



Back in November I was lucky enough to be able to travel to eastern Europe for a portfolio review in Bratislava, courtesy of the Gane Travel Award which I won the previous March/April. To get to this point I had to write an application proposing what I would do if given a £1000 travel grant and so I constructed an application based around experiencing contemporary art in the context of a different culture, attending a photography festival and primarily attending a portfolio review to accrue the opinions of a cross section of international gallerists, curators, lecturers and photographic artists.

I set off in November for Prague, having to arrive at Uni at 8:30 to reprint one of the images for my portfolio which just wasn't cutting the mustard. Following that I high tailed to Bristol airport and sat around for two hours before flying out. Arriving in Prague I caught a cab to my hostel and had a cracking chat with the driver who was a very pleasant man and advised me to avoid other taxis, only use Uber, which actually proved to be both sound advice as well as cost saving.

The hostel was called the Art Hole and accordingly had Picasso, Monet, Mondrian, Warhol and all sorts of other distinctive artists work reproduced onto the walls, doors, cupboards and fridge. It was my first time in a hostel and so an interesting experience, I met a girl called Sabrina from South America who was very pleasant as well as a Ukrainian called Sergey and an Irishman, Henry. Sergeys snoring in the bunk above me outlined the significant importance

of bringing earplugs to hostels. I resorted to using the noise cancelling on my headphones it was so atrocious.

The next day I focused on the Old side of town, visiting a number of exhibitions including one with some rather odd sculptures of babies with large heads, and some fairly unpleasant paintings with very graphic, cartoon like content. This was the first gallery I went to and so I was slightly unnerved. Following on from that however I watched a brilliant video work revolving around laser guided missiles and the training etc for them which seemed to highlight the detachment of the person from the event they were responsible for. I also did some of the obligatory sightseeing stops including the Prague version of the Eiffel Tower. It is situated on a hilltop and you have to walk an enormous way to get there. The view when you do though it is incredible. Looking out across the whole city it becomes evident how vast it actually is.

On the way back I went to a concert in a Church for about £4. It consisted firstly of a fantastically ornate setting and a singer and organist playing from a balcony. The whole thing must have lasted about forty minutes and was quite beautiful. On the way back from that I bumped into Henry and we decided to test out a Czech curry. Following this we had some beers back at the hostel and ended up going out with a group of people from there. The club we ended up in resembled the inside of a giant machine, serving incredibly cheap drinks as well as containing an in house burger bar, with tofu burgers. It was all in all a swell night.

The following day I went to the other side of the city to both get a feel for a more residential side of Prague and to have a look at some more galleries. Sadly the only one I was able to visit was Hunt Kastner, fortunately it was a brilliant space with an interesting show of work by Dora Maurer made up of a three video projections as well as a conceptual painting and photographic sequences. This was both the most interesting show and gallery I went to in Prague and definitely a gallery I will follow.

That evening I went for dinner with an American guy called Jack and Henry at a hotel restaurant. What would have cost about £25 a head at home was just scraping a tenner. Jack and I went back to the hostel as we were both up early the next day and Henry hit the cabaret, crashing back in about 3am, the smell of cigars punctuating his entrance. When I left for Bratislava in the morning he was still in his clothes, shoes included, asleep. He did make it to a top bunk however.

I took the bus to Bratislava and from where I was dropped had a half hour walk (including getting lost time) to the hotel included with the review. It was a standard Holiday Inn type affair and I spent the evening going over my portfolio in preparation for the two days ahead.

The review itself was initially an intimidating process and the very first thing it highlighted to me was the importance of being able to verbally articulate about your work. It involved twenty minute sessions with each of the fifteen reviewers I had chosen spread out across the two days, the first being the fullest. I had a number of interesting tutorials throughout that day, with one of the heaviest criticisms being the question of where do my cinematic constructed narrative images sit when it is a style of work which came to the fore in the 90's and 00's and has been well explored by multiple artists. I thought that was a fairly short sighted and market related question, however it did leave me thinking about the fact that narrative ambiguity and atmosphere were very significant in my images and so what were they particularly saying about an idea. I guess it shook the foundations somewhat.

I went on to speak to a lecturer from Birmingham, curator from Vienna and artist from Bratislava before lunch. An interesting point made by the curator was the popularity of more abstract work in their gallery and when I described what I was working on at back here she said she would be much more interested in that than my current work. This opinion was echoed by a lecturer and photographer from America I met after lunch who again found the ideas I was working on more engaging than the portfolio I had.

There were however also positive opinions to what I had shown, 'the atmosphere constructed in them and the ambiguous sense of narrative providing an interesting space for the viewer to work from' was one opinion. Another, probably the most pleasant comment over the weekend, was to do with the 'the poetic sensibility of the work', which is something I hope has carried through into my more recent makings.

The detachment and non cohesion in sense of a series was something else which cropped up. This may be a purely photographic idea, that of working in series, but it was something which both curators and festival organisers were concerned with in terms of the suitability of my work to gallery spaces and events. At this point I was quite adamant that I wanted to work through singular, stand alone images and one thing which has really come from this feedback which I've later discovered is the way my work functions in series.

The evening after the first day of the review, I attended the opening of the photo festival which was being held in Bratislava over November. There were some interesting pieces of work throughout the show, including the project pictured, with everyday Indian scenes collaged into the desert. Most of the hanging of the show was similar to this in terms of loose prints pinned to walls or perhaps bulldog clips. Very temporary in feel and not dressing up the prints at all. How the show would be hung is something I was rather curious about as with my own work it is a huge consideration and also says, in my view, something about the value placed in the print. It has a clean and temporary feel to it but also a slightly cheaper one. There were some

long strips hung from the picture rail however which worked rather well and some intriguing metal frameworks in which prints were suspended.

The second day of the review in many ways reinforced the first and something which the review really promoted was defending, to a point, your work. I don't mean in an argumentative context but it was reassuring to be able to plug some of the holes which certain critics made.

Overall the experience was both deflating and incredibly motivational, it really demonstrated the importance of getting real understanding of your work and also motivated me to really pursue what has ended up becoming my most accomplished body of work yet. It was a great introduction to the process of a portfolio review, the concept of a photography festival and to taking critique from outside of a university environment. These sort of events are likely to be where I get a great deal of feedback once graduating and so being able to attend one now has been a fantastically valuable experience.

One of the main points and possibly most valuable parts of the review has been the contacts made through it. I acquired business cards from multiple gallerists and curators as well as other artists attending the event and at the end of this year will make a concerted effort to put my work out to these places. The only issue of which is likely to be transporting it. For the sake of it being at festivals such as this however, there is always the possibility of using loose prints? A bridge to cross when the time comes. For now I am just incredibly grateful to the Gane Trust for facilitating this whole trip, it was splendid.