

nontoxicprint

Nontoxic Printmaking, Safe Painting & Printed Art

Unmapping the World

[CONTENT](#) | [SEARCH](#)

Reflections on
the Art of Tracy Hill

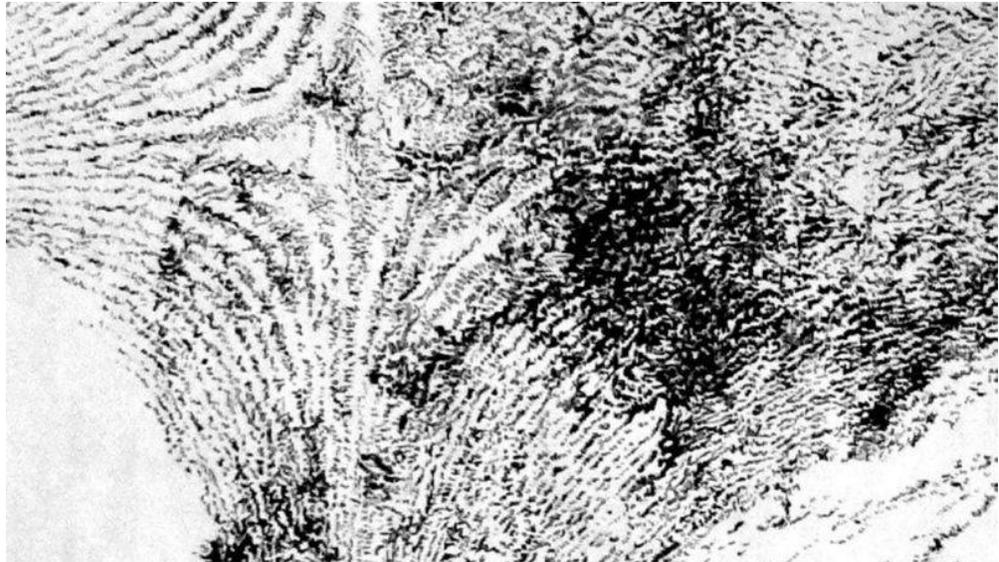
by Friedhard Kiekeben, 2018



**This essay reflects
on the unique and captivating
art of Tracy Hill,
who lives and works in the Northwest of England.
The artist makes the viewer acutely aware
of the changing relationship with nature
and the physical world
that is emerging from our insatiable
immersion in all things digital:
Today, increasingly,
we are replacing 'real' experiences,
tangible spaces, places, people,
and landscapes,
with digitally mediated ones,
...for better or for worse.**

👉 **Deciduous Drawings | Insoluble Ink**

[Walking in Wetlands with Tracy Hill]:
An essay by Deborah Stevenson



Cognitive Surveillance I - detail:
2017, Charcoal on Kozo, 160x110cm

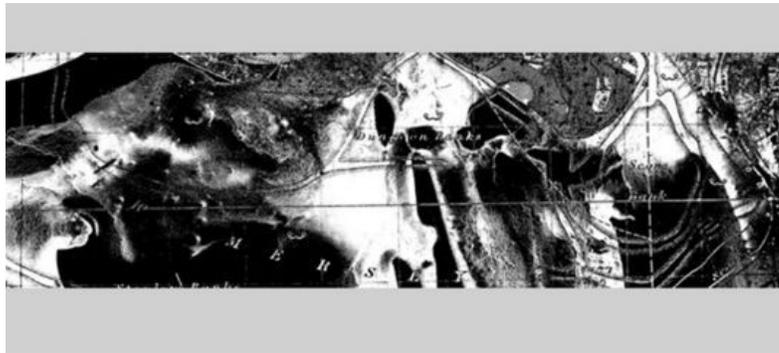
One particular focus of Hill's creative discourse and art practice is on contemporary mapping. In an age where everything can —and will be— digitized, monitored and recorded, catalogued in deep data sets, or processed and integrated in all-encompassing online maps, (Mother Earth becomes Google Earth?), even some of the most unique places can become nothing 'but a number', bits and bytes, ones and zeros, or in other words... just like any other place.

As an experiment I just went online to see what information I could glean about Mount Everest, my random choice, on Google maps. Luckily there wasn't a McDonald's restaurant to be found on top of the world's largest mountain (yet?), but I was surprised to learn that there actually is a tourist village a mere 10 miles away from the world's highest peaks, Gorak Shep, complete with cosy inns for weary trekkers, ketchup bottles on the dinner table, helicopter pad, online access, and, yes you guessed it, 118 helpful Google reviews (4.2 Stars!), praising its 'unparalleled serenity' in the most favorable review, while another visitor complained about the place being cold, dusty, uncomfortable, and you guessed it, having too many Yaks roaming around. Only a few decades ago, Gorak Shep actually was not a village, but the actual basecamp for the ascent to Everest. A uniquely remote and inaccessible place then...a fully mapped out holiday destination now.

Post-Industrial Places

Although Tracy Hill's art and thinking is less informed by such far-flung locations, but more by the study of post-industrial, urban, and natural places closer to her home in Lancashire, it is precisely this visible loss of uniqueness, individuality, and singular beauty, in potentially any place we are experiencing in the era of a fully mapped out, catalogued, and digitally known universe that informs the artist's work.

Although in part informed by concepts and methodology of traditional printmaking, Tracy Hill embraces some of the most sophisticated digital mapping and data collection technologies available today, and utilizes these for her own creative ends; often this discourse — facilitated by collaborations with scientists at geography or surveying departments — results in stunning works of art and new visual experiences that have their own unique beauty and 'poetics of space'.



**Digital Image for 'Maere':
2012, Cast refractory concrete
with screen print glazes,
30cm x 90cm**

Talking about her recent wall drawings derived from data sets captured in plain-air, she says: "My drawings in the Museum are very much taking place in the present, however they represent something, which is beyond the drawing. They are therefore a point where differences can grow. Where an exchange can take place between the real world and the imagination."

Tracy's main concern is 'discernment of individuality' in an era whose universal language can, bluntly, be reduced to strings of near meaningless code, ones and zeros, zeros and ones. Reflecting on the matter, Tracy Hill found the ancient concept of 'Haecceity' as a perfectly apt description of an elusive principle that conveys both 'uniqueness' of place and 'individuality': 'A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities ... capacities to affect and be affected.' Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 288



'Haecceity'

'Haecceity' was first proposed by John Duns Scotus (1266–1308), and a haecceity is a non-qualitative property responsible for individuation and identity. That property or quality of a thing by virtue of which it is unique or describable as 'this (one)'.

Recently 'Haecceity' was also the title of a new site-specific gallery installation, produced in March 2018 during a two-week residency at Warrington Museum and Art Gallery in the Northwest of England. The residency offered Tracy Hill an opportunity to revisit unique wetland sites in and around the town of Warrington collecting new visual data, and then working within the historic 150 year old Museum. The installation drew connections between Culture Warrington's permanent collections which bring together local objects and imagery from natural science, antiquities, social history, ethnology and photography.



Sites of Action - exploration through drawing

Reflecting on this ambitious project — which involved several weeks of intense wall drawing from projected data in front of an audience, within a museum setting — Tracy gave the following project outline, explaining to viewers the complexity of her creative process:

"I am particularly interested in exploring the idea that fine art can act as a platform of multiple dimensions, providing a link for cross-disciplinary research and enquiry and new ways of seeing the world.

Environmental impact and awareness of post-industrial wetlands over the last few years has led to increased interest in re-engaging with and the protection of these unique locations. Contrary to popular belief Mossland's offer geological and archaeological heritage dating back thousands of years (...) My use of commercial digital mapping instruments to inform my imagery connects with our modern obsession for ordering and controlling our experiences of landscapes through abstracted observation.



