

TOM SAUNDERSON

Red Velvet

Gildengate house Residency

Red Velvet is a multidisciplinary project, incorporating photography, a short film, and a body of archival research, which explores and contrasts the appearance in Norfolk of Pocahontas, the Native American princess, and Julian Assange, the editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks. These two historical figures – which at first glance could hardly be more dissimilar – illuminate the ways in which the biographies of significant individuals can be subsumed into the larger question of how national identities are constructed. Though born half a millennia apart, Pocahontas and Assange have been instrumental in shaping America's international reputation and its national mythology. Perhaps surprisingly, both figures lived for short but significant periods in Norfolk.

Rooted in an investigation into Pocahontas and Assange's time here, Red Velvet is based on a journey Tom Saunderson took across Norfolk between the villages of New York and California, via Boston. Designed as a tongue-in-cheek homage to the grand, Kerouacian tradition of the trans-continental road trip, Saunderson's journey weaves together local and global histories, word-of-mouth rumour and historical fact, Norfolk lore and American myth. Presenting the viewer with a constellation of references, between which multiple narratives can be drawn, Red Velvet acknowledges that the categorical distinctions of history and fiction are less stable than we tend to assume.

During the colonisation of America by European settlers in the 17th Century, a young Powhatan woman called Pocahontas – or Matoaka, as the descendants of her tribe know her – was taken prisoner and held captive Jamestown, Virginia. In order to secure her release, Pocahontas agreed to marry a tobacco trader named John Rolfe. Rolfe took Pocahontas to live in England, where she eventually died, aged 21, in Gravesend. According to local legend, she planted a Mulberry Tree in the garden at Heacham Manor, Norfolk. The crooked, leaf-shrouded tree forms a central image in Red Velvet, a living, physical object that lends (arguably spurious) credibility to the story of her time in this quiet corner of the world.

In 2010, almost five hundred years after Pocahontas arrived in Norfolk, Julian Assange found himself under house arrest in a secluded, but lavishly comfortable, mansion in the village of Bungay, invited there by a right-wing libertarian sympathiser and former army officer, Vaughn Smith. A variously lionised and reviled whistle-blower whose WikiLeaks website has doggedly sought to expose corruption and illegality in America's political and military regimes, Assange had just been charged with sexual assault by Swedish prosecutors. During the weeks he was holed up in Bungay, the world's media camped out at the gates of Ellingham Hall, hoping for a glimpse of the infamous renegade. Assange, meanwhile, stayed in a small, plush bedroom with heavy, red velvet curtains that blocked him from view of the rumours, conjectures, and accusations that stormed outside. This room, which Saunderson visited and photographed, forms another crucial location in Red Velvet.

Pocahontas and Assange are real. Yet the historical fact of their existence is sharply contrasted by the multiple ways in which their life stories have been, and continue to be, interpreted and instrumentalised. In Pocahontas's case, the story of her capture by John Smith, a white settler who imprisoned her prior to her forced marriage to John Rolfe, has been told and re-told, distorted and romanticised, to promote commercial agendas. Rolfe was a tobacco trader who used Pocahontas's idealised image as a 'good Indian' – obedient, beautiful, subservient, and graceful – to promote his products. In *Red Velvet*, Saunderson traces the evolution of Pocahontas's image across the collectible smoking cards which accompanied old tobacco packets. Some of these depict the story, bitterly contested by Pocahontas's descendants, of Pocahontas saving John Smith, her captor, from being beaten to death by Native Americans. With the arrival of cinema, Pocahontas's image was further distorted. The transformation peaked in 1995 with Walt Disney's animated feature *Pocahontas*, which depicts the princess as a young, headstrong woman who falls in love with Smith, and willingly succumbs to his advances.

Assange's story, meanwhile, is still being written. 6 years after he left Bungay, he is once again under house arrest. This time he is in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, where a dedicated team of policemen keep guard outside, ready to arrest him the moment he steps foot on Britain's sovereign soil. In contrast to Pocahontas, whose incarceration at the hands of colonial settlers has been twisted into a heart-warming tale of nobility and stoicism at the founding of America, Assange has assumed the role (in the eyes of the U.S. government, at least) of a villain, a traitor, and a dangerous rogue who threatens the stability of the American nation. Barring Edward Snowden's release of thousands of NSA documents in 2013, WikiLeaks has arguably done more damage to America's international reputation than any other organisation in history. Assange has disrupted the image of America as a benevolent global superpower and staunch defender of Western values, such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, unravelling the idealised national identity that Pocahontas played a small part in shaping.

Assange's incarceration in Norfolk is remarkable in itself: he is a juggernaut of international controversy whose surprise appearance in this part of the world is surreally disproportionate to its reputation as a rural idyll. Yet there are wider implications to be drawn from his appearance in *Red Velvet*. This year, in the wake of Donald J. Trump's shock victory in the US Presidential election – a victory many believe Assange actively supported, following the release by WikiLeaks of thousands of secret emails that revealed the inner workings of Hillary Clinton's campaign – Oxford Dictionaries declared 'post-truth' to be its international Word of the Year. In *Red Velvet*, Norfolk functions as a mirror of this wider world in which mainstream media no longer sets the agenda. *Red Velvet* acknowledges the contingency of national narratives, in which meaning is always up for grabs, and stories, like maps, are constantly being redrawn.

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