

Ekphrasis: inscriptions on wood and stone

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INTRODUCTION

Ekphrasis is a series of nine hand finished stone lithographs. Drawn on stone using a combination of autographic marks and transferred photographic imagery, the lithographs were printed by the artist using a direct press onto Simili Japon paper (sheet size 96 x 64 cms.). The seven copies of each image are individually hand coloured.

Through the narrative threads of language, Ekphrasis considers an intimate relationship between site and practice. Navigating both the tracks and pathways of local parkland, and the contours of lines drawn on stone, the text dwells on the analogous acts of inscription in which these worlds converge. Moving between the woodland environment and the lithography studio these territories offer sites of speculation in which the transcriptions of language are born. Glimpsed in this process is an interplay between systems and substrates that simultaneously progress these unfolding lines, whilst resisting and constraining the routes they take. Spilling out from the overflow of these events is the excess of ornament.

Written alongside the making of a series of lithographs, closely observed are the places and events that shaped their materialisation. After twelve years the woodland I live next to has become embedded in my work, depicted in the hand coloured images is aging bark gathered from felled and rotting trees. Also visually hinted at are nineteenth century atlases and anatomical illustrations. The work more specifically references Ogham – a Celtic alphabet named after trees. What remains of this early script is preserved on stones and in manuscripts, no longer surviving are inscriptions carved into wood.

SITE

A few years before we moved here, the surrounding Leicestershire farmland was purchased by the council and planted up as

woodland. Both a domestic dwelling and studio space, at the back of the house the garden opens onto this country park. Once clearly separated, a thin wire boundary that divided public from private is now removed, leaving little to interrupt the journey between the interior worlds of home, and the landscape beyond.

Part arboretum and part community orchard, when we arrived a multitude of young trees tethered to supports mapped out the planting scheme of rows, grids and clusters. Twelve years later colonies of



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Ekphrasis 1, Hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019
 Figure 2: Ekphrasis 2, Hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019

quickly growing ash and beech reach out to form canopies and young slender poles once indistinguishable from one another are now each encrusted with a rich patina of moss and lichen. Dense thicket that obscured the view has been thinned to reveal sightlines across the forest floor. No longer smooth, the bark of newly planted saplings has aged over the seasons, now bearing the distinct characteristics of breed. Wrinkled, peeling, scarred and sticky to the touch. Denizen species, growing far from their native lands in the winter woodland, flaunt the cultural heritage of an arboretum. Glossy and deep red, the maturing skin of Tibetan cherry is scarified with its tribal markings; green and white striations of snake bark maple follow its rise into the crown; and the bleached ivory trunks of white barked Himalayan birch glint in subdued light. These ornamental specimens remind me of the lacquer and ray skin detailing on Samurai swords, this is not raw nature left to its own devices, but landscape – a carefully planned and constructed artefact of living trees.

Overwhelming at first, in time ways have emerged to think with and within the smells, sounds and sights of this place. The wandering, watching and thinking that happens in the parkland now bleeds into the thinking, making and waiting that happens in the studio. In the journey between park and house lines of travel, and travail are mobilised. Gathered in boxes and on shelves are ephemera that record this acclimatization to a new environment. Curling fragments of 'paper birch'; brittle plastic treeshelters, stretched, outgrown and shed; and from following the drone of chainsaws, the foraged slices of green wood stumps. Amongst this collection are jackets of bark, loosened and peeled from rotting trunks left to lie. On the underside of these flayed strips highways of woodworm furrows are etched into the bast. Close up the outer surfaces scarred and callused, depict traces of microclimate and the attentive labour of human hands. Their decay halted temporarily by my curiosity, I consider these shards of wood. The iterative patterns of growth determined by genus, the history worn in each crevice and crease, and the small round holes signalling the flight paths of previous inhabitants. Distinctly round, these holes the size of pin heads pepper the bark's surface. Each one puncturing the wrinkled membrane like a radiographer's tattoo.

