

# DUST FOREST: MATERIAL ECOLOGIES AND PAPER AS TERTIARY MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY PRINTMAKING

Emilia Telese

## INTRODUCTION

*Dust Forest* and *Suite for an Imaginary Forest* are a body of work exhibited on 3 October 2025 on the fifth floor of the Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, London. The result of an ongoing collaboration between artist Dr Emilia Telese and environmental scientist Dr Pavla Dagsson-Waldhauserová, the works investigate Iceland's desert ecosystems, where dust - formed by glacial erosion and historical deforestation—travels thousands of kilometres each year. The work uses Icelandic dust, pigment, and paper as active agents, translating geological and atmospheric processes into print.

## BACKGROUND

Being a descendant of papermakers and an intaglio printmaker, I have had a longstanding interest in paper, as a vessel for traces of meaning. In parallel, as a conceptual artist with a history of installation and performance making use of personal history, I have come to use printmaking as a means of ecological attunement and embodied memory, where print is an interface between scientific observation and poetic perception.

After moving to Iceland in 2019 following 25 years in the UK, direct experience of climate change led me to a renewed focus on environmental issues, at first with a commitment to use found materials, such as recycled aluminium and packaging, then with performance and printmaking hybrid pieces (*Luna Rossa*, 2023, *Bergmál*, 2024, *Foreign Object*, 2024) exploring the symbology of ink, Icelandic salt and alien plant species. Trained in Florence in XVI Century painting techniques, I often incorporate these in my work through the use of mineral and organic pigments. Sustained research into local pigment and colours in Iceland then led me in 2024 to start an ongoing collaboration with Dr Dagsson-Waldhauserová, a pioneer scholar in High Latitude Dust (HLD) at the Agricultural University of Iceland and the University of Life Sciences in Prague, Czech Republic.

My collaboration with Dr Dagsson-Waldhauserová began with *Breathing Space*, a series of 40 monotypes on etching paper, using time-tracked high latitude dust as pigment to narrate the scientist's life and research in isolation on the Dyngjúsandur Dust Hotspot, a location in the Icelandic Highlands that is uninhabitable for humans. Her experience of how dust affected her life and health deeply resonated with me, constituting the genesis of the *Breathing Space* monotypes, which were presented and exhibited at the 2025 High Latitude Dust Conference at the Agricultural University of Iceland together with Dr Dagsson-Waldhauserová and later selected for the Woolwich Contemporary Print Fair 2025.

Iceland's Arctic desert, the largest in Europe, is the



Figure 1

### Figure Titles and Information

Fig 1. Emilia Telese, *Dust Forest* installation, dimensions variable, 2025. Monotype, collagraph and engraving on twelve 1m x 2m Wenzhou paper scrolls, pigment and dust from the Dyngjúsandur dust hotspot, Iceland. Exhibited at the South Bank Centre, London

result of human intervention and geological time. When Norse settlers arrived in the ninth century, native birch forests (*B. Pubescens*) were cleared for grazing, shipbuilding and fuel. Over centuries, volcanic activity, glacial movement and erosion stripped the topsoil, creating vast sandy plains. Arnalds et al (2016) and Dagsson-Waldhauserová and Meinander (2020) note that this area now produces more than 135 dust storms each year, sending fine volcanic and earth particles thousands of kilometres across the Arctic and mainland Europe. These storms transport not only matter, but also the memory of landscape itself—fragments of an ecology that once was, carried forward in particulate form. In her introduction to *Dust Forest*, she further observes:

*Glaciers once covered nearly all of Iceland, but beneath them lies a hidden rainforest—revealed only due to extreme melting. This ancient forest resembled the rainforests found today on the west coast of the United States. Massive tree trunks can still be found buried in the land. The correct sequence is this: first, Iceland was covered by forest, then glaciers, and finally, deserts—mainly as a result of human activity. Going further back in time, Iceland was once a sea floor that rose above the surface through volcanic activity. [...] Iceland has seven dust hot spots from where the majority of dust is uplifted during dust storms. The largest dust hot spot, Dyngjusandur, is in the Northeast Iceland, often called 'The Bodele\* of the North\*'. Dyngjusandur is at the northern tip of Vatnajökull Glacier, covered partly by the Holuhraun lava 2014-2015, and surrounded by the Askja stratovolcano. This area can be only accessed during three months in summer due to harsh weather conditions. It is the same place where NASA astronauts were trained for the Apollo space mission in 1965 or for the International Space Station visit in 2021. Dyngjusandur dust is very fine, it is of volcanic origin and reworked by glacial processes.*

Working alongside Dr Dagsson-Waldhauserová, I utilized dust samples she collected over different times and dust sites in Iceland, divided by location and sampling year. In these, volcanic glass, basalt, ash and glacial sediment intertwined. I began to think of this dust as a chronicle of transformation, where each grain functions as a record of erosion, melting and non-linear time.