Sensorium:
2014, Charcoal wall drawing detail

Traveling on foot through such dynamic landscapes requires an acute understanding of touch and connection to our own bodies; the work offers a dialogue between the past and our future understanding, challenging cultural associations of 'the wasteland' as somewhere to be conquered and controlled in order to mark progress.

By exploring the capabilities of our developing digital technologies my observations as both artist and walker offer a re-imagined vision, one, which goes beyond our own human visual capability. Through my practice as an artist I aim to illustrate and reveal the connections and complexities of our human relationship to place. A re-imagined vision; one that resonates with non-verbal human experiences, subtle, rhythmic and immersive. Providing an immediate link between the senses, thinking and showing, where our physical and digital worlds overlap."



Performative Drawing in the Gallery

I asked Tracy how one should read the relationship between her technological data capture in the landscape and the individual marks and creative decisions she makes during these time-consuming and intricate drawing sessions, and she replied as follows:

"The drawings are very much sites of action where the marks are the beginning of seeing and experiencing a memory or reimagined space. The marks are the beginning of a conversation; to put down the first mark creates a dialogue from within until something new emerges.

Playing with the idea that maybe I am uncovering something that has always been there but has only just materialized in to physical space." ...and: "A week into my residency and the installation of the first gallery drawing I feel that the drawing and the installation as a whole is now beginning to flow.

As with any new piece of work you have to build an understanding with it and this work has been no different. The first few days felt like it was an archeological dig where I was excavating the drawing physically from the wall. I have found the Limestone much harder to work with than I had anticipated. Compared to charcoal it is much less responsive and demands a new way of approaching mark making. Each piece has its own characteristics, colour and feel which is reflected through the mark it leaves on the wall."



**Along the way - detail:
2010, Screenprint, hand cut
line on Kozo with back**

**projection, multiple panels
various lengths.**

The final wall works resulting from this process of intense drawing activity, using simple marking media such as charcoal, chalk or limestone sticks, assemble into stunning panoramas of marks, waves, textures, and lines undulating across the wall spaces. Sometimes a similar creative approach is used in the making of printmaking works such as 'Standing Ash', from the series of photo-intaglio prints entitled 'Matrix of Movement'. Tracy Hill calls her unified approach a kind of 'Cognitive Surveillance'.

'Surveillance' refers to the unique method of digital image capture in the actual landscape using high-tech surveyors/engineering tools, and 'cognitive' is a pun on seeing her drawing and art making activity as a kind of personal survey of an inner landscape.

She explains: "In 'Cognitive Surveillance' I have been exploring my data scans through drawing as a way of making connections between my senses and the digital data. These drawings are an on-going investigation which offer an accumulation of experiences and memories.

Drawing is a duality of tensions; it is the visualisation of the point where one thing becomes another, the threshold between the world and how we feel to be part of it. The drawings are not a description of what is being drawn but the possibility to explore and visualise the potential of what might be. They attempt to go beyond the static moment and create an opportunity for participation - to explore what is beyond the image presented. Drawing provides immediacy, a link between the senses, thinking and seeing."

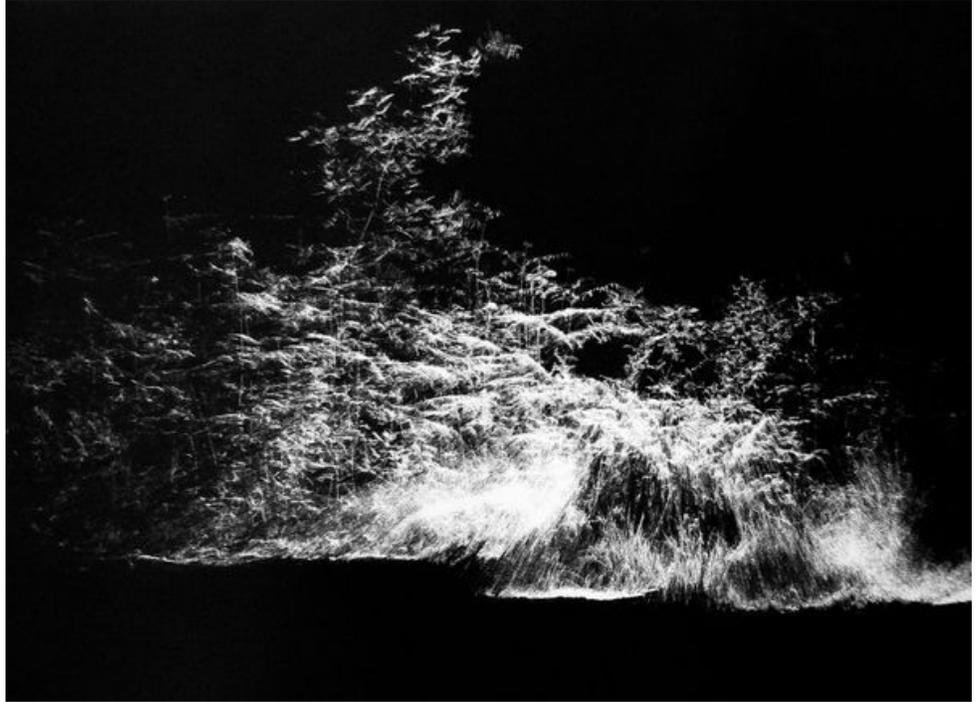


Data Drawings

The simplicity and beauty of Tracy Hill's finished wall drawings belies a creative process of baffling complexity, and there is a fascinating tension between the archaic and timeless qualities of chalk or charcoal on wall spaces, versus the high tech sophistication that is required in both the actual capture of source data of any chosen space, as well as in the processing, computation, and analysis of the large amounts of raw data captured for each project.

Considering the computational nature of the art-making process, the actual artworks are far from sterile and numerical, and the prints, objects and installations share a timeless aesthetic that has as much in common with say a John Constable landscape or cloud painting as it has with Silicon

Valley. Black and white — even chiaroscuro — is the preferred mode of tonality in many of the prints and wall drawings, but some series, such as 'Footsquare', also engage with a finely tuned color palette that resembles the landscape.

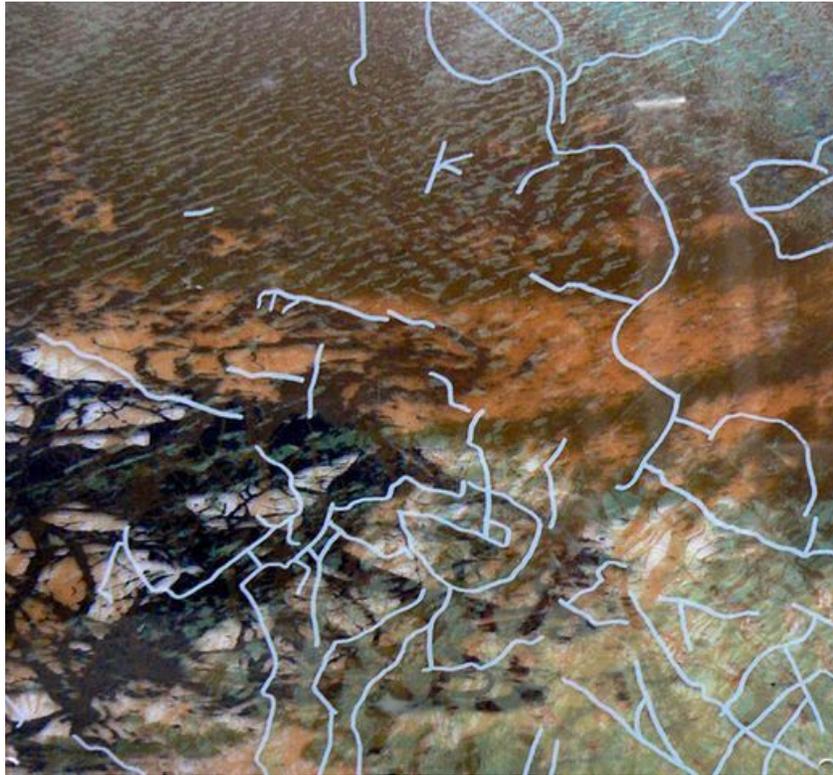


The Waste
2015, Intaglio-type on Somerset,
96 x 59cm

Tracy Hill has ties and connections with a number of science departments and technical experts that help her harness the kind of new technologies that are normally proprietary to the likes of Googlemaps, or large urban planning firms, or indeed modern day archaeology, which would also be a reference the artist welcomes.

