

Odyssean: Topographies

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Over two years, Simon Lee Dicker, Alistair Grant, Natasha Rosling and Alexander Stevenson instigated a series of artist residencies across the Orkney Isles. From different locations – a remote bothy, a lighthouse, a beachside golf course and a burial chamber – each artist developed distinctive connections with the archipelago, its human stories and extraordinary geography.

This publication has been produced as part of the Odyssean: Topographies exhibition at Hestercombe and draws together common themes in their practices, including the mapping of invisible or imagined spaces, the experience of physical and emotional remoteness and how technology changes our relationship to landscape.



An archipelago is like a fold in time

Phil Owen

and space

Spending several days in view of the island, The Holm, which was the originally intended destination ('stuck on the wrong side'). There is a belief that there was once a causeway across, now washed away. The friction of the weather, the resistance. Natural forces so present and so powerful. Utilising sound recording as a way to fathom natural processes, an opportunity to listen to a visceral depth of field. (NR).

A sea-going buoy that has shed its moorings. Cast away like a seed pod, like the light cast by the lighthouse. Preserving information inside a sealed structure about where it has come from. Testing the relationship to its (and his) point of origin. (AS).

Supine figure dreaming digitised memories of walking on a 'skin of land'. (AG).

Drawings of pebbles which people had stacked on the beach. Overlaid with diagrams of crystalline structures drawn many decades previously by a geologist working locally, and numbers taken from route maps for climbers scaling The Old Man of Hoy. (Microscale). Climber's chalk as a mark-making tool. Being able to see Caithness, but none of the other islands. (SLD).

Nowadays, islands are considered remote, made awkward by our incapacity to move between them independently. Few here today can pilot a boat for any distance, and instead move overland, on paths and roadways maintained for easy traversal. In the past, the opposite was true. Ancient human migratory routes followed coastlines, and the sea was easier and safer to cross than the hinterland. It is thus hardly surprising that Orkney, an archipelago of small islands clustered almost swimmably close to the Caithness mainland, should have such a long history of human habitation.

Somerset - the name means 'summer land'. (It is called Gwlad Yr Haf in Welsh, which means the same, but this name is probably even older). It refers to the low-lying nature of large parts of the county, the way that it is so boggy for much of the time. Our ancestors, so the names would suggest, did not attempt year-round habitation. But today, floods which turn villages into islands are regarded as a terrible assault on propriety.

Using modes of transport affordable to today's average artist, it can take 3 days to get from Somerset to some of the Orkney Islands. Previously, when transportation was so much slower, and prior to the advent of things like television, how might the inhabitants of each location have regarded one another's homes?

*

A formal garden invites movement, and contrives particular ways of delineating space that could otherwise be traversed quickly and simply. It could be seen as a problematisation of walking, for pleasure. It awakens a curiosity to move, to perambulate, to explore, of a kind you might normally associate with children. Planting schemes heighten this, doing something similar for the eyes – lines of walking and lines of vision intersecting, deflecting, harmonising, for pleasure. The temporality of a garden is a geographic thing, a folding of time and space.

The lines of sight at Hestercombe, from the formal garden, extend out across Taunton Deane, but block the view of the surrounding agricultural land which presents an altogether different sort of score for walking.

gard – 1. Enclosure, fence. 2. Halo around the sun or moon.

gardbalk – Ridge of earth marking the boundary between patches of arable land.

gart – 1. Enclosed uncultivated patch of land. 2. Farm.

'I am old now and never... leave home, though I am still working at my desk and bench. I do designs and alterations of gardens now by plan and description only and have done this for the last few years with satisfaction to my clients'. 1/32 or 1/16 of an inch to a foot for layout plans; 1/8 of an inch to a foot for planting plans.

ERIGERONKARVINSKIANUSBERGENIALATHY-
RUSLATIFOLIUSSEDUMZEAMAYSJAPONICA-
CANNAMYOSOTISSCORPIOIDESFICUSCARI-
CACLEMATISVERBASCUMPIXANTHINUMRO-
SARUGOSAULMUSGLABRA

'On the client's copies of the plans the retaining walls and the borders at their feet were drawn on one sheet of paper which was then folded so that the wall became vertical, thus giving the client, who perhaps found ordinary plans confusing, a much better understanding of what was intended'.

In 2015 a group of artists travelled to Orkney on a residency. Each artist stayed on a separate island, and made work in response to their surroundings. In the autumn/winter of 2017, they will exhibit their work at Hestercombe in Somerset, a large country house with a formal garden that is regarded as one of the greatest collaborative achievements of Gertrude Jekyll and Edward Lutyens. This text includes paraphrases of conversations with the artists, entries from a dictionary of Norn (the language the Vikings bought to Orkney), notes from a study of Jekyll's work, and a list of some of the plants growing in Hestercombe's garden.