As an artist, I have consistently resisted a didactic approach that risks overexplaining or illustrating the subjects I explore, particularly when engaging with scientific knowledge. Rather than translating scientific data into visual form, I seek an autonomy of practice in which the work stands independently from the issues that inspire it. In this I refer to Sontag (1966)'s warning call against interpretive overreach replacing embodied experience with explanation, as well as Rancière's (2009) critique of pedagogical art, in which over-explanation is understood as a form of control, fixing artistic meaning in advance, and implying a mistrust of audiences by way of their infantilisation. Tension between form and meaning cannot be resolved into message: in this sense, Adorno (1997) argues that the critical potential of art lies precisely in its refusal to illustrate concepts directly. Morton (2007) further maintains that ecological aesthetics need not rely on overt moral instruction. Yet



Figure 2



Figure 3

\*The Bodele depression is the most active dust source in the Sahara desert

Fig 2. Sample vials with dust, and, Fig 3. Different desert dust samples collected by Dr Dagsson Waldhauserova, Landbunaðarháskóli Íslands / Agricultural University of Iceland

the desire to eschew over-explanation does not exclude the need to tell the stories and thought processes that led me to make particular artworks, especially when their genesis is multi-layered in meaning and process. It is therefore in this spirit that I approach my account of this body of work.

## DUST FOREST AND SUITE FOR AN IMAGINARY FOREST

With *Dust Forest* and *Suite For An Imaginary Forest* after *Breathing Space*, I wanted to understand what lies beneath the surface of things, in a literal and metaphorical way. Iceland's vast and uninhabitable desert, unexpected in the popular perception of the country with its moss, snow and majestic waterfalls, became a starting point. Beneath the Arctic desert and volcanic dust lie the remains of ancient rainforests, preserved for millennia: the idea that a forest could become a desert, and that a desert might still contain the memory of a forest, led me to imagine making work where concentric layers of meaning could be unpeeled and dissected, almost counted like the rings inside a tree trunk, revealing human and environmental epochs.

From January to August 2025, I prepared the modular elements of the *Dust Forest* and *Suite* collagraph matrixes, and experimented with binders that could deposit dust, but also with the use of time and coalescence for some of the layers, in a time-intensive process that required each monotype to stand for several weeks in order for the materials to cure and meld together. The entire process was painstakingly carried over eight months, often requiring substantial physical effort, maintaining a performative element typical of my work, but which rather than being visible, became implied.

By September 2025, *Dust Forest* (2025) consisted of twelve two metre long monotypes with engraving and collagraph elements, depicting Icelandic birch, *Betula Pubescens*, on translucent, 30gsm Wenzhou Chinese paper, hand-burnished using a Japanese baren. The delicate paper, itself derived from trees, allowed dust to permeate its fiber, with the twelve pieces creating a "forest" of suspended prints that viewers could walk through. This intentional fragility mirrors Iceland's vulnerable landscape, shaped by human intervention and contemporary climate shifts. *Dust Forest's* monumentality contrasted with its delicate material: because of the lightness of the Wenzhou paper, any audience movement generated rustling and swinging movement in the work, light changes and sound, with the pigment texture tangibly and visibly apparent when witnessed close-up. In *Dust Forest*, pigment is a presence, recalling Mark Rothko's (2004, posthumous) insistence that colour carries emotional and spiritual weight, and that standing before it can represent a quasi-religious encounter, an experience of stillness and communion.

Made together with *Dust Forest*, *Suite for an Imaginary Forest* (2025) comprised six intaglio collagraph monoprints —*Prelude, Allegro, Adagio, Andante, Minuetto* and *Presto*—on heavy, 650gsm 100% cotton paper using engraving, collagraph and monotype techniques, each



