

Art at the Met Office



Artist

Susan Gamble and
Michael Wenyon

Work title

*Automated
Observations*

A phalanx of buoys ranges across a long sliver of the Atlantic Ocean, outriders to the fore, troops fanned behind. In the foreground is a mysterious carapace, plates of armour, straps and ropes – a defence levelled against the advancing barrage. In the distance, below the calm, singular, unified sky, on the rolling horizon, you might almost take the low clouds for ice, fantasising some dramatic climatic event to merit this armoury.

This solitary buoy, seen from many angles, is two days' sailing from land and unaccustomed to visitors and portraitists. K1 is one of eleven, moored in the waters round these islands after the unexpected storm of October 1987. The Marine Automatic Weather Station network operates as an early warning system to more accurately anticipate such weather. Each buoy is an autonomous weather station measuring air pressure, air and sea temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction, and wave height and frequency. Every hour, day and night, K1 reports its observation from sea area Sole. As Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon were photographing it, from an encircling dinghy, K1 was making and transmitting its representations of its environment, including in turn the subtle traces of their presence. We encounter vestiges of information from the buoy everyday:

absorbed in the morning weather bulletins, at work in the poetry of the night-time shipping forecast, broadcast into our homes and out to sea.

Made with an automated digital camera the kaleidoscopic tableau invokes primitive cinema: the animation of a flick book or zoetrope. Its resemblance to filmstrip and panoramic photography belies the complexity of its structure. Shot not from a single rotating point but an elliptical path, looking inwards, it is a series of spatial overlappings, reiterations and temporal discontinuities. The vista is more than 360 degrees and, as well as the buoy, it records where the dinghy has just been, on the other side, so that the camera constantly points across its own lines of sight.

The helm and sides of the dinghy are choppy evidence of the presence of the artists, pitched and pulled by the current. This band of visual fragmentation and repetition so near to us contrasts with the continuity of the sky. It is, effectively, a simple panorama, unbroken by the relatively small movement of the camera off centre because the clouds are so far away. The single ship, like the sky, persuades us of the unity of the image. It invites us to approach *Automated Observations* as not primitive but contemporary cinema: to speculate romance, disaster, storm, deluge and redemption.

In the digital era fundamentally physical problems, such as recording climate details in remote places, powerfully evoke the persistence and insistence of the material world. Simultaneously scientific apparatus exerts considerable aesthetic appeal and we find contemporary beauty in the technology that observes nature as much as in nature itself. This sliver of ocean is mounted on a white wall beside a walkway through the Met Office Street and opposite a small rectilinear indoor stream. This instrument of defence against the most violent of weather, set in the expanse of the Atlantic, is viewed whilst listening to the tinkle and trickle of water.

Shirley MacWilliam