PASSING PLACE

An unfinished Orkadian story
Simon Lee Dicker

Before putting my feet on land I studied maps, photographs and stories of the island of Hoy. I discovered Professor M F Heddles' paper on the geology of Orkney that appeared in the Mineralogical Magazine in 1880, via Author Hamish Johnston, via a copy of the Hoy newsletter, the Blether. I read a time to keep by George Mackay Brown written 1969, and took with me a story of searching for radioactive red sandstone in the Pentland Firth by geologist Ross Aitken.

forms the jaws of
the Pentland Firth

Image: Simon Lee Dicker - Rackwick 2015

In the shadow of the Old Man of Hoy - The first journey, Hoy September 2015.

After two days and nights of hopping from South to North, Coker to Bristol to Glasgow to Kirkwall to Stromness, I was on a ferry looking at the flat grey hills Hoy rising out of the clouds. With thoughts of rain in my head I cycled on the road to Rackwick, rucksack on my back like a cartoon tortoise. Hidden from sight from the rest of the Islands, I pitched my tent outside Burnmouth, the Rackwick Bothy, protected from the worst of the winds by a stone wall separating me from the beach.

"The Sneuk and the Too stood on each side of us like guardians"¹

An hours walk from The Old Man of Hoy, Rackwick bothy is nearest place for climbers to stay before ascending one of the seven routes up one of Orkneys' most famous landmarks. Climbers gear was strewn all over the bothy when I arrived. After putting up my tent I followed the well trodden path to the Old Man and watched the climbers descend as the wind pushed against me, turning tiny blades of grass into the noisiest of instruments.

The next day I spent walking. Down the valley towards Moaness, scrambling up the peat soaked heather of Hoys' highest hill to a view of all of the other islands. Then back along the ridge, layers of flagstones crunching underfoot occasionally revealing traces of the sea etched into stone.

When the clouds allowed, sunlight would slide down the hills, spotlighting warm cottages built on the edges of abandoned crofts.

Back at the bothy it was too dark to sit inside and the midges wouldn't let me rest so I headed for the beach, traversing the rounded sea smoothed boulders lining the shore until they made way for golden sand. I plunged into the icy sea.

A cold and quiet night followed the glowing warmth of the day. The fireless bothy with resident rat sent me early to my sleeping bag. The following day, held hostage in my tent by a swarm of midges I drew until my legs went dead and devised a plan for whiskey and kindling.

On the last evening I had three visitors. I listened to stories of people that lived, worked and died in this place and showed the drawings for the first time.