A key technology that is frequently used for modern day surveying and planning is known as 'Lidar' which broadly describes technologies that work within the interface of 'light', 'lasers', 'radio', and 'radar'. The actual equipment often does not look very different from a regular camera (and is often mounted on a tripod), may have an array of mirrors and infrared distance sensors, memory, and optical digital camera, and is tethered to a laptop computer for on-the-fly data processing of vast data streams that are generated as the scanning machine interacts with its surroundings.

One manufacturer of Lidar devices ('Faro' 3D scanning) aptly compares the capturing process as being more akin to 'touching', 'modeling', or 'sensing' every facet of space, the landscape, or any interior space or object, than to taking pictures in the conventional sense.



Footsquare
2011, Screenprint and drawings on Acrylic,
20 x 30cm

The artist's traditional preoccupation with ethereal qualities such as tonal values, shades, and color interactions (which is still present in digital photography) has been thoroughly replaced by the technology of precision mapping, or so it seems. The capabilities of 'seeing, touching, sensing' machines already far surpass what our conventional perception can achieve.

And yet at every step of the process Tracy Hill never loses sight of the artist's engagement with 'Haecceity' - the uniqueness of place, uniqueness of the artist's personal vision and point of view, a subjective strategy for interpreting data sets, and a highly personalized way of transforming the process into striking works of art.



The Creative Process

Tracy Hill's projects can be broken down into three distinct process steps:

- 1) engagement with a chosen location through walking
- 2) scanning, analysis, processing, and editing of captured data sets
- 3) reinterpreting edited data into physical works of art

- all process steps are guided by artistic intent and decision making, true to the unique experience, 'Haecceity', of place.

In several email dialogues I asked the artist to help me deconstruct and understand the intricacy of each of the steps involved in making work (here in printmaking), which she did in the following:

"The source of the imagery is from captured 360 degree Lidar scans which I take using a laser scanner borrowed from the geography department at UCLan.

I then work with the captured data and create what I call 'data drawings'. The data is deconstructed and manipulated to create gestural images which are more in line with my aesthetic memory of the landscape I have walked in. (...) I can twist and construct layers of data to offer images from perspectives not usually possible.



**Hunter Estuary, Kooragang Island NSW,
(right) detail from Harmonic Constituents,
2016, Intaglio-type on Somerset**

"At this point I export sections of these 'data drawings' which create my positives to make my plates...by the time the prints are on paper they have taken on characteristics of a hand printed etching plate. I was intrigued by how the wall drawings developed."

At this point in the conversation, new questions came to my mind, and I asked the artist: "I am really intrigued by your equal attention to tracing/drawing processes, and printing. That's a kind of new approach to transfer work that goes well away from reproduction, and I like that a lot (...and is something that's also emerged in my own recent art practice). How did you start this practice? What fascinates you about light projection work? And what are the sources for your charcoal projections?"

Tracy explains: "The wall drawings began as I was working towards my Masters degree. At that point I was already using the data scans for making plates but was trying to find a way of aligning more closely the connection of the sites I was working on for my research.

The decision to use the walls and draw directly with charcoal not only connected the data imagery with materials from the landscape, (charcoal runs below the mosslands), but by using the wall directly meant that the scale and shape of the imagery was unrestricted by plate and paper size. By projecting the data I could again use my aesthetic decisions as an artist to connect the digital information with the actual mark-making through touch."



Unmapping Places

'Maps and mapping' are a powerful recurring theme that sprang to my mind when engaging with Tracy Hill's works, and the more I thought about this the more clear it became how mapping, (conceptualizing?), as a creative concept permeates all of her creative endeavors in one form or the other. In some works, such as the concrete floor slabs, 'Footsquare', or in installations of silkscreen 'curtain-like' forms,...'You Are Here', there are signs, geometric shapes, 'pathways', and meandering elevation lines, that literally look like abstractions of the kind of visual graphic shapes and elements used in actual maps.



Basement Membrane
2011, 10 x Kozo panels with
screen print and hand cut lines.

In some of the works the interplay of sign-like forms also seem to resonate with the artwork of the American artist Julie Mehretu, whose grand panoramas Tracy Hill very much admires.

Some of the artist's processes and activities, such as surveying and scanning places and landscapes with high tech tools such as 'Lidar', or mapping out projected data through manual wall drawing, all invite their own map-related references.

Rather than trying to emulate the purpose driven map-making and map reading activity we are familiar with, — today through apps and MapQuest rather than oversized folded sheets of say an Ordnance Survey map — Tracy Hill is more concerned with using the technique as a form of visual poetry,...something that allows us to deconstruct how we make sense of places, the world, and ourselves. It is a process she aptly calls 'Unmapping'. In her own words, she writes:

"Interesting that you see map-like symbols, maps have been a passion of mine forever. Since 2010 really my work has directly referenced our relationship to modern maps and the drive to interpret everything and every journey using the bias of the car. I am hugely affected by place and my connection to landscape and wanted to explore ideas around how as a society we are losing our ability to navigate ourselves.

I thought to begin with that I wanted to remap locations to reconnect with lost histories and narrative of places but actually I realized very quickly that what I wanted to do was to 'unmap' places. By unmapping I wanted to create an image, a space where there is room for the viewer to bring their own memories and interpretations, therefore the prints and drawings become a threshold for something which is beyond the fixed image."



On Exactitude in Science:

Borge's Impossible Map

The visionary Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borge shared a similar desire for 'unmapping' of the known in order to reveal something that is hidden, personal and unique, (Tracy Hill calls it Heacceity), and defies the presumed precision of science and mapping.

In March 1956 Borges published the famous single-paragraph short story, 'On Exactitude in Science', which describes a country with a king who is obsessed with making the most accurate, and largest, map of a kingdom humanly possible, exerting most of the countries' resources in the process.

The project eventually produces a map the same size as the kingdom and covers the territory it attempts to represent, but ultimately fails, — how could it not? — ("In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map").

One wonders what Borges, who sadly became blind in his later years, relying on friends to help him orient himself, would have made of our present world of today, where maps are no longer just crude points of reference, but actual 'programs' that give direction to your car as you drive, or hire a cab ride from your smart phone, or tell satellites what to look at.

