

## **Clear as mud? Why art and science are both in the mix**

I'm delighted to have been asked here today to say a few words by way of introducing the two exhibitions which are on display. One of them, entitled "Punctuated by poems", is based on a book that I have edited for the British Council, an anthology of poems and scientific texts on the theme of climate change. The other is a photography exhibition entitled "Four elements in Nature", and that is a display of pictures selected from a photo contest organized last year by international photo clubs in Geneva. I think both these projects and the works on display are not only of real excellence but also thoroughly relevant to this particular gathering, and I'd like to explain why I believe that to be the case.

When asked what the title of this talk would be, I came up with something a little enigmatic. "Clear as mud? Why art and science are both in the mix." Before I knew it I was already causing problems— typical artist!—because, of course, the title needed to be translated into other languages. And "clear as mud" is a peculiarly English expression: it is of course a metaphor—that's why I liked it. It's also, obviously, a seeming contradiction: mud is not at all transparent. The phrase is also something of a cliché, so (in England at least) we use it without really thinking about it.

But I'd like you to think about it. And I'd like you to think about metaphor, and why we use it and why we need it. My contention is that both art and science rely on it absolutely. Think for a moment about one of the most famous scientific discoveries of all time, Newton's understanding of gravity. The apple falls from a tree onto his head: his thinking comes clear and one of the essential laws of physics is captured and passed on for ever more by virtue of the image, the apple.

Now I don't think it's a coincidence that a certain computer company, with its advertising strapline "think different" has used the apple as its branding. "Think different". (My only quibble is with the grammar, since surely it should be "think differently"—but maybe that's the whole point!)

Someone, however, an ex-Beatle by the name of Paul McCartney, was not at all happy with a computer company making use of the apple image; he thought he had a prior claim to it for his music publishing business. So we had a long-running feud between an IT company and a musician. Fast-forward though to *now*, and what do we see: McCartney's songs selling like hot cakes as digital files on the Apple iTunes store; a coming together of computers and music—the convergence of science and art like some kind of marriage made in heaven.

It might at first be "clear as mud" (i.e. not at *all* clear) why art and science should both be working together, but both of them make their most significant

discoveries by a mixture of close observation and imaginative leaps. Both are venturing into the unknown and with metaphor as a principle tool. Mere arithmetic may be prosaic but pure maths is poetry.

Photography, of course, represents a very obvious blend of technology and artistic purpose. The winning photo in the competition, "Raining sunshine", is both technically accomplished and marvellously expressive. I also love the title itself, which makes us look at the image in a different way. To think differently. I think immediately of one of the poems in our book called "Out of sync Haiku", where the seasons get mixed up, and instead of spring, winter or summer, we have summer, and spring. Raining sunshine. It's very much the same thing, expressing in such a vivid way how things are reaching a new level of disturbance.

Poetry, metaphor, art can reach to the heart of the matter more compellingly than prosaic explanations or pleas. They can explore the future through supposition.

My working title for the poetry book was *Barometer*, which I rather liked, perhaps because it had a tough, scientific feel to it as a title. Then of course I started to think of what the cover of the book might look like, and the immediate and obvious idea was to incorporate a barometer dial. But of course that wouldn't have worked: it would have been too obvious, even tautological. *Feeling the Pressure*, the title finally decided upon, not only created a counterpoint between title and cover image, it also seems to me to be an especially appropriate title, because it makes metaphorical use of the barometer. Yes, it refers to the atmospheric pressure on the mercury but it also of course refers to how individuals might be reacting, in a human sense, and how society too should be "feeling the pressure" to act.

When first asked to describe the whole idea of the book, I myself reached for an image to explain what I thought was going on. That image was the canary in the coal mine, the songbird possessed of a critical sensitivity enabling it to detect any dangerous build-up of gas. By analogy, the term "climate canary" is used to refer to a species that is affected by an environmental danger prior to other species, thus serving as an early warning system. I didn't in the end pursue the image, as I thought it was flawed. After all, the canary's warning is through its silence. Some of the poets' songs may be distressed but they are songs nevertheless. It is precisely the *insistence* of their songs which is so powerful. There is though, intriguingly, a poem in the book called "Songs we did not sing", with its haunting line: "so we didn't sing a cornfield in the evening sun".

What you will notice throughout all the poems is the way in which the science of climate change has clearly entered the language and permeated the way we think. Andrew Motion, the UK's Poet Laureate, has contributed a poem which is not in the least a crusading, tub-thumping poem; on the contrary, it's a very

quiet, utterly personal piece of writing. But what is so striking about it is the way it features one of the most powerful images of climate change and takes it to heart, literally, using it as part of a personal, bodily description:

*another milk tooth cuts  
loose from its glacier  
into the gorgeous arctic.*

I hope you enjoy the exhibition. I'm delighted to see poems escaping the confines of a book and being presented in such a dramatic way. But do please also delve into the book because not only are there many more poems there to be discovered, but it is also, in the end, the way to get most from a poem, simply to spend time with it on the printed page.

I'd like to end with one of my own poems, chosen because its theme, very directly, is the same as that of the photography competition: the four elements—earth, air, fire and water. But again, I'd just like to mention the title, which is something different: “Paper, steel, stone”. It refers to a playground game that I remember from when I was growing up. Paper (flat hand), steel (scissors shape), stone (a fist). Steel cuts paper (and therefore wins); stone breaks steel; but paper wraps stone; so any of them can come out on top. The game, the title, is a simple metaphor for what is going on in the poem.

### ***Paper, Steel, Stone***

*He, Fire: She, Water  
Water quenches Fire.  
He loses.*

*He, Earth: She, Fire.  
Fire scorches earth.  
He loses.*

*He, Air: She, Earth.  
Air throws Earth around for fun.  
She loses.*

*She, Air: He Water.  
Air and Water conspire.  
They draw.*

*He, Air: She, Fire.  
Air fuels Fire with fury.  
Both of them lose.*

*He, Earth: She, Fire and Air.  
Nothing stands in the way of water.  
All is lost.*

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