

FINDING A WAY THROUGH

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Les rivieres sont des chemins qui marchent et qui portent ou l'on vent aller.

He who does not know his way to the sea should take a river for his guide.

Blaise Pascal, Pensees (VII, 38)

Every day I sit at my desk looking out at the River Leam which runs behind the Royal Pump rooms. It changes constantly. Ducks swim up and down while moorhens pluck a determined course across it, canoeists paddle by at speed and debris floats downstream. The wind blows ripples across its surface and, when the sun shines, the light is reflected and dances into the office. If the waters rise we erect steel flood barriers, fearful that the river might break its banks.

When Jo was approached to produce a body of new work for an exhibition, she was fascinated by the river's proximity to the gallery space. The circuitous route through the Art Gallery and Museum to the exhibition space leads to disorientation and it is easy to forget that behind the back wall of the gallery the river flows by. False windows on the outside wall imply a view which is, in fact, impossible. Working with filmmaker Dom Breadmore, we replicated this view, transforming the gallery into a contemplative space and showing the river outside, reflecting the buildings of Leamington and Jo herself.

Rivers have long been associated with the life cycle. The terminology used by physical geographers reflects this: a river valley is described as 'young' at its spring, 'mature' as it becomes stronger and deeper, and 'old' as it nears the sea. As the river finds its way through the landscape, it negotiates hard rock, erodes the landscape, and collets and shifts sediment and minerals. Jo uses the river's journey to tell her own story. On a map, she plots her progress from birth to the present day. Unexplored territory remains blank, echoing the maps created by explorers whose travels had revealed only part of the existing landscape. It recalls the fictional maps of *Treasure Island* or *Swallows and Amazons*, but it is both imagined and real. It does not correspond to an Ordnance Survey plan, but it is biographically correct and includes real places. A 'long profile' elaborates on her story, while 'core samples', taken at critical stages in her life, reveal her biographical composition.

But the exhibition is not just about Jo. By telling her own story, Jo encourages us to explore our own. Jo describes herself as a 'commentariographer', a word last used in 1576 to describe 'someone who writes, mediates, ponders, portrays or records. One who comments on current events and produces an expository treatise'. Her work reflects, records and interrogates the world around her. It is at once intensely personal and powerfully expansive. By looking into herself she is able to see the

world around her more clearly and convey a universal story. Each visitor to the exhibition will have 'found a way through' to the gallery and has a story to tell. The exhibition ends with a sculpture consisting of eight 'core samples', one for each week of the show, to which every visitor will be invited to add a pebble. This installation will tell the story of the exhibition, which is the story of us all.

Working with Jo has been an enlightening and invigorating experience. Jo encourages a largeness of vision, a desire to look at everyday life in a new way. Looking out of my window at the river will never be quite the same again.

Chloe Johnson, February 2007