*On Exactitude in Science Jorge Luis Borges,
Collected Fictions, translated by Andrew Hurley.*

**...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography
attained such Perfection
that the map of a single Province
occupied the entirety of a City,
and the map of the Empire, the entirety of
a Province.
In time, those Unconscionable Maps
no longer satisfied,
and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map
of the Empire
whose size was that of the Empire,
and which coincided point for point with
it.
The following Generations,
who were not so fond of the Study of
Cartography
as their Forebears had been,
saw that that vast Map was Useless,
and not without some Pitilessness was it,**

**that they delivered it up to the
Inclemencies of Sun and Winters.
In the Deserts of the West, still today,
there are Tattered Ruins of that Map,
inhabited by Animals and Beggars;
in all the Land there is no other
Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.**

—Suarez Miranda, Viajes de varones prudentes, Libro
IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658

(Wikipedia version)



Rock Mapping
Field of Vision project,
2011 residency in Washington DC

Land Art: Art and Walking

Richard Long's famous piece 'Line made by walking' from 1967 is a simple mapping exercise. The young artist repeatedly traverses a park until the grass is pressed down into a long line, which is then photographed and recorded for posterity.



left: Richard Long, *A Line made by walking*, 1967
 right: *Riverlines*, 2006
Riverlines is a mural by Richard Long created in the Hearst Tower in New York in 2006. He created the work using a mixture of mud from two rivers: the Hudson (in the United States) and the Avon (in the UK).

(Wiki-Art)

Much of land art embraces the idea of 'intervention', often in ways more monumental than by just walking. By contrast, Tracy Hill visits unique places and landscapes in a much more subtle way, deeply engaging with its features in search of its 'Haecceity', but leaving it virtually undisturbed. Aided by high-tech scanning the artist endeavors to observe the environment in all its uniqueness and layered complexity.

Following a process of painstaking data analysis, editing, and artistic re-creation, these observations go deeper and into more topographical detail than is normally humanly possibly through our ordinary senses. Tracy Hill's wall drawings, objects, and prints, are all testimony to an astounding authenticity that links the artwork to their origins in actual places, in the artist's vision, and in the viewer's enjoyment of Tracy Hill's captivating art.

Tracy Hill's art also invites a contemporary dialogue with the endeavors of 'land art', and in the series 'Footsquare' is based on actual walks that become part of the process and the artwork, not unlike some of the early 'walking' pieces made by Richard Long on the outset of his career.

The Artist explains: "Footsquare' was part of a project I undertook with Martha Oatway who I met in Preston while she was on a residential visit from Washington DC. We decided to do a series of walks in both Lancashire and Washington DC and then make works in response. There is a 'Footsquare' panel for each walk we did - 10 in total. There was definitely an influence of Richard Long as well as artists such as Brendan Stuart Burns, Sarah Cullen and Teri Rueb who are all exploring ideas around mapping and connection to site and place."



Tracy Hill

Born in Birmingham Tracy Hill studied Fine Art at Burnsville School of Art, Birmingham, Sheffield Hallam University and University of Central Lancashire, Preston. Currently a research associate and co-leader of Artlab Contemporary Print Studios at The University of Central Lancashire, Hill's practice investigates and reconsiders the relationship between our developing digital capabilities and the aesthetics of the traditional hand created mark.

 www.tracyhill.co.uk

 www.artlabcontemporaryprint.org.uk

Deciduous Drawings | Insoluble Ink

[Walking in Wetlands with Tracy Hill]



An essay by Deborah Stevenson

In response to Sensorium and Matrix of Movement

Projects by Tracy Hill 2014 – 2017

*Memories, then,
are generated
along
the paths of movement
that each person
lays down
in the course
of his or her life.*

Tim Ingold



Footnotes
2010, 50 cast plaster tiles
with screen print,
30x30cm each

Elemental Uncertainty

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.
Heraclitus (panta rhei) in Plato's Cratylus

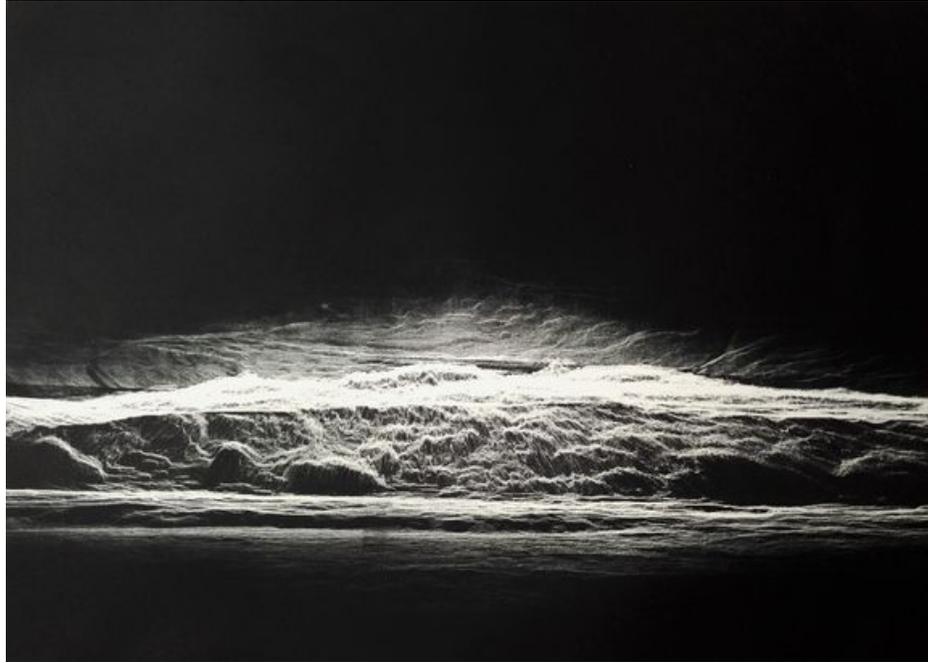
Mutability is at the core of Tracy Hill's practice. From a pale floor strewn with powdered fragments of crow-black charcoal, remnants of the artist's labour, the eye is drawn up and across the gallery wall from which a vast and dynamic grayscale mural, vibrating with motes of carbon dust, threatens to engulf the viewer.

Hill's explosive wall drawings are forceful in their impact, animating otherwise tranquil spaces, suggestive of a temporary lull following an outburst of bustling activity. The works are poised, charging the atmosphere with a sensation that the artist, although absent, might return at any moment, gather up her charcoal and continue her purposeful task.

Closer inspection reveals an organic, sinuous tapestry rendered of tightly controlled tonal marks, intricately drawn by hand. There has been no feverish activity; the work is measured and meticulous yet palpably friable and ultimately transient. No fixative holds the image: a careless movement, gust of air or the sweeping brush of a thoughtless cleaner will obliterate days or weeks of painstaking industry. These are deciduous drawings and their extinction is part of Hill's plan.

On another wall, vast, enigmatic prints, each a metre wide, describe a horizon across the gallery space. Velvet-dark ink draws the viewer through the paper's soft, mossy surface and deep into its viscous chambers. Time spent with these images produces the curious sensation of two dimensions becoming three or four; suggesting the possibility of walking through each picture plane and into a wild hinterland of indeterminate spatiotemporal location.

Compellingly elemental yet ambiguous in subject matter, the works ignite a tense uncertainty in the room. Where are these places, what are they? Imagination conjures dark, mountain landscapes rising from mist-pooled valleys which melt and shift into vaporous cloud formations, advancing tornados, dust storms and tidal waves.



**Harmonic Constituents:
2016, Intaglio-type on Somerset.**

A sense of displacement occurs readily in the presence of Hill's otherworldly panoramas; equilibrium is challenged. The viewer is provoked to suspend disbelief and enter into a dialogue with the works not just as representations of geological or meteorological phenomena but as post-apocalyptic landscapes or sites of supernatural haunting. These images are perplexing, uncanny; their meaning is fugitive. This is precisely Hill's intention.

Place, landscape is not reducible to co-ordinates on a map or a digital data set. It is a complex hybrid of myth and memory, an amalgam of all we have ever known, can never find out and of long abandoned ways of living. Landscape is an aggregation of shadows, reflections, tremors and textures; it contains traces of our ancestors, lost narratives and unimaginable futures.

