able to produce inundation where there is none presently. And so I have the Thames Barrier overtopped and the North Kent Marshes and Ham House flooded. The youngsters' party mood sobers as they realize the jeopardy they are in. It is only when they reach the mysterious Island of Children, where they receive knowledge from their yet unborn

grandchildren, that they are empowered to make the necessary changes.

The series took me nearly a year to make and I was fortunate in being released from my teaching commitments by the University of Derby in order to give the project my full attention. Our aim was to reach a wide audience using a mixture of appropriate exhibition venues. We produced a catalogue and web version (see www.johngoto.org.uk), with accompanying texts describing what is happening in each picture and the general aims of the project. The work was premiered at Churchill College, Cambridge, during an international conference entitled 'The Challenges of Living with Flood Risk: Resistance, Resilience or Retreat?' in the summer of 2006. It has since been shown at Derby Museum and Art Gallery; Andrew Mummery Gallery, London, where David Cameron's 'Quality of Life Commission' chaired by John Gummer and Zac Goldsmith held a one-day seminar; the River and Rowing Museum, Henley; and Hampton Court Palace, to coincide with the Thames Landscape Strategy AGM. It

goes next to Gallery On, Seoul, Korea; City Hall, London; and Science Oxford. Many of these venues were able to support the exhibition with public lectures and an education programme for schools. In terms of disseminating ideas and stimulating debates around flood risk management, the exhibition has been a demonstrable success.

One of the ways in which art can contribute to knowledge is through the imaginative transformation of information, which in turn can engage the public. But this alchemical process is delicate, and the imagination does not flourish if overly-managed. It needs space, and although Egon and I had regular meetings to update each other, the genius in his method was to trust and encourage me. I like to think his approach paid dividends.

* **John Goto** is Professor of Fine Art at the University of Derby.

FloodScapes will be at Science Oxford from 26 November 2007 to 11 January 2008.