

## The Garden of England

These paintings are part of a series investigating the peripheral landscapes and margins of greenery along the M2 corridor in Kent.

I regularly drive from London to Canterbury and back and have done so for the last twelve years. This journey to my workplace in Canterbury takes me down the A2/M2, driving through the middle of what King Henry VIII described as 'The Garden of England'.

My experience of gardens is as quite places of stillness and reflection. The motorway greenery by contrast fizzles rapidly past the windscreen of the car, punctuated by familiar landmarks, signs and intersections. Other people leave and join in ordered succession while the familiar places just pass by, rapidly recede then dissolve in the rear view mirror. Henry's gardener, Richard Harris, introducing cherries from Europe can little have imagined such a grey arterial conduit, now London's gateway to the continent, transporting similar goods and commuters in such vast numbers. (1)

One day, while waiting in a traffic jam I suddenly became aware of how still and vibrant the wildflower 'meadow' of the verge actually was. The banks were a varied and lush carpet of greens, broken intermittently by small shrubs, swaying flower heads and the clicks and buzzing of insects. These motorway embankments, which are seemingly part of the despoliation of the landscape, in fact act as biological corridors for some endangered wildflowers and valuable zones free of chemical pest control.

This encounter triggered a realization of how these green spaces could act as a primer for minimally painted landscapes which speak of the disjunction between the man made and the natural environment; a long-standing preoccupation of painters working in the English landscape tradition.

Kent was stripped of its status as 'Garden of England' in a recent national poll (2). As pressure on land increases, with both Government and private initiatives for housing and airports, these green verges are refuges which cannot be developed and which provide a buffer zone while everything else hurries by.

These verges are restricted places. We are forbidden to stop on the motorway unless we break down. Access to them is strictly controlled and often monitored by remote cameras. Like J.G Ballard's 'Concrete Island', the verge is a metaphor for something forbidden and inaccessible, and once there, almost inescapable.

These 'Island' hyper-landscapes contain worlds in which our rapid through-transit alters our sense of scale, which is simultaneously diminished and increased. Through making these paintings I have become increasingly aware of these fragile, yet extremely self-sustaining and hard environments, changing landscapes that embody both beauty and survival.

**Edward Chell     2009**

*1) While working with the permission of contractors Skanska on the Cobham Relief Section of the A2, I was shocked to discover there were between 300 – 350 car accidents per week in that section alone.*

*2) Martin Wainwright. The Guardian, June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006*