¹ George Mackay Brown - *A Time to keep*

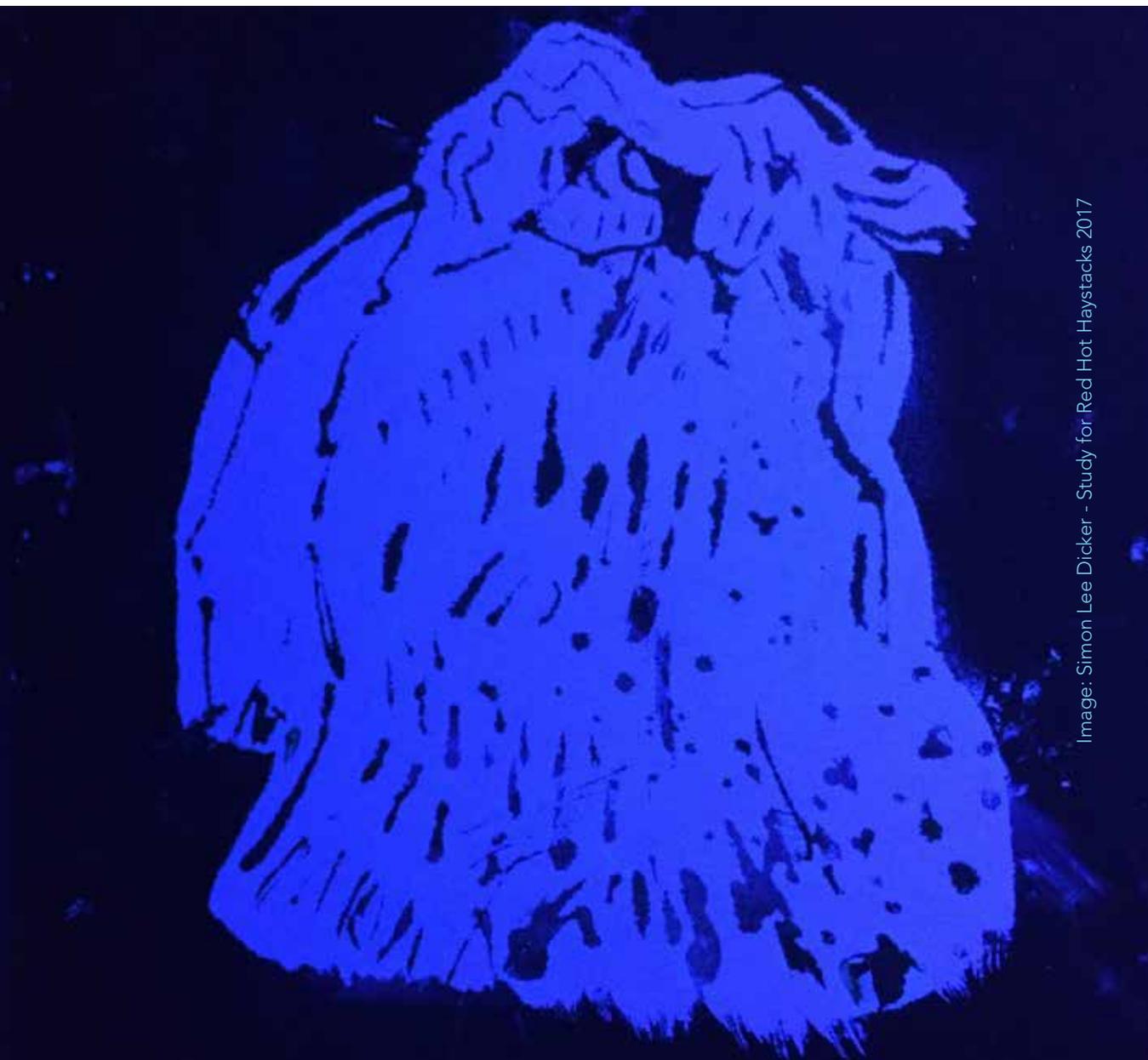


Image: Simon Lee Dicker - Study for Red Hot Haystacks 2017

Red Hot Haystacks

High levels of radiation were reported on the coasts each side of the Pentland Firth that separate mainland Scotland from the Orkney Archipelago. Believing a valuable uranium deposit may have been discovered a boat, kitted out with state of the art radiation detection equipment, was commissioned to investigate. Being one of the most treacherous areas of sea in the world the Pentland Firth proved to be too much of a challenge for the Geologist working for the Radiogeology and Rare Minerals Unit of the Institute of Geological Science who spent all his time below deck

being sick. All the equipment recorded was the motion of the waves going up and down. The survey was never completed.

It was later discovered that particles produced by air borne nuclear testing in the late 1960's had found its way into the soil, only becoming apparent when the grass grew and hay was cut and gathered into stacks. Described by the geologist as Red Hot.

The Accidental Sculpture - The second Journey, Hoy June 2016.

Created by man and swallowed by the sea to be thrown up once more onto the shore. Looking over Rackwick from the high path that leads to the Old Man you can make out an alien structure sitting at the mouth of a burn just beyond the Bothy. On close inspection the large corroded steel structure, battered by the elements, with a path worn around it by sheep is incongruous to the surrounding landscape and according to Jimmy, local fisherman and caretaker of the bothy, is the most photographed object in Hoy.

Interested in the hidden story of movement, displacement and the relationship with the forces that shape our physical world I made a second visit to Hoy, 750 miles, magnetised by the rusting hulk. It felt as if it had shrunk in the year since my last visit. Objects grow by at least a third when left in the imagination. On the longest day of the year, whilst naked Orkadians danced around the Ring of Brodgar, I made a circle of 16 points around the hulk using stones and animal bones.