It is the unseen, untold, undocumented aspect of landscape that occupies Hill's imagination and this is what she seeks out as she walks the inhospitable edge lands of England and far beyond. Despite the ethereal beauty of her renderings, it is not the sublime or the picturesque that draws Hill's attention; rather she is concerned with the liminal: endangered wetlands, tidal river estuaries, ancient pathways and plundered mosses. Her interest lies in communicating the forgotten possibility of a deeper and more intuitive connection with the earth beneath our feet and she offers

us her artwork as a thought-provoking, sensory response to the places she encounters through walking.

A Balance between Being and Doing

Like the Stations of the Cross, the labyrinth and maze offer up stories we can walk into to inhabit bodily, stories we trace with our feet as well as our eyes.

Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust*

Tracy Hill's research takes her on slow journeys through untamed places, from the Hunter River wetlands of New South Wales to the saltmarshes of the Mersey Estuary and its nearby peat bogs.

Volunteer work with Lancashire Wildlife Trust on the protected remnants of historic Chat Moss has imbued Hill with a fierce respect for the treacherous mires of North West England.

She has come to know their geological and social histories, their wild beauty and the perils of navigating their hazardous terrain.

A solitary gleaner, Hill roams the mosses, their wide expanses of flat, boggy ground devoid of way-markers, hedgerows or visible pathways and bordered by vague margins of distant woodland. Divided only by unseen drainage ditches, vast fields of black peat and swathes of unyielding, sabre-sharp sedges conceal dark pools of acidic water, home to burrowing tics and stinging horse-flies. Mists and fogs gather over these eerie landscapes in winter months. They are places of mystery, dread and folklore, watery tombs for the embalmed remains of the soulless and the slaughtered.

In a letter describing the "County of Lancaster" in his record of "A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain" between 1724 and 1726, Daniel Defoe wrote of Chat Moss:
The surface, at a distance, looks black and dirty, and is indeed frightful to think of; for it will bear neither horse nor man, unless in an exceeding dry season, and then so as not to be travelled over with safety... What nature meant by such a useless production, is hard to imagine; but the land is entirely waste, except... for the poor cottager's fuel, and the quantity used for that is very small.



Maere;
2012, Fired refractory
concrete, 90 x 30cm

Yet the same land described by Defoe as ‘entirely waste’ can be tranquil and soothing to the senses, muffled, as it has been for ten thousand summers, by pillowy folds of soft, green sphagnum moss and lulled by the murmur of swishing, downy cotton grass. A place where the glaucous leaves of sweet bog myrtle send a heady scent into air flecked with the luminous blue of rare marsh gentian and opalescent flashes of damsel fly wings and where yielding groundcover quivers with darting lizards and slow toads.

In a landscape of contradictions, Hill is mindful that a carelessly placed foot can disappear into the sucking bog with devastating consequences, so she moves deftly, reading subtle shifts in the sodden earth, discerning the scant maze of safe tracks from sightlines pegged off distant landmarks, looking for obscure signifiers and always alert to ‘what shouldn’t be there.’

Hill is a seeker of stories; she searches the landscape with the penetrating gaze of an artist and the tenacity of one who plunders an archive, absorbing the earth and its history by walking. It is, as Rebecca Solnit intuits, “a delicate balance between being and doing, a bodily labour that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences and arrivals.” With each walk, Hill “moves through space like a thread through fabric, sewing it together into a continuous experience,” the profound depth of which is revealed to us in her hauntingly beautiful prints and drawings. She pours hours and weeks of intensive, meditative labour into her artworks and each one serves as a testament to her sensitivity and perseverance.

Perception is (not always) Reality

Somewhere in the hollows and spaces between our carefully managed wilderness areas and the creeping, flattening effects of global capitalism

***there are still places where an
overlooked England truly exists***

Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts

Walking in wetlands is undoubtedly a point of departure for Hill's artwork as she conflates past and present by retracing the ancient steps of those who eked a perilous existence from their gaunt landscapes, but it is also a deliberately political act staged with the intention of challenging popular assumption.

In Western culture, wetlands have long been represented as "black waters:" places of darkness, disease and death. They insinuate horror, the uncanny and are inextricably linked with melancholy and the monstrous. This perception has been reinforced since the 19th century reimagining of wild landscapes as 'sublime' and can be seen in Charles Dickens' evocation of the "dark, flat wilderness" of the Thames marshes in the opening scenes of *Great Expectations* and in C.S. Forester's rendering of *The African Queen's* wretched and tortuous journey through the seething mud flats of the Bora Delta. We encounter "all the rottenness of a thousand years...festered under the stagnant water" in the dystopian visions "of the metropolis reclaimed by the swamp" conjured by Richard Jefferies in *After London* and J.G Ballard in *The Drowned World*. Cinema, too, immerses us in the sinister and brooding landscapes of the Southern Gothic portrayed in films by directors including Jean Renoir (*Swamp Water* 1941) J. Lee Thompson and Martin Scorsese (*Cape Fear* 1962 and 1991)



Footsquare
2011, Screenprint and
drawings on Acrylic, 20x30cm

In his 1996 cultural critique, *Postmodern Wetlands*, Rod Giblett explores the "western vilification and destruction of wetlands which are seen as a "threat to health and sanity." He suggests that "the patriarchal hierarchy with its dryland agriculture and its misogynistic denigration of the wetland as the environmental femme fatale" has fostered a horror of wetlands predicated upon their negative feminisation, "the typical response to (which) has been simple and decisive: dredge, drain or fill and so 'reclaim' them." Giblett, just as Henry David Thoreau before him, argues for a recalibration of our perception of wetlands as "biologically rich and fertile places, vital for life on earth" and representative of the "variety and capacity of that nature which is our common dwelling."

A jaundiced view of estuarine and mossland landscapes continues to pervade, however, and is

supported by media generated fear in sensational reports of 'nuisance' mosquito populations thriving in wetlands close to our towns and cities and also by the carefully managed publicity machines of the political establishment and capitalist enterprise seeking to profit from the 'reclamation' or extinction of these areas.

Despite providing natural flood barriers for hinterland communities, coastal saltmarshes have historically been valued less favourably than inland areas. Treated as 'sacrificial,' these edge lands play host to nuclear power facilities and military training grounds. They have become exclusion zones.

Perceived as 'expendable', mossland has been plundered over time for its surface peat and deeper coal deposits and drained and 'reclaimed' for agricultural and industrial purposes. But wetlands are 'sinks' of greenhouse gasses, their destruction causes significant CO2 emission and ultimately environmental harm. They cannot be destroyed without themselves destroying.



**Along the way - installation detail:
2010, Screenprint, hand cut line on Kozo
with back projection,
multiple panels various lengths**

The positive benefits of maintaining the integrity of such landscapes receives comparatively little publicity. Intact lowland raised bogs are one of the scarcest and most threatened habitats in Europe for rarefied species of flora and fauna. The ancient mosses of North West England were the largest of these habitats, home to birds including the nightjar, curlew and snipe and insects such as the downy emerald dragonfly and the large heath butterfly. As a consequence of man's relentless pillaging over the last two centuries, this precious land area has diminished by ninety four percent.

Less strident than steadfast in her politics, Hill is nonetheless determined to challenge the popularised view of coastal marshes as 'lesser' places and therefore ripe for exploitation. In her compelling artwork she confers a rare beauty on terrain otherwise defined as repellent and, in doing so, holds up a mirror asking her audience to consider whether, through ignorance or inaction, we

have been complicit in the incremental loss of vital landscapes whose aesthetic appeal might not be immediately apparent.

