

# THE SYNTHETIC LANDSCAPE

Ian Chamberlain

In the following paper *'The Synthetic Landscape,'* I will highlight and examine some of the core values at the heart of my practice. These will include my approaches to making, the themes and concepts I explore, and most importantly how I see these connections.

I will overview some of my past works and focus on three bodies of work that I see as pivotal in the development of my practice, bringing together process and core conceptual concerns.

## 1. FORT I

My past works reference manmade technology and architectural forms. Many of the subjects I have recorded were considered at the forefront of technology during their lifetime, for example, the Maunsell Sea Forts in the Thames Estuary and the Orford Ness Military testing site in Suffolk. However, many are now defunct or superseded or have been reconfigured for different uses. These now lie abandoned, preserved as stark reminders of this past, as lonely structures in the landscape....

Seeing these structures and how architecture and redundant technologies can act as metaphors for a past fascinates me and has been the focus of earlier works. The function and purpose of a lot of my subject matter are generally unknown to the wider public. The work then acts as an introduction to these locations and their histories.

During the making and researching of this work, I became interested in concepts around hauntology, especially the writing of Mark Fischer and how he relates *hauntology* to elements of popular culture including art, music and film.

*Hauntology* covers a range of ideas referring to the return or persistence of elements from the social or cultural past. The concept asks people to consider how "spectres" of alternative futures influence current and historical discourse. For me, this related directly to the forms I was capturing and how these architectural structures may be seen as

a metaphor to highlight debates around current themes and future concerns.

I begin many works by gaining first-hand experience and gathering primary research material during field visits to locations where these structures exist. When researching, I use a range of research methods, including drawing, photography, video and sound. This mix of media and process allows me to record as many physical and figurative references as possible, alongside capturing more elemental and emotive qualities of the wider environment.

I find that drawing underpins all my work in many ways, from entirely drawing-based works, both on

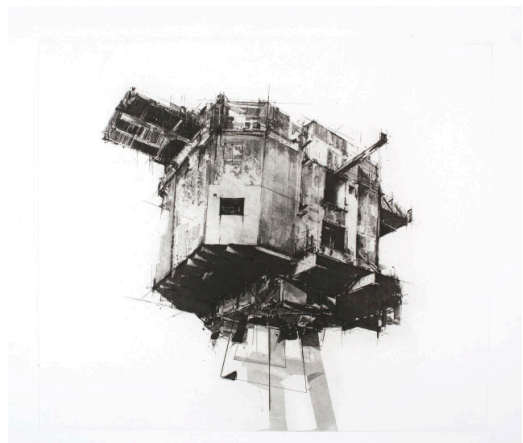


Figure 1

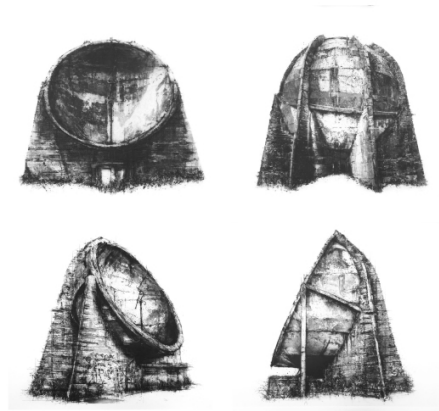


Figure 2

### Figure Titles and Information

Figure 1: Fort I, (2013) Etching, Plate Size 48cm x 56cm  
 Figure 2: Mirror Series I, II, III and IV (2015-16) Etching, Plate Size 47cm x 53cm

paper and for print, to sketching for photographic and video works. I see drawing, then, as becoming incorporated into the expanded fields of printmaking and photography, where re-engaging with material and process combines with the drawn mark. In this way, drawing acts as a direct process into print, allowing the work to evolve organically, further informed by memory, chance and abstraction.

Drawing gives the framework, but the final print questions the need for a topographical reference and instead embraces a more intuitive approach. The image starts to evolve, becoming a composite of visual fact and my artistic response. Through geographical and emotional distance, the passing of time influences what we remember about the places we visit. It allows more abstract ideas to surface, creating autonomy and uniqueness within the work.

This notion of preservation and conservation allows me to consider the work as a graphic historical record. By recording these structures, I have started to highlight their historical, cultural and social impact by documenting the architectural remains of human activity, which brings me to the ideas around hauntology.

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I would like now to discuss three bodies of work, in particular The Mirror Series, Shifting Sands and my new Shelter works, which have fed into and informed each other over the last ten years. Over this period, I feel I have developed a more interdisciplinary approach, allowing me to explore particular themes around defence, boundaries and shelter, generating a stronger political edge and social awareness of my practice.