Figure 4



Figure 5

Fig 4. Emilia Telese making *Dust Forest*, Reykjavík, 2025  
 Fig 5. Emilia Telese making *Suite For An Imaginary Forest*, Reykjavík, 2025

corresponding to a musical tempo and organized in the same way a symphonic composition unfolds, and each conceptually depicting the trees that once formed the dust the prints are made of. While *Dust Forest* is light and translucent, *Suite* is grounded and dense, printed on an intaglio press with mineral pigment, earth from glaciers as well as Arctic desert dust, all elements left to coalesce on the surface like sedimentary layers. Pressure leaves visible traces: matrix edges, embedded dust particles and compressed fibres, carrying the physical evidence of its making, like a record of accumulated contact over time. Pigments I used also included materials such as lapis lazuli and malachite, traditionally used in Italian Renaissance works. Their use represented evolving continuity with my previous works, as well as an ongoing interest in contrasts: the precious with the humble, the translucent with the heavy, the symbolic with the mundane. For *Suite* I used the same modular matrixes I constructed for *Dust Forest*, joining the two works visually and conceptually, but in *Suite* I allowed them to be progressively destroyed by the intaglio press, the matrixes being too fragile to withstand continuous pressure. *The Suite* that the title refers to chronicles the disintegration of the matrixes, both collagraph and engravings, with each subsequent print progressively showing them in a state of disappearing. A symbolic act, the disintegration of the matrix intentionally places the piece in a state of loss.

During installation at the Southbank Centre, the installed works were accompanied by a minimalist soundtrack composed by British composer Scanner, whom I have previously collaborated with. Music acted as a cohesive force between the two pieces, allowing them to coexist in the exhibiting space. The natural light of the Southbank Centre's French doors allowed for the work to benefit from the effect of the sun over it, creating reflections and natural shadows.

In *Dust Forest* as well as *Suite*, time acts as an active material binder. Processes were allowed to unfold over days or weeks, with layers drying at different rates and interacting unpredictably: at times pigment bled through the paper, at others dust mottled and broke the surface, like the cyclical, nonlinear temporality of natural systems. Time, and the printing press, in this sense participate in the making, as agents of natural forces: chance, dust migration, evaporation, oxidation. Materials became gatherings of the world, always in a state of becoming (Ingold, 2013): allowing them to behave according to their own tendencies acknowledged artmaking as an evolving conversation.

## PAPER AS TERTIARY MEMORY

As a child, I grew up in close proximity to paper through my grandmother's, later my father's family-run paper firm in Italy. Much of my early familiarity with this material came through use and handling: playing near it, learning to distinguish between weights and formats, and discovering how different papers responded to drawing and touch from an early age. Although my great-grandfather's Dipino Paper Mills in Amalfi had already closed by the time I was born and moved production to Naples, stories of traditional carta bambagina



Figure 6



Figure 7

Fig 6. Emilia Telese, Suite For An Imaginary Forest 4 -Andante, 70x44cm, part of Suite For An Imaginary Forest Installation, 2025

Fig 7. Emilia Telese, Dust Forest installation, South Bank Centre

production—rag collecting, bleaching, beating and pulp formation using a Hollander machine, and later production of packaging papers and boxes— were passed down informally through stories and old lithographs in my family. When I became a practising artist, my family heritage later developed into a sustained interest in papermaking and printmaking, where material, labour and time remain central to my work. Amalfi's papermaking tradition is rooted in the XIII Century, situated in many water-powered mills in the Valle Dei Mulini by Amalfi's Canneto river, which produced charta bambagina. The technique, thought to have arrived via commercial exchange with the Arab world, allowed European makers to transform linen, cotton and hemp rags into pulp and paper sheets, through hydraulically driven hammers and moulds. Most mills fell into decline with industrialisation and were destroyed by mid-20th century flooding, with only one remaining mill operating today, and another turned into the Museo Della Carta (Museum of Paper) in Amalfi (Cartiera Amatruda, 2020). The nature of Amalfi paper, the handmade processes and the recycling of rag-based fibres gathered from former clothes, highlight the nature of paper as a cultural substance, capable of carrying cultural weight. If we consider the emotional quality of personal items such as clothes, bedsheets, or any other items for human use that ended up being transformed into rag paper, such meaning is apparent. But can the memory of clothes worn by a beloved, departed relative, or heirloom bedsheets passed down from mother to daughter endure as residues of emotional meaning after they are transformed into other materials?



Figure 8

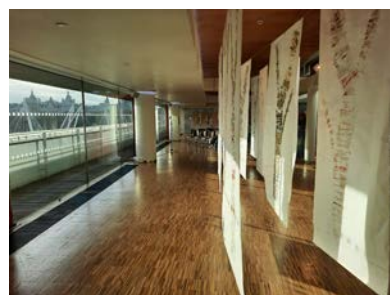


Figure 9

Memory is formed through action, but also with objects that come into our life and end up representing entire eras in our personal history, imbuing themselves with meaning: an old toy, a beloved jumper, anything that comes to acquire a different nature as an aide-memoire (Zijlema, 2018). This idea of an extended mind can run across our body and the external world around us (Clark & Chalmers, 1998). So if paper can represent transfigured memory, as an artistic or theoretical intention this understanding aligns it with the concept of tertiary memory described by Bernard Stiegler (1998), in which forms of memory are externalised into technical supports that persist beyond the human body. Paper holds traces of geological and human time in a material form. Conversely, dust too carries memory in the form of mineral, organic and historical residue across space, adding to paper's externalised remembrance, and embedding landscape memory inside it.