By walking, working and sharing her research and her art, she persists in a quiet activism aimed at causing shifts in our perception of wetland landscapes. She shows us that they are of historic and future value: places of tranquillity, fecundity and mutable permanence; places that can never entirely be bent to the will of developers without their fighting back.

Through her drawings and prints, Hill urges us to see that she “walks among elementals, and elementals are not governable.”



**Matrix of Movement - site specific drawing installation -
The Brindley, 2016, Charcoal**

The Truth about Maps

It is not down in any map; true places never are.

Herman Melville Moby Dick

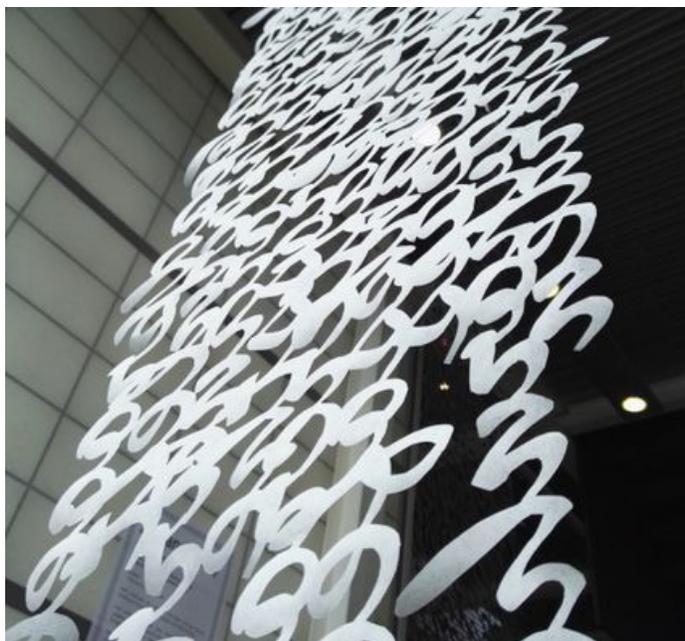
For many creative practitioners, including The Situationists, Francis Alÿs and the Italian collective, Stalker, the walk is their art form. This is also true of Hill for whom “the walking is the constant (and) the art medium is the variable.”

As a walking artist, maps are indisputably a tool of Hill’s trade; however, in common with many thinkers and writers whose passion is landscape, she remains deeply sceptical of printed maps and the ubiquitous digital mapping media presented to us as accurate and reliable.

“It can take time and effort to forget the prejudice induced by a powerful map,” writes Robert Macfarlane, “And few maps exercise a more distortive pressure upon the imagination than the road atlas...Considering the road atlas, an absence also becomes visible. The wild places are no longer marked. The fells, the caves, the tors, the woods, the river valleys and the marshes have all but

disappeared.” Macfarlane warns us to be aware that “maps organise information about landscape in a profoundly influential way. They carry out a triage of its aspects, selecting and ranking those aspects in an order of importance, and so they create forceful biases in the ways a landscape is perceived and treated.”

As a result of their omission from ‘official’ maps, the precarious, misunderstood and transitional places in our landscape: the liminal spaces, have fallen prey to exploitation by industry and governments. One of the measures by which we gauge the status of a landscape as liminal, observes Dr Les Roberts of Liverpool University, is its capacity to “invite and accommodate oblivion.” Referring to the wartime decoy sites of the Dee estuary, rigged by film makers to resemble Garston Docks in South Liverpool and so fool the Luftwaffe, he explains how they were transformed into ‘fields of deception’, “littoral spaces of performance and illusion.” Despite the obvious interest of such sites to historians and archaeologists, Roberts claims it is in fact “the performative attributes of these landscapes – their material and symbolic architectures of oblivion and memory; the heterotopic invocation of other worlds: other spaces and times – that makes them so compelling.”



You are Here
2016, Hand cut screen print on Kozo

It is a similar awareness of the inherent narrative sensibility in landscape that seizes Hill’s imagination. With the same curiosity that motivated Roberts in his navigation of the Dee estuary, “as a space of performance – a liminal zone of myth, ritual and practice,” Hill sets out to record the marginalised wetlands of her home county and beyond. It is the marginal nature of such places, says Roberts, that provides “the possibility of a strategic amnesia by which, paradoxically, an archaeology of deep memory may be performed.”

The ‘performance’ of deep memory is evident in Hill’s Mersey Estuary works. Her images entitled Harmonious Constituents and Temporal Wandering consider the shifting sandbanks and tidal nature of the Mersey at the point where its inhabitants historically crossed the river on foot or on horseback. Situating herself at this crossing place, just as the river dwellers before her, Hill is present within her images but invisible to us, lost in the vanishing point of the scanner as it turns on its 360 degree axis. The encompassing images she presents to us have been altered by stealth. Whilst read from digitally accurate visual topographies, Hill’s finished works represent subtle

reinterpretations of the scanner's point cloud data. Each of her landscapes is invested with the patina of time and distance and alloyed with memory. Her images also hint at the traces of journeys made by those who lived alongside the river and navigated its channels daily. Hill's prints and drawings are an amalgam of all of these facets and reveal something of "the latent energies that reside at these confluence points."

It is in this way that each of Hill's artworks represents a "deep map" of sorts: an intuitive, atmospheric and temporal rendering of a landscape vibrating with a history in which she has immersed herself and which she now 'remembers.' Hers is a "cartography that aspires to yield what a conventional map or guide cannot even come close to conveying."

Mercurial Process

***"Printmaking involves processes.
And where there are processes
there are always inventors."***

*Friedhard Kiekeben, The Contemporary Printmaker
(Write-Cross, Press, NY, 20013)*

Calm determination and a steady nerve are necessary attributes for an artist whose working processes hover at the threshold of alchemy and are fraught with unpredictability. At every stage of her work, disruption and failure are possible and Hill embraces this lack of control with rigor, discipline and the playfully open mind of an inventor.

In her recent bodies of work, Sensorium and Matrix of Movement, she uses portable 3-D terrestrial laser scanners as her means of data capture. These are heavy, valuable, precision instruments capable of infinitesimally accurate measurement and panoramic representation, more commonly used in the field of forensic analysis by architects, archaeologists and crime scene investigators. Sensitively balanced and highly susceptible to moisture, they must be kept level and dry.

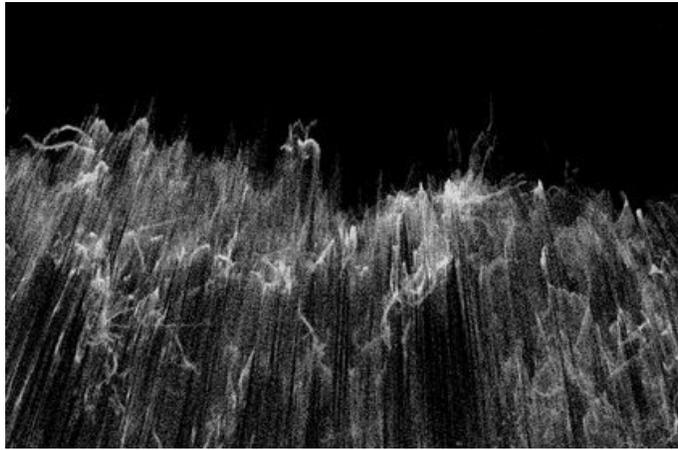
Determined to question the veracity of ultimately logical, digital 'facts,' however, Hill employs considerable ingenuity, physical effort and measured care to transport this bulky equipment into wet, spongy mossland and across soft, estuarine sand in order to collect her source data. Then, in deliberate defiance of the laws of mathematics and geometry, she wilfully 'misrepresents' and manipulates the scans in order to produce her intuitive, analogue drawings which more accurately represent her memories of those places as she experienced them - at that time, on that day, in that light and with that particular frame of mind.