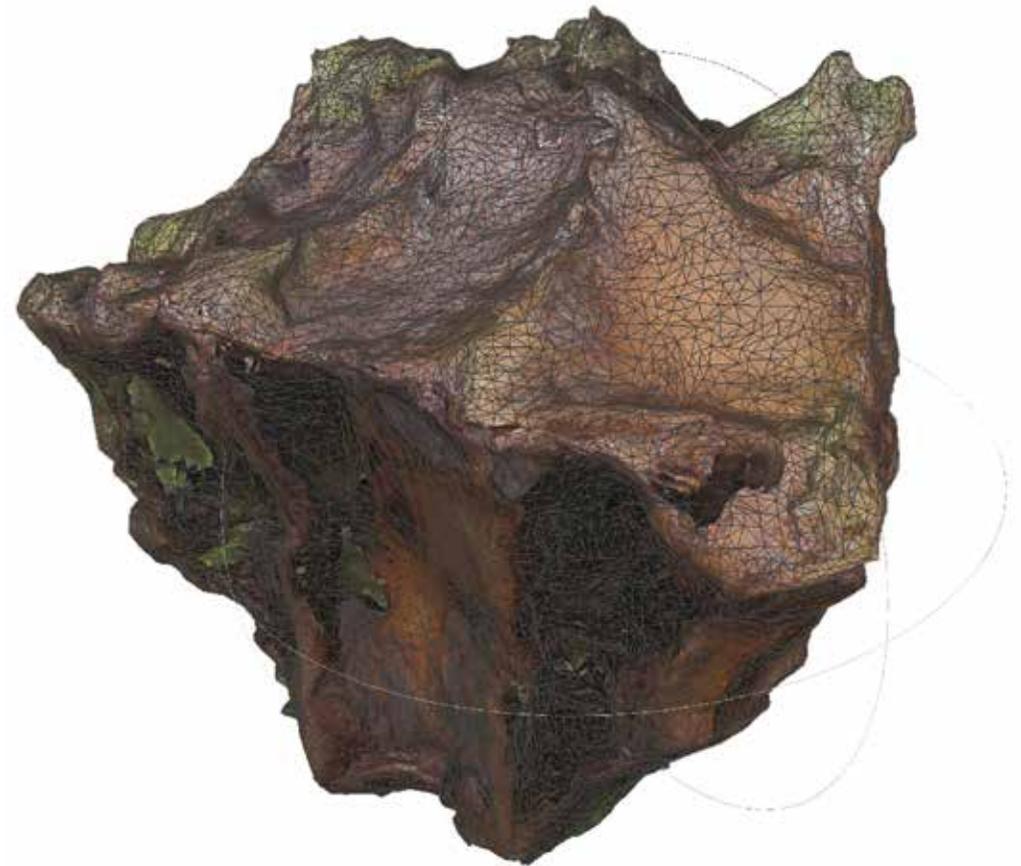


Image: Simon Lee Dicker - 3d rendering of The Accidental Sculpture 2017

Sitting on the edge of the horizon - The third journey, Papa Westray September 2016

I woke. Warm dreams like chapters in a book fading into the morning. The storm pushed across the island from the Southwest with little resistance as I lay sunken into the mattress, heavy limbed, deferring action for as long as possible until the cold of the rain soaked pillow made me rise.

Standing next to the steel armature of its future self the shed size airport is locked when I arrive. I stand looking at a section of dry stone wall that had been stripped of moss and painted in red and white stripes. The familiar sight of the island post van approaches along the road that dissects the island from top to bottom. I'm met with a smile from the postie as she steps out of the van and I follow her inside. She takes a high-vis jacket from the back of the chair and pulls it over her uniform. The wording on the back reads 'Airport Staff'.

"Have you just changed jobs?" I ask
"Aye", she said through broad smile, whilst switching on a two-way radio transceiver.

Luminous orange against a blue grey sky a windsock rises to 45 degrees as if suddenly woken, then sinks back down rest.

Once at the centre of a busy trade route the oldest stone house still standing in northern Europe lies just beyond the runway. Papay is now a remote island to the north of the Orkney archipelago sitting on the edge of the horizon, although the shop sells avocados and quinoa.

Through the window I see the gravel runway, a thin strip of grass, and beyond the shimmering water another island in the blueness of distance. A scrap of paper on the desk catches my eye. The marks revealing a ritual act of recording and crossing out without giving a clue to their meaning. This is the start of another story.



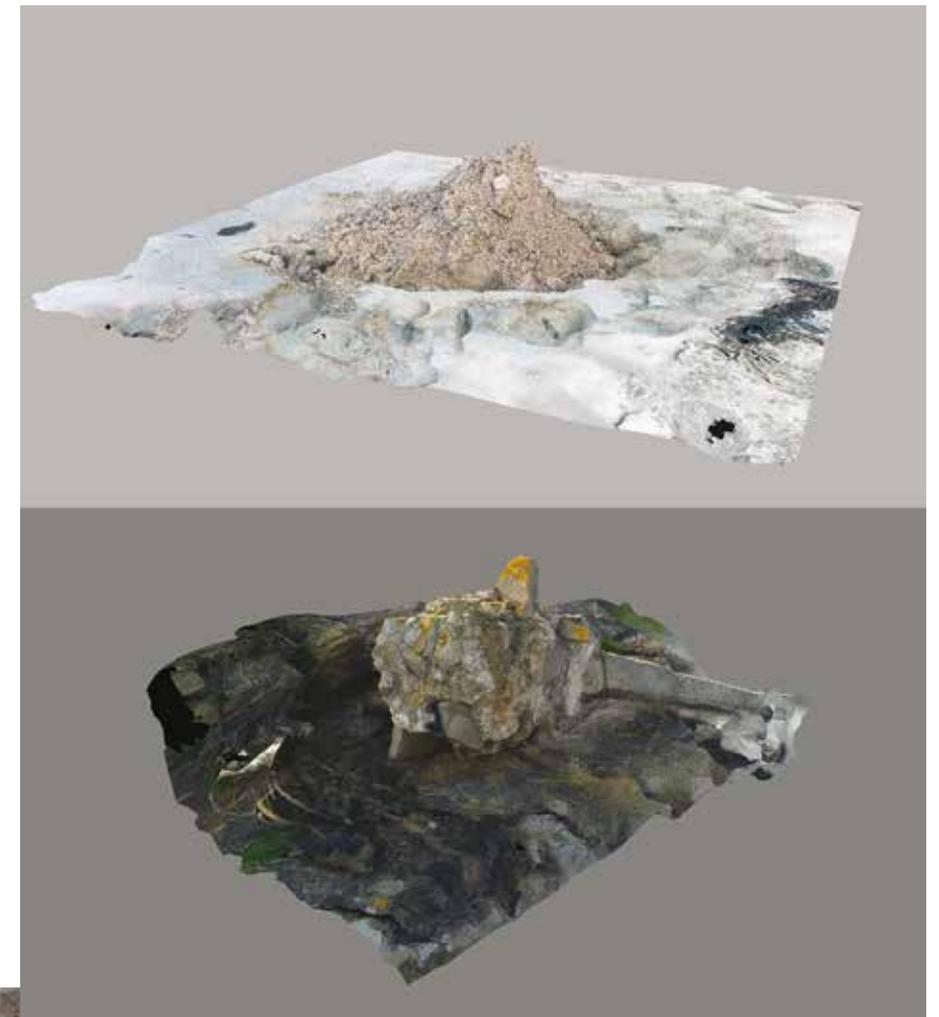
Image: Simon Lee Dicker/J.R Rendall - The start of another story 2016

