

# Osmosis

Jeroen van Westen

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## PRESS RELEASE

CBAT are delighted to present Osmosis, a new exhibition of work by Dutch artist Jeroen van Westen. Curated by Lia Gieling of CARGO (Netherlands) the exhibition documents the artist's extended residencies in Canada and the northwest of America in the late 90's.

van Westen is perhaps best described as versatile. Trained as a painter, his work varies from artist's books and soundscapes to contributions to design masterplans and large scale interventions in urban and rural landscapes.

In the work of visual artist Jeroen van Westen, cultural historical and ecological angles are important. If van Westen is involved in the restructuring/regenerating of public space, his work becomes manifest to a larger public. Inhabitants and users of the specific area might not experience consciously his subtle interventions in the urban or natural landscape. What the people usually don't know is the amount and kind of research that goes into van Westen's interventions. His books and photos circulate only in a small public arena. This is also true for the work he has made during his long stays in the northwest of America. Van Westen researched the mutual enrichment of the concepts of nature and culture

For the last three years, van Westen has been working with Cardiff County Council and CBAT's subsidiary, Grounds for Change, to realise a multi-faceted public art work for the Lamby Way landfill site in Pengam. This work, funded through the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme and sponsored by Tesco Stores and Arup, is now coming to completion and can be seen from adjacent roads.

The show OSMOSIS however demonstrates a different approach to the landscape, in the form of large and detailed colour prints mounted on aluminium.

*"Van Westen not only creates records of landscapes, he rewrites them as well. His observations are not passive. His photographic work is a detailed notation, investigative and scientific, archaeological, geographical and socio-historical. Every image is a journey of discovery and van Westen has a story for each image...Van Westen's passion for his subject is infectious in the same way that great travel writing makes you restless."*

From an exhibition essay by Wiard Sterk, Director, CBAT

The show at CBAT gallery consists of eight works in two formats, landscape and portrait, with the latter carrying two images. The work shows van Westen's great care for our natural and built environment and his skill as an observer and artist.

For further information on the Breathing in Time out public art work at the Lamby Way landfill site, please visit: [www.breathing-in.org](http://www.breathing-in.org).

Press inquiries: please contact Aldo Rinaldi, Project Manager, CBAT, 123 Bute Street, Cardiff, CF10 5AE, Tel: 029 2048 8772, Fax: 029 2047 2439, Email: [aldo.rinaldi@cbat.co.uk](mailto:aldo.rinaldi@cbat.co.uk).



**CBATGFC**



**Osmosis**

by Wiard Sterk

In 1988 the Lake District was proposed as an area worthy of World Heritage Status in recognition of its cultural and natural richness. The application was turned down by UNESCO because the lakes were not considered to represent a unique natural landscape. The influence of more than a millennium of human activity, such as farming and the construction of water reservoirs for the industrial cities of England's north-west, was clearly recognisable. Furthermore, for an area of outstanding cultural heritage it was considered to be insufficiently protected because farming, industry, tourism and associated infrastructure works still influenced the landscape.

This is of interest in relation to Jeroen van Westen's work, in which the balance between nature and culture, between past and present are important elements. Van Westen not only creates records of landscapes, he rewrites them. His observations are not mere registrations of its image, but detailed investigative, scientific, archaeological, geographical and socio-historical analyses. Every series of pictures is a journey of discovery and van Westen has a story for each image:

*"Afterwards I went with him (Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, a Watchman of Ninstints, an abandoned Haida village) to the quarters of the Haida watchmen on the island and joined him for something to eat and we continued our conversation about ecology. He showed me a series of drawings which were to be a story board of life in Ninstints. One of his people took me to a small bay and taught me how to crack and eat sea urchins. Have you ever done that?" (E-mail from the artist)*

I have never done that and this note made me conscious of the fact that I have missed out on an important experience in my life. Van Westen's passion for his subject is infectious in the same way that great travel writing makes you restless.

The area of Ninstints by the way is recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. It is viewed as a witness to an important era in the cultural history of Canada, along with the old colonial centre of Havana, the industrial ironworks of Blaenavon in South Wales and the windmills of Kinderdijk in the Netherlands, to name but a few sites.

The instant in which the photograph is taken is important for van Westen. He allows time, waiting for just the right light, lets the camera do its work without haste, rejects images considered too grainy or too sharp and searches for an accurate colour match. In other words, he wants a "true" picture, within the visual limitations of the human eye. He leaves the scanning of the negatives to professionals, but retouches the result himself by computer. This is witness to a great deal of respect for and an intimate relationship with the subject matter and the importance of the moment of exposure. It also reveals his desire to portray this moment in its essence through careful composition of the image.

Dominant in the composition is the foreground. The horizon line is seldom lower than one third from the top of the image, which presents us with two-thirds landscape. Together with the use of a wide angle lens, this creates a panoramic feeling and a sense of being drawn in. Our observation is active because the image occupies a large section of our field of vision.

Van Westen offers us landscapes in which interaction between nature and culture are revealed, in which sometimes one and sometimes the other has the upper hand. Everywhere we observe the layered structure of the landscape, in which inscriptions have been left by natural or human influences, that in turn, overwrite each other. It is therefore only a small step for van Westen from the abandoned and ruined settlements of the Haida to the rubbish tip in Cardiff where he is realising a project that will make visible the hidden waste and will interpret an artificial landscape, creating a collective memorial to a specific period in the life of this city.

Similarly van Westen exposes layers in the photographed landscapes; the viaducts and underpasses of Pittsburg, the abandoned industrial landscape as witness to a change in the culture of that city, a jungle with the ruins of temples and cathedrals; the sprawling houses of the inhabitants of Queen Charlotte City, casually placed against the backdrop of an brilliant landscape, on the edge of wilderness and water, lonely and overwhelmed; the abandoned villages and burial places of the Haida, an almost extinct native American tribe that once lived in harmony with their surroundings and whose belief system was closely connected to sea, earth and animal life.

Osmosis is a process of selective exchange through a semi-porous membrane. It is a feeding system for plant cells, the exchange of salts is important for the survival and growth of the cell. It is an essential process for primitive as well as complex forms of life. In van Westen's work we can also identify the process of osmosis, an exchange of past and present, of nature and culture. He searches for the essence of a particular period which may shimmer through the landscape and defines the global importance of this for society.