I find this emphasis in this quote by Celeste Olalquiaga:

“Architecture is treated as the material support to history.”  
(Olalquiaga, Celeste, 2019, Remains of the fray, Art Forum)

## 2. MIRROR SERIES – THE SOUND MIRRORS

The first body of work I will discuss is my Mirror Series, based on the sound mirrors that were built on the south and northeast coasts of England between 1916 and the 1930s. The sound mirrors were part of Britain’s national defence strategy, designed to pick up the sound of approaching enemy aircraft by focusing the noise of aircraft engines onto a microphone that was amplified by the dish. I specifically concentrated on the Denge location in Kent on the southern coast of England.

The sound mirrors were at the forefront of technological advancement for their time in a pre-digital age, but the development of technology, including the speed of aircraft, and their lack of



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

### Figure Titles and Information

Figure 3: Shifting Sands ( 2018) Etching Plate Size 47cm x 73cm

Figure 4: Synthetic Landscape Series, I, II, III, IV, V and VI. ( 2022) Photopolymer Intaglio, Plate Size 21cm x 25cm

Figure 5: Synthetic Landscape II (Projection)

purpose and function have left them behind. They have become remnants from a previous time, a redundant architectural reminder of a defensive age.

Interestingly, this sense of defence, surveillance and concern around possible military aggression is gaining increased prominence and relevance in the current political landscape in Eastern Europe.

Visiting the site at Denge, I began with initial research drawings and first-hand references, recording and attempting to understand the form, composition and surface qualities of the mirror structures.

These initial drawings remain evident in the etchings, continually changing hierarchy and emphasis. The role and value of drawing are integral to both the making and the development of the work, allowing me to adapt the image as I think through and evolve ideas.

Taking these drawings into the intaglio etching process offers a unique means of working. Inherent to etching is the intervention on the surface and the sculptural physicality of the process, layering and building up information through cyclical reapplications of grounds, drawing, etching, burnishing and drypoint. This helps me use the potential for expression found within the drawing and printmaking process.

### **3. SHIFTING SANDS – THE ATLANTIC WALL**

The next body of work is entitled Shifting Sands and is based on the remains of the Atlantic Wall. The Atlantic Wall was a system of coastal fortifications built by Nazi Germany in World War II, 1942 – 1944, along the coast of Western Europe, stretching over 6000 miles.

The Atlantic Wall body of work explores themes of boundaries and frontiers, offering contemporary relevance and a symbolic connection with current social and political debates around visible and invisible barriers. The structures are a contradiction of their functional redundancy and their political legacy, which still haunts us today. Some of these brutalist structures remain. Originally built to defend and create a boundary, they now remain isolated architectural symbols of permanence slipping into failure and decay and becoming a visual metaphor for the shifting political, social and environmental landscape.

They are an architectural reminder of failure.

During site visits to the locations of these structures, I came across this poem by Shelley, which resonated with me as I began working and researching.

*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Ozymandias, Percy Shelley, 1818

The locations in France and Denmark evoke a sense of the sublime, of the lonely and colossal wrecks that Shelley mentions, which I aimed to bring into this work, pulling these neglected spaces back into the cultural imagination.

Through onsite observation, I started to record these structures through drawing, video and rubbings. The combination of photography, printmaking and the continuation of the drawing element is an integral part of my process.

Wooden textures are still visibly evident in the concrete of the bunkers. The wooden forms used to cast the concrete sections of the bunkers are now imprinted and fossilised into the very being of the structures. I have incorporated these wooden textures into the etchings, allowing the subject matter to inform the materials used to record it.

I see a direct correlation between the continual elemental erosion of the bunkers and the erosion of the etched copper surface used to make the printed images. Here, time is inherent in the making of the work, slowly layering and etching away the surface as the image builds. The subject matter then becomes embedded in the process used to record it, the material values of the process becoming engrained within the concept.

The notion of time passing greatly influences the structures I record and plays an important role in the decisions I make when making work through particular processes. Drawing in pencil, etching or photography can all evoke time in the final image in different ways and at different speeds. The passing of time influences what I remember about these places I visited, and it becomes a fine balance in the work between the spontaneity and immediacy of the original drawn marks and sketches and the lengthier, methodical approach of the printmaking process.

In the studio, the etching plate is continually reworked, expanding on the idea of permanence and impermanence. Taking an immediate response – a quick drawing or a photograph – and building from it into something slower and more considered, which draws a creative parallel with the way one's immediate response whilst in a place is

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different to the thoughts and feelings that emerge later.

The two bodies of work I have discussed have been key in laying the groundwork for my current body of work, titled The Synthetic Landscape, which explores the theme of shelter.