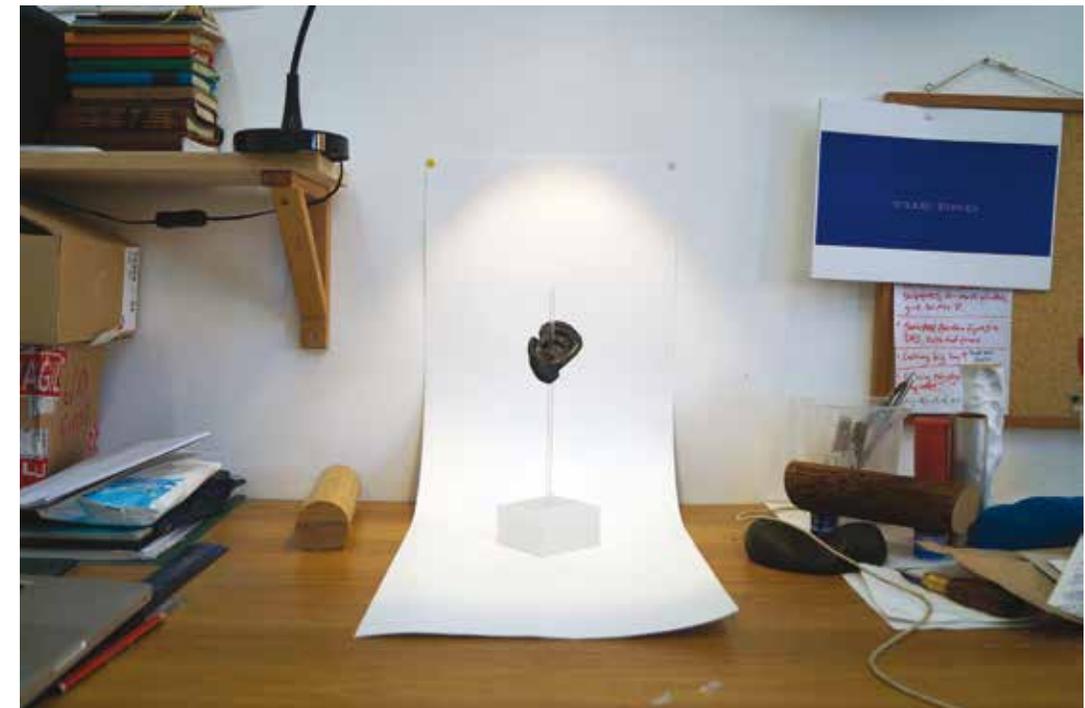
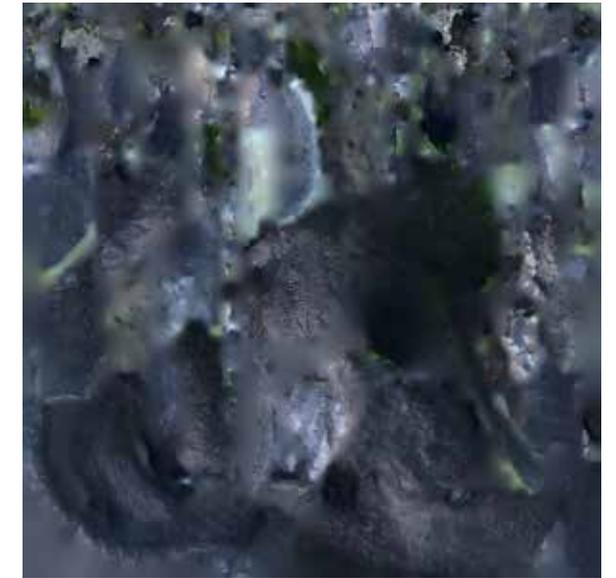
MEMORIES OF GREEN