Hill's work fuses art, invention and chance. Her materials-in-trade are intrinsically volatile: ductile metals and friable charcoal; photosensitive polymers borne on frail mylar membrane; inconsistent sources of ultraviolet light; corrosive chemicals; inks, oils and pigments of variable viscosity and 19th century printing presses prone to mechanical glitches. Any artwork she makes is not influenced by her alone but by unstable materials and environmental fluctuation. Making a print on a warm, dry day is an appreciably different endeavour than that of taking a print from the very same plate on a cool, damp day. Hill's meter wide etching plates from which she creates her monochrome landscape prints are vast by the standards of most etching plates. To ink each one, from which only a limited number of impressions can be taken before degradation occurs, and to pass it through the press, takes more than an hour of concentrated effort, stamina and considerable skill.

It is also true that her artwork is subject to the vagaries of other people's behaviours. A cleaning contractor using a mechanical floor polisher, oblivious to the weeks of work invested in one of Hill's monumental wall drawings, obliterated an important section of the piece in a matter of seconds.

Such is the precarious nature of Tracy Hill's work. Its intrinsic material vulnerability stands firmly as a metaphor for the threatened, fragile environments she strives to represent. Hill does not deal in

certainty; mercuriality is at the heart of the landscapes and the weather in which she walks and inherent in the conditions, materials and equipment with which she works.



Architectural fens
2018, 76 x 56cm Intaglio-type on Somerset

Wayfinding

*Knowledge is grown along the myriad paths
we take, it is an improvisatory movement-of 'going along'
or wayfaring- that is open-ended
and knows no final destination*

*Tim Ingold Footprints through the weather-world:
walking, breathing, knowing*

Tracy Hill's practice is about 'wayfinding', it represents her constant striving for a deeper understanding of the places she encounters through walking and her search for ways to communicate this understanding. Like Karen O'Rourke, she believes that "we begin by making sense of our surroundings so that we can go somewhere." By 'making sense' of the wetlands portrayed in her artwork, Hill's aim is to communicate their precarious existence and so engage cross-disciplinary conversation surrounding the environmental dangers posed by their reclamation. Hill is not only an artist but an activist, an advocate and a committed environmentalist. As she walks the common access routes to the mosses near her home, she stops to collect discarded plastic bags, bottles and other detritus, aware that this small act of public responsibility is having little impact.

Much is written about the "lurid debris" that pollutes our land and seas. Robert Macfarlane recalls

the scene from a day of beachcombing on Skye: “blue milk-bottle crates, pitted cubical chunks of furniture foam, cigarette butts, bottle caps, aerosol canisters and Tetrapak cartons, printed with faded lettering in dozens of languages. “Even here”, he laments, “on this remote Atlantic –facing bay, evidence of damage was unmistakable, pollution inescapable and the autonomy of the land under threat.”

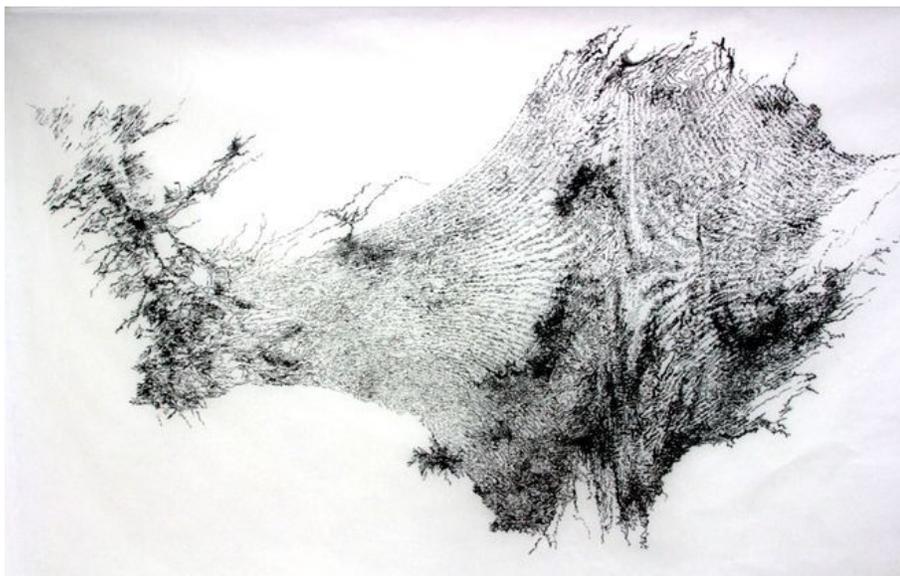
As we stand on the threshold of the Anthropocene Era and glimpse the scale of environmental damage wrought in the name of post-industrial ‘progress’, the enormity of what we face is not easy either to comprehend or to respond to.

Timothy Morton, our foremost ‘prophet’ of the Anthropocene, describes the dawning realisation of the horror we have helped to author as “ecognosis.” He suggests that the moment of ecognosis is akin to seeing ourselves implicated in an environmental film noir, trapped in the loop of a Möbius strip as “Deckard in Blade Runner when he learns that he might be the enemy he has been ordered to pursue.”

Morton further argues that our initial confrontation with the Anthropocene is precipitated through an encounter with the shocking reality of ‘hyperobjects’. This is the term he has coined to address concepts we tend to think of only in the abstract; phenomena so gigantic, so “massively distributed in time and space” that we can barely assimilate them, despite being caught up inside them. It is only through confronting hyperobjects: those ‘things’ that will outlast civilisation, such as global warming, Styrofoam and plutonium, says Morton, that we become aware that we have not only caused the Anthropocene but that we can’t control it and are now trapped by it.

In the face of questions too big to answer, artists do what they can to draw attention to uncomfortable truths. John Akomfrah’s recent six-screen film montage, *Purple*, represents his monumental response to the ‘hyperobject’ of global warming. Rather than present an alarmist eco-documentary, however, Akomfrah offers us a thoughtful and deeply affecting meditation on the inevitability of the Anthropocene; a sublime lament of profound melancholy and resigned sorrow. We see a similarly elegiac response to the unthinkable in Hill’s work.

In earlier research, Hill explored philosophies inherent in cultures pursuing a more immersive, intuitive connection with the earth and our paths within it. It has been demonstrated that nomadic peoples inhabiting spaces devoid of tangible visual signs develop a broader range of senses in order attune to the rhythms of their surroundings, such as the Inuit in Arctic snows and Polynesian navigators in the Pacific Ocean. In this way, the traveller becomes a “wayfinder,” a teller of stories; one who does not necessarily understand her surroundings through the co-ordinates on a map but by textures, atmospheres and histories. This, observes Tim Ingold, is mapping through knowing.



Cognitive Surveillance
2017, 160 x 110cm Charcoal on Koza

Knowing as opposed to mapping therefore is a method of wayfinding prevalent in non-western cultures. The 'songlines' of Aboriginal Australian people are a set of oral traditions in the form of ancestral songs which enable each succeeding generation to navigate the landscape. Rather than a tract of land enclosed within borders, "Aboriginal territories are an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through.' Each clan has a responsibility for its own totemic ancestor's "footprints" ... and through exchange, negotiation, singing and storytelling, the paths of the different families are linked."

When Aboriginal Australian people describe a place, they recount its myths as well as detailing its topography. Their map is their story and their story is their map

The ravage of global warming, brought about through a disconnection with our surroundings, calls for a way back to the elemental and a renewed awareness of the feel of the earth. Tracy Hill has learned to navigate the wetlands as a 'wayfinder.' Listening, watching and walking, she draws out stories kept in silence by the mosses. Always alive to their dangerous beauty, adapting her gait to accommodate their yielding, disingenuous terrain, her feet remember the paths she must not take as she searches for distant visual cues. Conscious of the imminent dangers threatening this fragile environment which has become her element, she responds with delicate and powerful artworks, soft with velvet ink, dancing with cotton grass but freighted with foreboding. Her map is their story and her story is their map.