#### **4. SYNTHETIC LANDSCAPE - SHELTER SERIES**

Throughout the pandemic and during lockdown periods, I started to research and record a range of shelter structures, through primary research and using online referencing. I began to consider mankind's basic need for shelter from the elements, especially in times of crisis. Over the last few years, we have seen an increase in migrants fleeing political crises and searching for new homes or places to feel safe. The structures I previously looked at had certain national political agendas for defence, whereas these shelters are more about personal defence and the individual need for protection.

I researched a broad range of shelters highlighting a diverse range of repetitive shapes, forms and materials used, such as wood, straw, metal, straw, fabric and found materials.

In beginning this work, I isolated each structure in composition to take it out of its original context or environment. Some are in the process of being made, the skeleton and framework of the structure laid bare heightening the sense of vulnerability and openness to the elements. A broad range of structures was recorded, highlighting a range of repetitive shapes and forms where form and function were considered over aesthetic value.

At this time, I was trying to bring looseness and energy into my existing way of working and was interested in developing new mechanisms and approaches to do so.

Drawings were made and then photographed using the wet plate collodion process.

The negative glass plates are then overlaid and scanned, and sections of the image become covered or revealed, enhancing figurative elements and abstracting sections. This creates abstract imagery that gives a sense of transition and a state of flux in their creation. This transience and state of change offer a duality in that the structures are made for protection but are also temporary and will disappear.

Coming from a print and drawing context, I wanted to explore the wet plate collodion process to embrace its inherent material qualities as part of my interdisciplinary practice. The collodions are then drawn and scanned, retaining the mistakes and flaws in the developing

process, celebrating and bringing forward these incidental marks and making the technical glitches more visible and embedded in the work. Like the etching process, this creates autonomy and uniqueness in the work, embracing the crafted and handmade. The primacy of looking and the progressive withdrawal from topographical detail allow abstraction to play more of a role. The visual accuracy of photography has given way to something new and more personal.

A digital scan image is then taken back into the print workshop to create photopolymer etching plates, allowing the intaglio print process to resolve and synthesise the layers of information, creating new compositions through layering, collaging and material ink surface.

A correlation has become clear between my past use of etching to discuss contemporary themes and the use of a historic analogue photographic process such as wet plate collodion to discuss related themes around isolation and boundaries. This relates to the influence of hauntology and looking to past processes, integrating both conceptual ideas and process qualities.

## **5. SYNTHETIC LANDSCAPE II PROJECTION**

The scale of this work is smaller in comparison to previous works, but more recently I have explored a way to bring these images to almost life-size through projection. Having digital images of the prints means I can put them into different kinds of external spaces, projecting onto surfaces of walls. Varying surface qualities for the projection not only alters the clarity of the image but informs the concept and context of the work. Projections offer the opportunity and flexibility to explore scale and immersion and relate to them as more temporary and mass-disseminated objects for human use.

I am currently working with the charity ShelterBox, an international disaster relief charity providing emergency shelter in areas such as Ukraine, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan. I was approached by ShelterBox to use this body of work as a vehicle to highlight the message of the charity and to create a new working relationship where talks and exhibitions are presented to major sponsors and corporate partners in the fields of architecture, construction and engineering. For them, the work can reach new audiences, bring greater awareness and diversify the publicity and awareness of the work they are undertaking in disaster zones around the world.

As I look back at these three bodies of work, I see the nature of interdisciplinarity becoming increasingly important. As an artist, the way I can record and emphasise subject matter through various making processes can bring awareness to overlooked structures of the past in new ways.

I feel that although boundaries of each process become blurred,

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overlapping and informing new lines of enquiry for new original ideas and concepts to be explored, there is still a moment for each to offer its unique stance, with drawing, etching and wet plate collodion forming part of an ongoing methodology.

To be continued...

## **AUTHOR**

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Ian Chamberlain's practice reinterprets manmade structures as monuments placed within the landscape acting as architectural metaphors of past and current technological achievements. These have included structures in Industry, Science and the Military.

Ian is interested in the use of drawing and traditional Print process being used to record subject matter that is generally at the cutting edge of technology for its time.