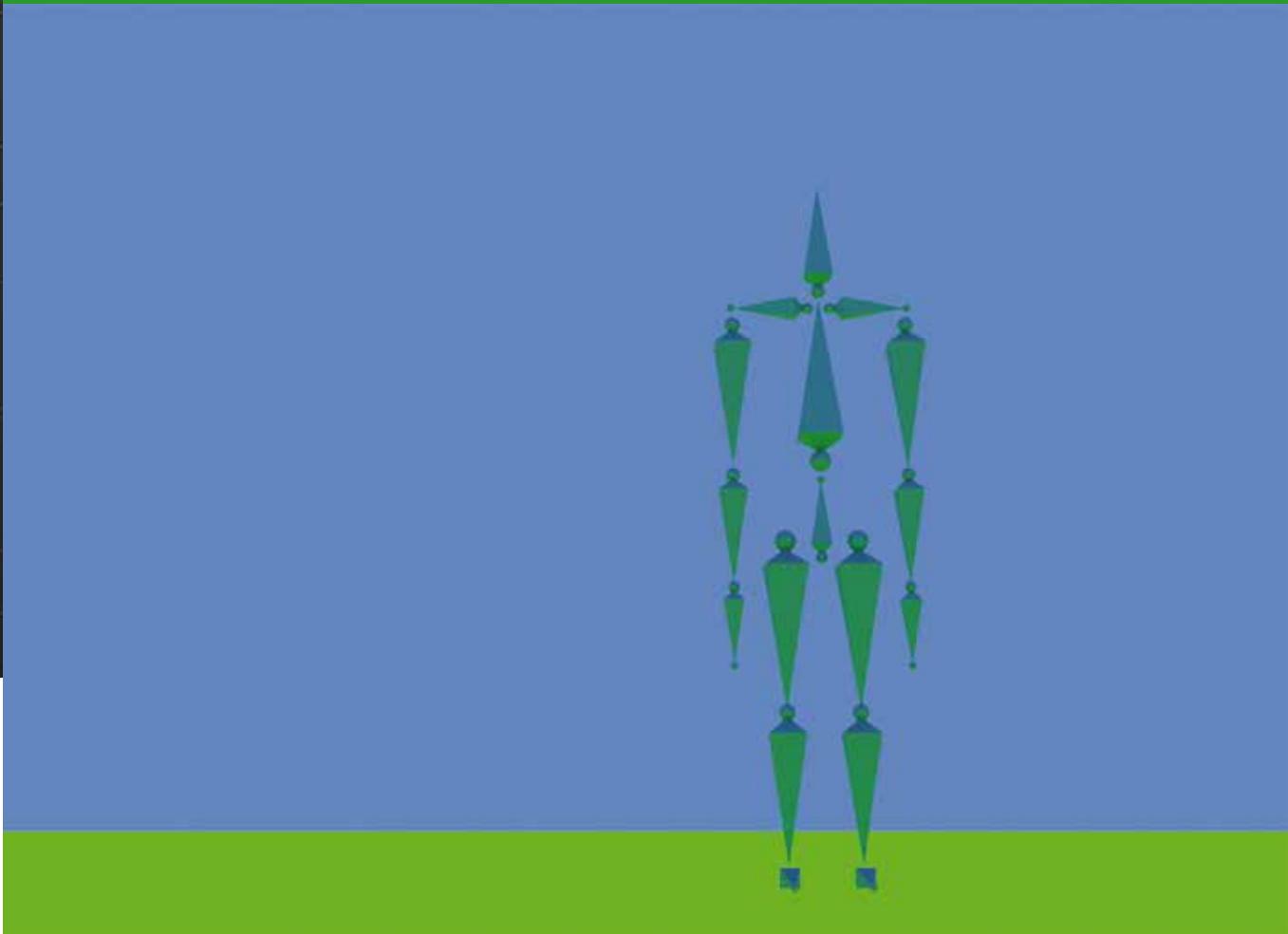
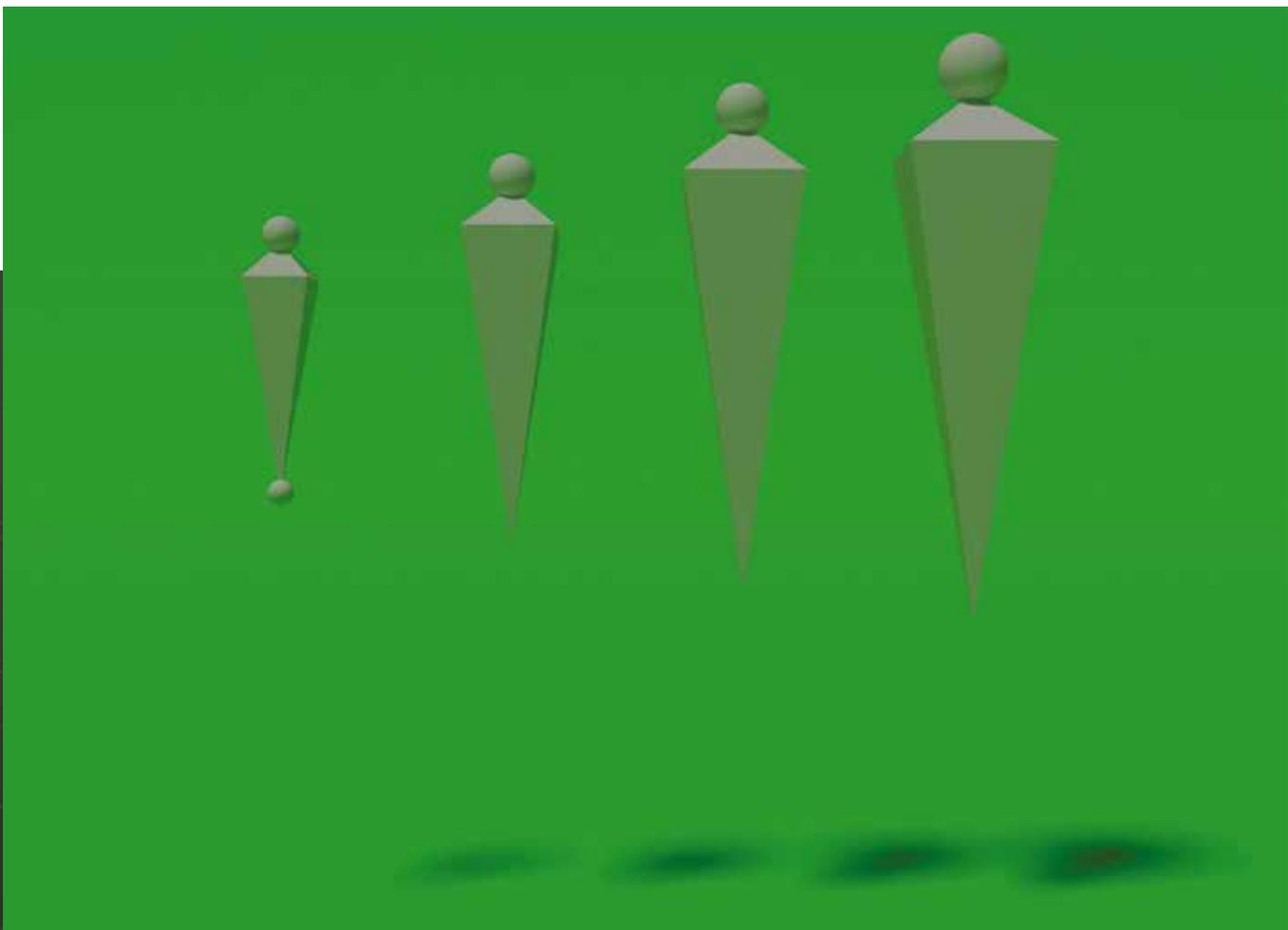