RUBRIC

Under bright light the face looks free from imperfections. When flushed with water the colour of the limestone changes and what becomes easier to detect are clues to what lies within and below the surface. A freckling of small dark spots and the pale ghost of an image left by previous use. Silica tracks in the margins of the stone, one of which marks a sharp disjuncture in the pattern of sedimentation, tells of the shifting sands of deep geological time. Some distance from the Bavarian mines of its origins, this stone has travelled far to arrive here in my studio. With water and a dusting of pumice and grit, I use a broken fragment to evenly grind away the surface, and as a slurry forms on the wet limestone, fresh sediment collects in the trough below. In spite of seventy-three kilos of dead weight, the stone's fragile



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

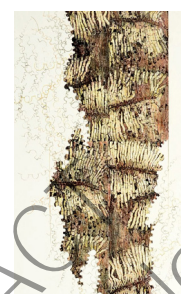


Figure 6

Figure 3: Ekphrasis 3, hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019
 Figure 4: Ekphrasis 3, hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019, detail
 Figure 5: Ekphrasis 4, hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019
 Figure 6: Ekphrasis 4, hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019, detail

composition quickly gives way to the rotating pressure of sand and water.

Its January and leaning on a slip of paper the heel of my hand can feel beneath it the stone's cool humidity. Slowly tracing around a rigid stencil, I follow its edge with a hard pencil, pressing against the resisting curve of the plastic. Designed to correct the aberrant inflections of a freehand, the lines produced with the tool's help are imposters – masquerading as the rhythmic movements of a cursive script penned by a more fluent hand. This particular device has a circular edge embellished with a row of small discs that gradually diminish in size. Attracted by the generic clarity and refined curves of this geometric aid, I accept the assistance offered in breaking the silence of the unmarked stone. By turns both compulsive and tedious, the impulsive gesture of my body is satisfyingly held in check by an imposed navigation of its contour. Re-positioning and tracing the edge several times a pattern is generated, variable by the angle of the curve and the density of the repeated lines. Not entirely systematic, the marks produced by this task, show differences in pressure, or changes in speed, when my hand fatigues, slips, or encounters an awkward angle. Deceptively abrasive, the smooth limestone quickly wears the pencil which needs frequent sharpening to keep its point; when subsequently returning to drawing the line is slightly thinner and dusted by a small excess of graphite powder.

As the drawing progresses I wonder if the hands of Celtic scribes also tired, whilst scoring the lines of Ogham text into fragments of wood. Cutting short repeated grooves against the grain an effort would have been felt, different to that which allowed the tool to willingly travel along the pathways of growth. Perhaps they too made use of a device to control the errant gesture, and aid production of measured lines of written language. This can only be speculated. What the remaining Ogham stones tacitly share are ciphered incisions that scale their lichen clad faces with a purposeful regularity that resists embellishment. Contouring the edges, the cut lines navigate uneven corners without detour, and prompt me to ask if these scribes, flesh pressed into stone, also briefly held their breath while negotiating the changes in direction prescribed by the matrix.

Traversing the topography of this substrate, the tracks of these movements cluster and intersect. Lines of travel collide and converge. And as the tracing and re-tracing, repeats and returns, left within the membrane is a manuscript that documents journeys taken and territories charted. Laid down in the process is the fragmented text of notation – a choreographic inscription in which might be glimpsed, an arabesque performed in the nexus between generative systems, time, and the intentions of life on the move.



Figure 7

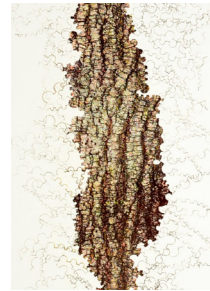


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Figure 7: Ekphrasis 6, hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019
 Figure 8: Ekphrasis 6, hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019, detail
 Figure 9: Ekphrasis 7, hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019, detail
 Figure 10: Ekphrasis 7, Hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019

CONTACT

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Figure 1: Ekphrasis 1, Hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019

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Figure 2: Ekphrasis 2, Hand coloured stone lithograph, 2019

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