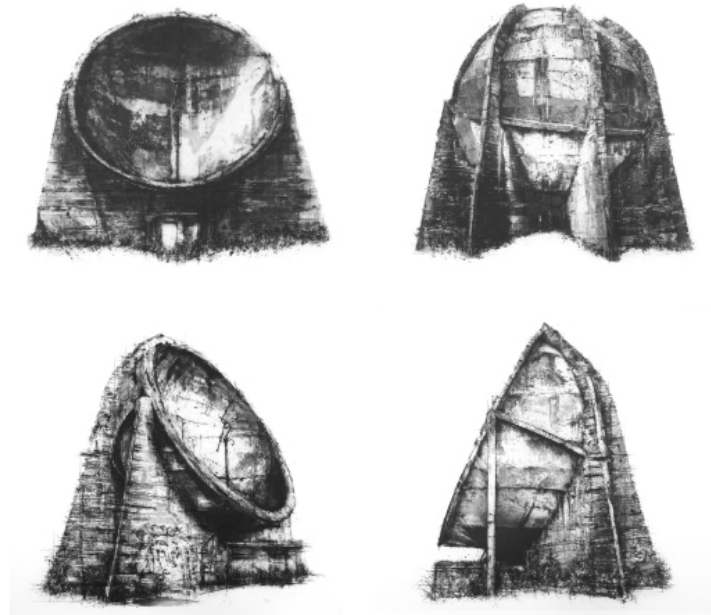
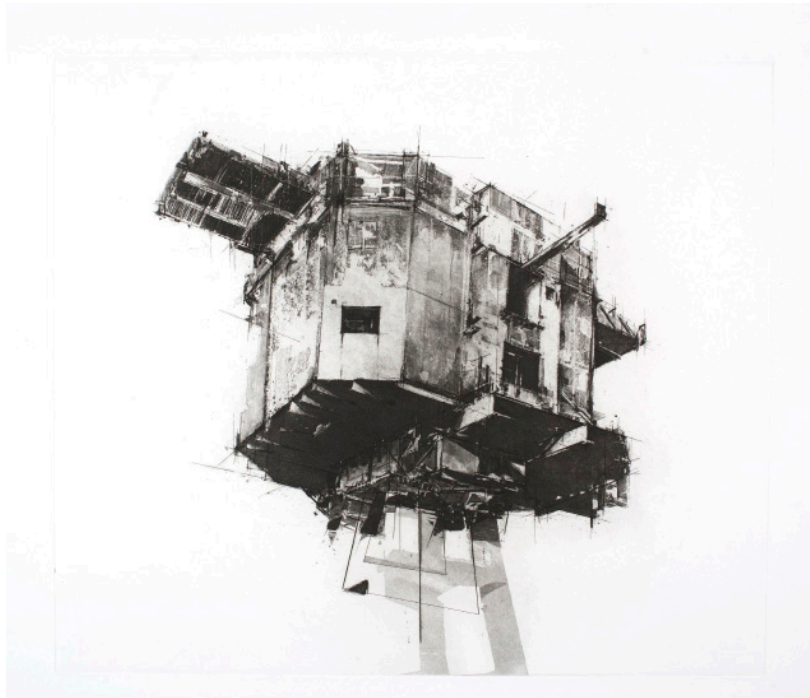
The etchings become an extension of his drawing allowing him to record the location through the interlinking processes of drawing, photography and printmaking.

He has exhibited extensively Nationally and Internationally and his work is held in several International permanent collections including the Ashmolean Museum, The Tate, Pallant House Gallery and The V&A. He has also been shortlisted for several Internationally recognized Art prizes including The Jerwood Drawing Prize, The John Ruskin Drawing prize, The Derwent Drawing Prize, The Aesthetica Art Prize and the Evelyn Williams award.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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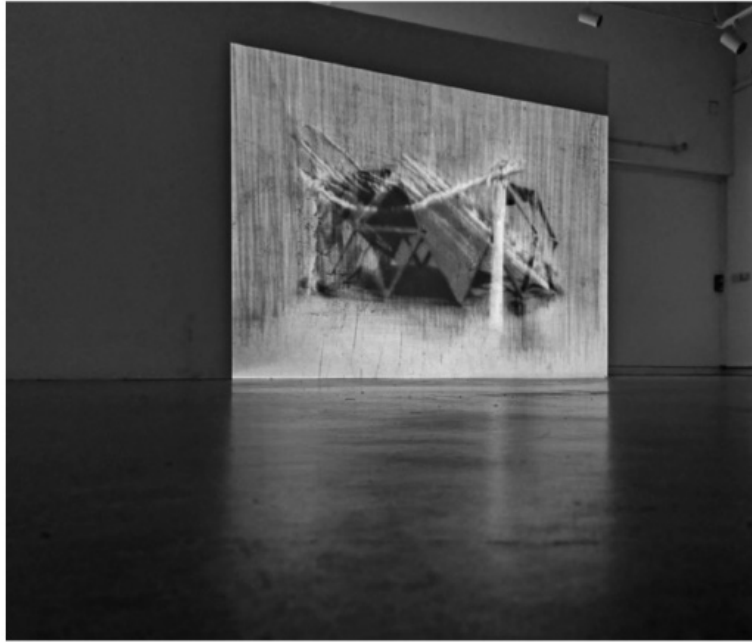




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Figure 5: Synthetic Landscape II (Projection)