In the context of my practice research, I have often made use of this animistic approach and used the forest as a metaphor within it, for example in the performance and video installation *Sleepwalking* (2002) exhibited at the New Forest Pavilion, one of the collateral events of the 2005 Venice Biennale. In the piece, I reconstructed my father's journey to the New Forest shortly before his death, while affected by a terminal illness whose side effects included narcolepsy. During the course of a month in 2002, I retraced his steps in the forest and slept in the same places he did, whilst wearing his clothes. In another forest themed piece, *Life Circle* (2006), exhibited at the Arti Nel Bosco Festival in the

rural town of Chions in the Italian region of Friuli, I gathered objects of personal significance from people living in this quickly depopulating area. In both cases, I made use of personal objects and clothes as embodiments of significance, historical emblems or artifacts, where the soul of their wearer/user was transfigured in its own echo, or material vitality (Bennett, 2020).

From a scientific point of view, paper has long functioned as an active epistemic tool. Litmus paper, filtration membranes, chromatography, lab notebooks, all act as knowledge carriers to stabilise complex processes into a transportable form through networks of materials and mediations (Latour, 1987). Comparably, *Dust Forest* and *Suite For An Imaginary Forest* render the slow, often invisible environmental processes of erosion and deposition into perceptible traces, mediated in the artist's studio as experimental spaces. In this way, paper can be thought of as an active participant in the creative process. Wenzhou paper fibres actively draw ink and dust through capillary action, like dust moves across continents. Thick cotton paper responds to the printing press's pressure by compressing pigments and debris into its own surface. Each represents a facet of meaning: the airborne, fragile time of dust and wind, and the slow time of earth's sedimentation. Tertiary memory, therefore, defines the paper in my work like a geological era, where printing becomes the act of pressing the memory of one material into another, producing a record of contact that endures beyond the act itself.

## CONCLUSION

*Dust Forest* and *Suite For An Imaginary Forest* invite attention to fragility within an imaginary ecology, in which matter and memory coexist. The viewer walking among the works becomes part of this ecology, displacing volumes, altering light and reflection. The fragility of Wenzhou paper and the disintegration of matrix are in tension with the vast ecosystems they references, of glaciers, forests and human coexistence.

Tension between the intimate and the immense lies at the core of my practice, together with questions about those timescales that far exceed human experience. In dust and paper, I explore the role of printmaking as a way to hold the traces of what is disappearing as well as imagining what might yet return. Materials have a memory, and can represent memories themselves, inviting us to remember differently, embracing complexity layers and entanglement. (Haraway, 2016; Kagan, 2011). In this context, the artist's studio operates as an open experimental system, whose outcomes emerge through process and material behaviour study, where meaning arises through interaction (Rheinberger, 1997).

Central to my artistic vision is also the need to manifest an intimacy of emotion, through autobiography and personal response, as is evident in the legacy of my work: even when responding to scientific research, it engages with it materially, where embodiment and partiality are



Figure 10

Fig 10. Dr Telese (left) and Dr Dagsson Wald-Hauserová (right) at Breathing Space presentation, International High Latitude Dust Conference 2025, Landbunaðarháskóli Íslands / Agricultural University of Iceland

central. (Haraway, 1988)

The convergence of scientific and artistic approaches in the body of work examined in this paper centres on the idea of the archive. In geological terms, dust and paper are vector of memories, carrying particles of past ecologies across vast distances and can be seen as archives of meaning. In printmaking the archive, or trace-making, is created through contact: the ink-charged mark of one surface onto another. Both processes involve translation through touch, yet, as my Greek professor maintained whilst tackling *The Iliad*, true translation does not exist, there is always a certain loss of meaning; and as Derrida (1996) reminds us, archives are inherently fragile, themselves being subject to continual loss, which shapes them as much as preservation does. The vulnerability of paper in my work acknowledges this, allowing memory to remain provisional, shifting and incomplete, inherently human.