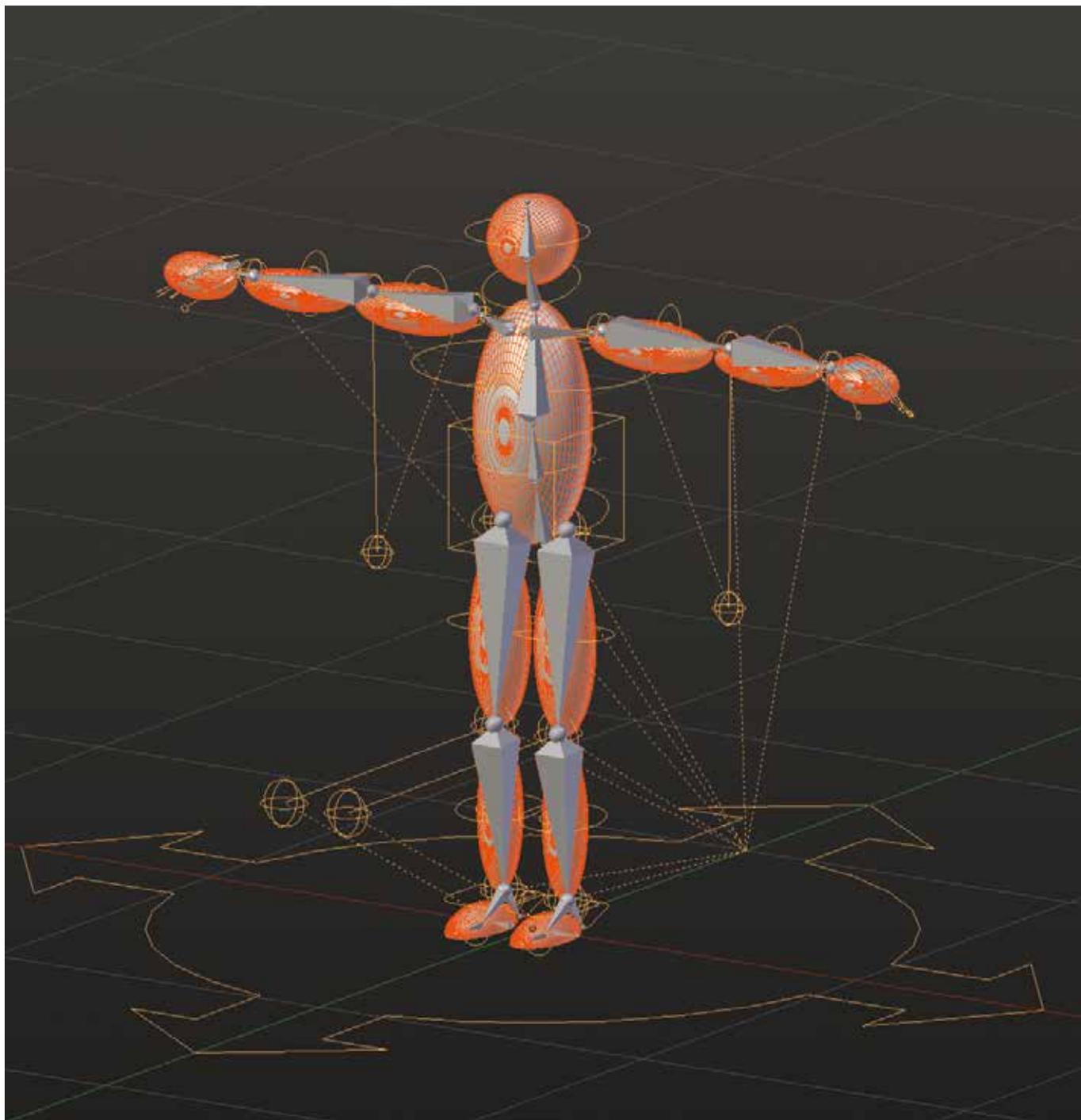
Alistair Grant

