

# Tank

*Edward Chell*

*Viewing Stations*

Private View & Tank Closing Party:  
Thurs 10<sup>th</sup> Nov 2011 6:30-9:30pm

Exhibition 11th-26<sup>th</sup> November 2011

*Because they are rarely seen statically, roadscape undermine our Ruskinian ideal of landscape as a view seen at once from a privileged vantage point by a single viewer...our culture has learnt to interpret landscapes in a particular way – to read water meadows as picturesque, mountains as rugged or fenland as inscrutable. But we haven't been taught to read roadscape, because they seem too mundane and too fleetingly viewed to form any part of any imagined ideal. In order to make sense of them, we need to re-educate our eyes. 1)*

Land use, its ownership and accessibility are becoming ever more hotly contested issues on an island whose main conurbations are becoming increasingly crowded. For instance, the recent attempt by central government to sell some 15% of 250,000 hectares of woodland assets from under the stewardship of the Forestry Commission caused a public outcry.

As national parks become more heavily used and managed for tourism, our more marginal, peripheral and threshold landscapes are becoming increasingly important both for wildlife and new forms of evaluation. Often ignored, untouched and usually unprotected, they represent a new kind of frontier where an emergent sense of their uniqueness is beginning to bud. These spaces, very aptly described in Paul Farley and Michael Symmons-Roberts' book *Edgelands. Journeys into England's True Wilderness*, including a passage on my own painting, form a truer picture of our experience of landscape than we might care to imagine.

A few painters have explored the urban perimeters of towns and suburbs, in deadpan images that capture their melancholy character, for example George Shaw or David Rayson. However, there has been no substantial investigation of *Edgelands* in painting. As Paul Farley, Marion Shoard and Joe Moran have all pointed out, this is a gap in our cultural engagement with landscape. My work distinctively makes visible the rich ecologies of the verge, celebrating of these



Image: *Conium maculatum*, Edward Chell,  
Acrylic on and varnish on gesso, 11 inches x 9 inches, 2011

often spectacular places which are, nevertheless tinged with unease because of the uncertain nature of their existence and the environmental questions they pose.

Motorway *Soft Estate* environments are controlled, manufactured and yet wild - qualities simultaneously like formal gardens and bunker shaped moraines. Like a latter day kind of enclosure, their very inaccessibility hints at the power of the state. Yet they are susceptible to contrary subliminal readings – lack of boundaries, trespass and unfettered nature.

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.

## Additional Information

Edward Chell's work features in *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts.

He talked about his work on *Open Country*, BBC Radio 4, first broadcast 26/03/2011 and available online at [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

Chell's recent work focuses on borders and peripheral places. Recent commissions include *Carboretum*, *Acer to Quercus* at Stour Valley Arts in Kent and *Ten Steps to Heaven* at The Swedenborg Society, London.

[www.edwardchell.com](http://www.edwardchell.com)

Excerpt from the new book ***Edgelands Journeys Into England's True Wilderness*** by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts. Published by Jonathan Cape, London. February 2011 - pp 100 – 101.

*The overlooked landscape of road verges has begun to attract artists. The painter Edward Chell has been drawn to this inaccessible wilderness, mundane and sublime in its infinity. Chell first noticed how rich a landscape this is, like many of us, while inching forward in gridlocked traffic. Motorway verges today are pesticide-free strips of wilderness, as difficult to reach as sea cliffs, miniature landscapes that run along this in-between space for thousands of miles. He works from photographs and sketches, but access is difficult and dangerous: these are forbidden zones, places where the traffic police will pick you up within minutes. Working on the M2 and M20, Chell learned how to make himself invisible by wearing a hi-vis jerkin and hardhat: the twenty-first-century en plein air artist in disguise.*

*The paintings he produces suggest the busy-ness and fecundity of roadside verges, rich and alive. He has described the powerful visual metaphor of the verge as poised between ordered, policed and restricted boundary spaces of the state that we are only allowed to look at while travelling at great speed, and the slower, uncontrollable energies of nature. Working in shellac, he is also able to suggest a strange patina, what he describes as 'a kind of shot quality' (which brings to mind T.S. Eliot's 'flowers that are looked at' in *Four Quartets*). They suggest our perception of flux: the way, seen at speed, the intricacies of grassland and vegetation shift in and out of focus as our relation to the incident light changes. Because Chell is interested in vision, how we look at (or don't look at) what lies all around us.*

*His paintings concentrate our gaze on what's usually fleeting and reduced to blurred texture; at the same time, their stillness seems to contain speed, and its shifting effects of light.*

*His attention extends to where his work is exhibited. For the work made at Cobham Slip and Maidstone Services, Chell decided the Little Chefs of Kent would make the ideal gallery, a place where the motorist, fresh from the experience of passing through corridors of grass verge, could contemplate these spaces. Working on the A66 and M6 for his Cumbrian project, Chell used the Little Chefs of Lakeland, not least because they also represent the equivalent of the old staging posts along coaching routes (the Little Chef at Appleby is on the same route the Wordsworths used on their visits to north-east England).*

- 1) Moran, J. 'On Roads. A Recent History' published by Profile Books, London, 2009.

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### Gallery open:

Wed – Fri, 3 – 6pm; Sat & Sun, 1 – 6pm,  
and by appointment (admission free)

### Tank

The Ladywell Tavern  
80 Ladywell Rd  
SE13 7HS

### Directions:

Train: Approximately 15 minutes from central London, frequent service to Ladywell Station from Charing Cross, London Bridge and Waterloo East

Overland: New Cross/New Cross Gate then 136 bus to Ladywell

DLR: to Lewisham, then buses to Ladywell

Bus: 47, 75, 122, 136, 185, 199, 208, 284, 484, P4

Car: free parking nearby