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Dr Emilia Telese (Italy, 1973; lives and works in Iceland) is a visual artist and theorist working with printmaking, immersive installation, and performance. Using materials such as personal objects, dust, soil, and pigments, her practice reveals hidden histories through direct encounters with fragile environments including forests, glaciers, urban and volcanic landscapes. Her work explores themes of personal mythology, belonging, transience, and material temporality. A graduate of the Fine Arts Academy in Florence, following studies at Brighton and Warwick University she completed a CDA-HMRC funded PhD at Loughborough University (2020). Worldwide exhibitions since 1996 include the Venice Biennale, Ars Electronica, the Louvre, London's Freud Museum, the South Bank Centre and others.  
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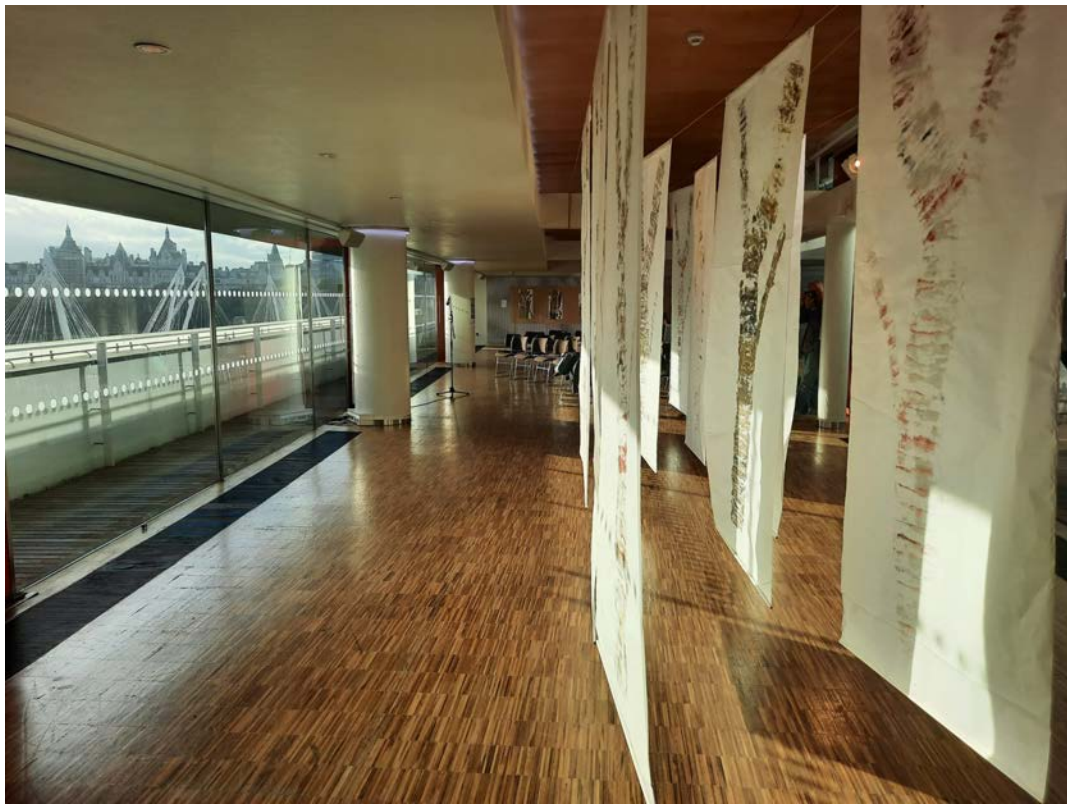
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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 1. Emilia Teles, Dust Forest installation, dimensions variable, 2025. Monotype, collagraph and engraving on twelve 1mx2m Wenzhou paper scrolls, pigment and dust from the Dingyusandur dust hotspot, Iceland. Exhibited at the South Bank Centre, London



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Figure 2. Emilia Telese, Dust Forest installation  
Figure 3. Emilia Telese, Dust Forest installation



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Figure 4. Emilia Telese, Dust Forest installation, South Bank Centre  
Figure 5. Emilia Telese making Dust Forest, Reykjavík, 2025  
Figure 6. Emilia Telese making Suite For An Imaginary Forest, Reykjavík, 2025



Figure 7. Emilia Teles, Suite For An Imaginary Forest 4 -Andante, 70x44cm, part of Suite For An Imaginary Forest Installation, 2025, six intaglio collagraph and engraving monoprints —Prelude, Allegro, Adagio, Andante, Minuetto and Presto, collagraph and monotype on 650gsm 100% cotton paper, with dust from Dyngjúsandur, Eyraudalur, and Snæfellsjökull glacier, pigment, and lapis lazuli.