

The road to Utopia

In 1969 the artist Hamish Fulton followed in the footsteps of Sitting Bull, in a walk over the Little Big Horn battlefield in Montana. This is the hard, empty ground where the Sioux achieved their most celebrated victory over the US government in 1876, when George Custer and his 7th Cavalry attacked a teepee village only to be cut off in a ravine and wiped out. Fulton's walk over this resonant terrain was... what? A homage, an exploration, a re-enactment, a wilderness holiday? Or a work of art?

Now Fulton has an exhibition at Tate Britain that documents the hikes, climbs, rambles and road walks he has been undertaking ever since, crossing vast tracts of the planet, traversing some of the remotest places on earth, leaving not a trace to mark his being there, bringing back not a thing.

When he visited the territories of the Plains Indians, Fulton was at the beginning of a long march. Born in 1946 in London, he was one of the generation of students at St Martin's School of Art who invented a distinctively British - romantic, solitary, whimsical, cussed - conceptual art at the end of the 1960s. Fulton was at St Martin's with Richard Long, and the two of them felt that walking across a place was an act so meaningful, distinct, conscious, that it deserved to be thought of as art.

One of the first walks Fulton and Long engaged in was not in the wilderness, but the middle of London. They and a bunch of friends staggered from the corner of Greek Street and Old Compton Street round the corner to St Martin's, on Charing Cross Road. They weren't the first students to stumble through Soho, but they were all roped together, walking as a single body. It took ages.

Walking Journey is an arresting, tantalising show. In an act of foolhardy generosity, Tate Britain has given over a vast exhibition space to an artist who has nothing to show except some framed photographs with reticent texts, cases of cards and artist's books and wall paintings using commonplace words against unexceptional colours. And just in case you start savouring the classic beauty of his photographs of Himalayan boulders and American riverbeds, or appreciating the graphic ingenuity of his wall paintings, be advised that none of this is the core of his art, which is the walking - what you see is evidence that his art happened, that he walked from point A to point B.

What makes the repetitiveness, dryness, silence of this exhibition so triumphant is not some chic pleasure in nothingness but something more difficult to accept and impossible to let go. Fulton's art is a goad. Its purpose, seen in a gallery in one of the densest cities on earth, is to make you realise that this is not where it's at. There are other places. There is another pulse - that of the wilderness, that of nature. There are, still, ways of inhabiting the earth that make you feel small, transient, mortal. And this recognition is political.

The problem with attempts to make political art today is the absence of utopia. Utopianism and the possibility of total, revolutionary change were part and parcel of modern life from the socialist experiments of Robert Owen in the early 19th century to the end of communism in Europe in the late 1980s. Now this sense of other possibilities is more etiolated than ever. Fulton however, in his endless walk, is an exponent of a visionary politics that has survived since the very beginnings of industrialisation. He is a romantic anti-capitalist in the same way the young William Wordsworth was when, penniless, he walked across Salisbury Plain in 1793 feeling like an exile in conservative Britain.

Fulton would be a romantic in an almost quaint way, if his art were not so hard. He believes in romantic things: in the purity and specialness of nature, in the idea of the wilderness, the shrinking yet still just discoverable margin of uncolonised, uncivilised earth. Like Rousseau and the idealists of the age of the French Revolution, he worships peoples at one with wildness.

The political provocation of Fulton's art - which is inseparable from its beauty - lies, however, not in transporting us into the heart of landscape, as JMW Turner did when he brought back stormy painted documents of his own travels, but making us longingly aware of the absence of landscape.

Nor does Fulton give us anything to compensate for the fact that we are stuck here in the city while he is in the Himalayas. His photograph-and-text pieces are the ultimate holiday postcard. Just as a postcard from someone else's exotic holiday can only ever make the recipient envious, Fulton's photographs tease and frustrate. A road vanishing in the desert, a boulder encountered in the mountains, a milestone. A track through leafy England has the pastoral seductiveness of Constable's east Sussex dirt track in his 1826 painting *The Cornfield*. Yet where

Constable's painting, which hangs in the National Gallery, brings the country into Trafalgar Square, giving you a nostril full of cow dung, Fulton insists that his picture is no more than an inadequate souvenir of the walk to which it alludes. Underneath the photograph is one of the laconic texts that point to his experiences: "A nine and a half day coast to coast walk from Norfolk to Dorset travelling on country lanes and paths. The Peddars Way - The Icknield Way - The Ridgeway. England July 1997."

That's all we get: a document banal in its lack of emphasis, were it not for the grave, quiet loveliness of tone. All the things he must have seen and heard in a walk across England from coast to coast are for us to imagine. We are in the position of Coleridge in his poem *This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison*, when he imagines the delights of a party of friends who have gone for a walk he cannot join because of an injury: "Well, they are gone, and here I must remain/This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost/Beauties and feelings, such as would have been/Most sweet remembrance..."

Like Coleridge, we didn't have that experience, see those beauties, hear that bird sing on the Ridge way that morning, after the rain; and our prison is not even a lime-tree bower but a museum.

Fulton's purpose is not to satisfy us with an image but to point to a lack in our lives - it is like advertising. He wants to advertise a form of life that he believes to be good. Fulton's pictures and graphics tell you again and again that it would be better, freer, more beautiful a long way from here, in another place and time. He has made the advertising analogy explicit in big, billboard-sized works. They are no more substitutes for natural landscapes than his earlier photos - on the contrary, the spur is more powerful, insistent, more satirically desperate. He mimics the graphics and promise of posters that use landscape to sell things. *Warm Dead Bird*, Spain 1990, has the look of a classy ad, and yet it points to an experience we did not and cannot have, that is gone like the dead bird, and that is threatened by the pace and violence of the modern world. "Walking against the oncoming traffic", the view of a road in southern Spain is marked.

The fact of another place is all Fulton wants to tell us about - not show, but tell; not give, but promise, in that we can go his way, follow his road. Text paintings tell us this with superb economy, big letters arranged in visual analogy to what he saw. Strangely these works, without even photographs to help us picture the scene, are the closest to the pleasures of traditional landscape art. The layering of the word "clouds" over "stones", for example, says enough about a walk in Wyoming to make you picture a desolate glory.

Fulton has spent more than 30 years honing an art that is defiantly deictic, its purpose to point to something. In an early photograph, he indicates a landscape with a stick, and he has never tried to do more than this. His art is a signpost, directing us to the last wilderness regions, to the freedoms of the pastoral. By always pointing to other places, other times, he keeps utopia alive; his art is radical because it is joyous, pleasurable. The pleasure is not given us here to enjoy for a moment before we get on with our busy lives, but as a possible reward if we change our lives. What he shows us is otherwise just a souvenir. A wall painting tells us that in 2000 he climbed to the summit plateau of Cho Oyu (8,175 metres) in the Himalayas without oxygen. Only a simple graphic of a sun rising out of a crescent hints at the splendour he saw.

Walking Journey is at Tate Britain, London SW1 (020-7887 8008), until June 4.