Space and Time

*It is impossible to suppose...that men have derived
those forms of their intuition or perception
which we call space and time from
any conceivable source other than the environment
in which they have evolved for thousands of years*

Marie Bonaparte Time and the Unconscious

The edge lands walked by Tracy Hill are as timeless and as contradictory as her multi-faceted practice. These apparently featureless ancient landscapes, possessed of no obvious beauty, are revealed for us as compellingly spectral places in her commanding drawings and prints.

She is determined to continue her work of changing our perception of estuarine and wetland landscapes, long vilified as deviant, said to produce aberrant 'humour', psychosomatic states of melancholy and derided as 'anomalous' "in a classificatory order predicated on a hard and fast distinction between land and water, time and space."

The "timelessness of maps and the spacelessness of history," writes Rob Giblett, "do not lend themselves to the changing nature of wetlands. What is needed instead are temporal maps" that show a "spatial history... and quantum ecology that construes the natural environment, especially wetlands, on a space/time continuum."

Tracy Hill has responded by capturing both time and space in her wall drawings and intaglio prints. These are durational works of art that evolve slowly in the here and now but they speak of time past and suggest futuristic imaginings. Her approach to making work is simultaneously poetic and practical. With the insight of one who grew up surrounded by nautical maps, she walks hazardous

terrain not with the unalloyed caution of a navigator but with the curiosity of storyteller, a 'wayfinder', who sees that "every place holds within it memories of previous arrivals and departures, as well as expectations of how one may reach it, or reach other places from it." And just as her artwork maps a narrative continuum, so the landscapes in which she walks "enfold the passage of time: they are neither of the past, present or future but all three rolled into one."



'Maere':
2012, Cast refractory concrete panels
with screen print glazes,
30cm x 90cm each panel

Hill travels slowly on foot through mosslands to meditate on their primitive beauty, "to be reminded of the narrow limits of human perception." She walks, not to escape, but to enable her thinking, seeing and imagining. She chooses her paths with care, because they are more than simply a safe "means of traversing space" they are "also ways of feeling, being and knowing." "To make an impression," writes Robert Macfarlane, "is also to receive one, and the soles of our feet, shaped by the surfaces they press upon, are landscapes themselves..." Hill gives us some of this 'knowing' in her art work, reminding us what the world feels like, showing us that "place is a protean and fundamental aspect of what it is to be human."

Her practice presents a robust challenge to lingering establishment denigration of these landscapes as miasmal, poisonous, deathly black waters; as the environmental 'spider woman' to be 'conquered' and reclaimed in the name of capitalism. Instead, she has found a way to articulate a more holistic and positively feminised global view of wetlands as places of fascination rather than horror, as biologically rich and fertile terrain where life and death, light and dark co-exist as living black waters.

Hill's aim is for us to see the beauty in wilderness, to question our interpretation of official intelligence and to be aware that the digital data sources on which we increasingly rely are not beyond corruption. When her work is done, when she collects her charcoal remnants from the floor, hangs her prints and withdraws from the gallery, what remains are 'hyperobjects': vast wall drawings which can only be apprehended gradually, dense prints which reveal their meanings slowly. She leaves us with her immersive, unfathomable landscapes which encapsulate the frailty of our stressed physical environment and confront us with our culpability in the malevolent chain of events now set in motion through our relentless consumerism, with consequences so immense we can perceive them only in the abstract.

In a fast-paced world where speed is expected and extolled, Tracy Hill's anachronistic practice

persuades us to think in geological time. Using topographical information generated by data systems at the vanguard of digital technology combined with working methods rooted deeply in the past, she renders ancient, dead and dying wetlands in vital and affective works of contemporary art. She filters the indisputable through the fine mesh of intuition and offers us a new way of looking at things we have forgotten to see.

Deborah Stevenson

Deborah Stevenson is a writer and artist based at the University of Central Lancashire. She is concerned with the interconnectedness of place, memory and narrative. As a PhD student, the focus of her research is the Dock Road area of Liverpool with its architecturally disparate hinterland of working class dwellings and grand mercantile and civic buildings.

deb@debstevenson.co.uk

 <http://waterloolandcity.co.uk>

¹ Ingold, T (2000) *The Perception of the Environment Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill*, London, Routledge p. 148 <http://nomadicartsfestival.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/the-perception-of-the-environment.pdf>

² Solnit, R. (2014). *Wanderlust*. London: Granta, p.71.

³ See Lancashire Wildlife Trust <https://www.lancswt.org.uk/about-our-mosslands> accessed 9.10.2017

See <https://www.wigan.gov.uk/Docs/PDF/Resident/Planning-and-Building-Control/Mossland.pdf> accessed 9.10.2017

⁵ https://archive.org/details/gri_33125010870554 accessed 9.1.2018

⁶ Robert Macfarlane

⁷ Solnit, R (2014) p5

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Lee Attwater, Political strategist to George Bush Snr.

- ¹⁰ Farley, P. and Symmons Roberts, K. (2014) *Fageians: Journeys into England's true wilderness*, London, Vintage, p.10
- ¹¹ Giblett, R. (1996) *Postmodern Wetlands Culture, History, Ecology*, Edinburgh University Press
- ¹² Dickens, C (2007) *Great Expectations*, Wordsworth Classics
- ¹³ Forester, C.S. (1935) *The African Queen USA*, Little Brown and Company
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p.81
- ¹⁵ Ibid
- ¹⁶ Giblett, R. (1996) pp. 3-4
- ¹⁷ Ibid p.xi
- ¹⁸ Ibid
- ¹⁹ Ibid
- ²⁰ Ibid, p.236 quoting Thoreau, H.D. (1982) *The Portable Thoreau* (ed. C. Bode), New York: Penguin
- ²¹ See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14613140>; <http://www.salfordstar.com/article.asp?id=3531>; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/the-biggest-company-youve-never-heard-of-lifting-the-lid-on-peel-group-the-property-firm-owned-by-8890201.html>
- ²² See the research of Dr Les Roberts of Liverpool University, especially see: http://www.liminoids.com/2012%20Roberts_TheSandsofDee.pdf accessed 8.1.2018
- ²³ See: <https://www.wigan.gov.uk/Council/Strategies-Plans-and-Policies/Planning/Local-plan/Background/Key-Local-Studies/WiganLandscapeCharacterAssessment.aspx> accessed 19.1.2018
- ²⁴ See: Stephanie Miles, Heath Malcolm, Gwen Buys, Janet Moxley (30th May 2014) *Emissions and Removals of Greenhouse Gases from Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: 1990-2012* Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, Bush Estate, Penicuik, Midlothian, EH26 0QB lulucf@ceh.ac.uk; See: Wetlands, Carbon and Climate Change Landscape Ecol DOI 10.1007/s10980-012-9758-8
See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-wetlands/wetlands-could-unleash-carbon-bomb-idUSN1745905120080720> accessed 7.1.2018
- ²⁵ See Morton, T. (2010) *The Ecological Thought*, Harvard University Press, p. 130
- ²⁶ See: <https://www.wigan.gov.uk/Council/Strategies-Plans-and-Policies/Planning/Local-plan/Background/Key-Local-Studies/WiganLandscapeCharacterAssessment.aspx> accessed 19.1.2018
- ²⁷ Macfarlane, R. (2007) *The Wild Places*, Granta Books, p. 158

© 2021