A distant alarm sounds and human-like figures move efficiently indoors. The drill has been performed for as long as this colony was successfully established on the planet. Heavy cloud formation always results in an alarm so that no life-forms perish. Within seconds there is no movement on the surface, leaving us, safe as imagined observers, with a cityscape vista resembling a bed of needles of no definitive colour. The climate of this off-world colony demands that all surface structures are of a slender cone form, pointing upwards to the sky with a high-gloss seamless cladding. Each building has the same optimum proportions but the scale is increased or reduced by an appropriate factor relative to its function, be it a dwelling or a factory.

A natural phenomena occurs that gives this planet the nickname of 'The Slammer'. An area over the city colony and its surrounding compressed landscape is subjected to a single intact sheet of heavy falling water. The edifices pierce the sheet and spread its weight across their surfaces, the water rushing and collecting at the base, draining instantly into the gulleys. A pink flash of diluted red indicates that a lifeform did not make it inside in time. The doors open and the workday continues.







A photograph of a layered rock formation, possibly a cliff face or a large rock outcrop. The rock is light brown and tan, showing distinct horizontal layers. At the top, there is a layer of dry, brown grass. In the foreground, a black electronic device, possibly a power supply or a small generator, is connected to several black cables. The device is resting on a flat surface, and the cables are tangled around it. The overall scene suggests a field or outdoor setting.

What Remains

Natasha Rosling

Hole in the Land
[For three voices]

HEAVY SHOULDERS; SALTY SKIN; QUIVERING STOMACH...

You have just arrived on Papa Westray, you missed your ferry from Aberdeen to Kirkwall - which led to a long series of alterations and delays, including wild camping next to aberdeen airport.

I am about to meet Jonathan, the Papay ranger at the ferry port. He delivers you to your camping spot out near the old mill, a remote point between the loch and the sea.

THE SUN IS ALMOST ABOUT TO SET AND A THICK MOISTURE HANGS IN THE AIR. I clunk my heavy backpack to the ground and unzip the contents of my tent bag.

Sliding a pole through each seam, your shelter is almost erect.

THE LIGHT IS WANING/

I fiddle with the tent pegs in each corner - I feel the bite of nettles sting my fingers.

You retreat into your tent on your hands and knees/ The wet grass has already penetrated the groundsheet, and my sleeping bag has been rained on.

You wind up your camping lamp, breath in, sharply, and prepare yourself to slither between your soggy coverings.

[Pause]

Now flat on your back, you breathe out...You hear a rumble explode in your stomach followed by the raucous screeches of a flock of geese passing overhead.

I want to shift my focus away from my hunger, and dampness...

You are finally on Papa Westray... It has been your imagination for a while. You've been obsessively reading whatever information you can find and have searched across its surface on google earth. But now, what a difference, your body is actually here, lying against its ground.

I came here to think about the Holm/

You only caught a glimpse of this ancient burial cairn through the mist before the darkness consumed it. You close your eyes and picture it/

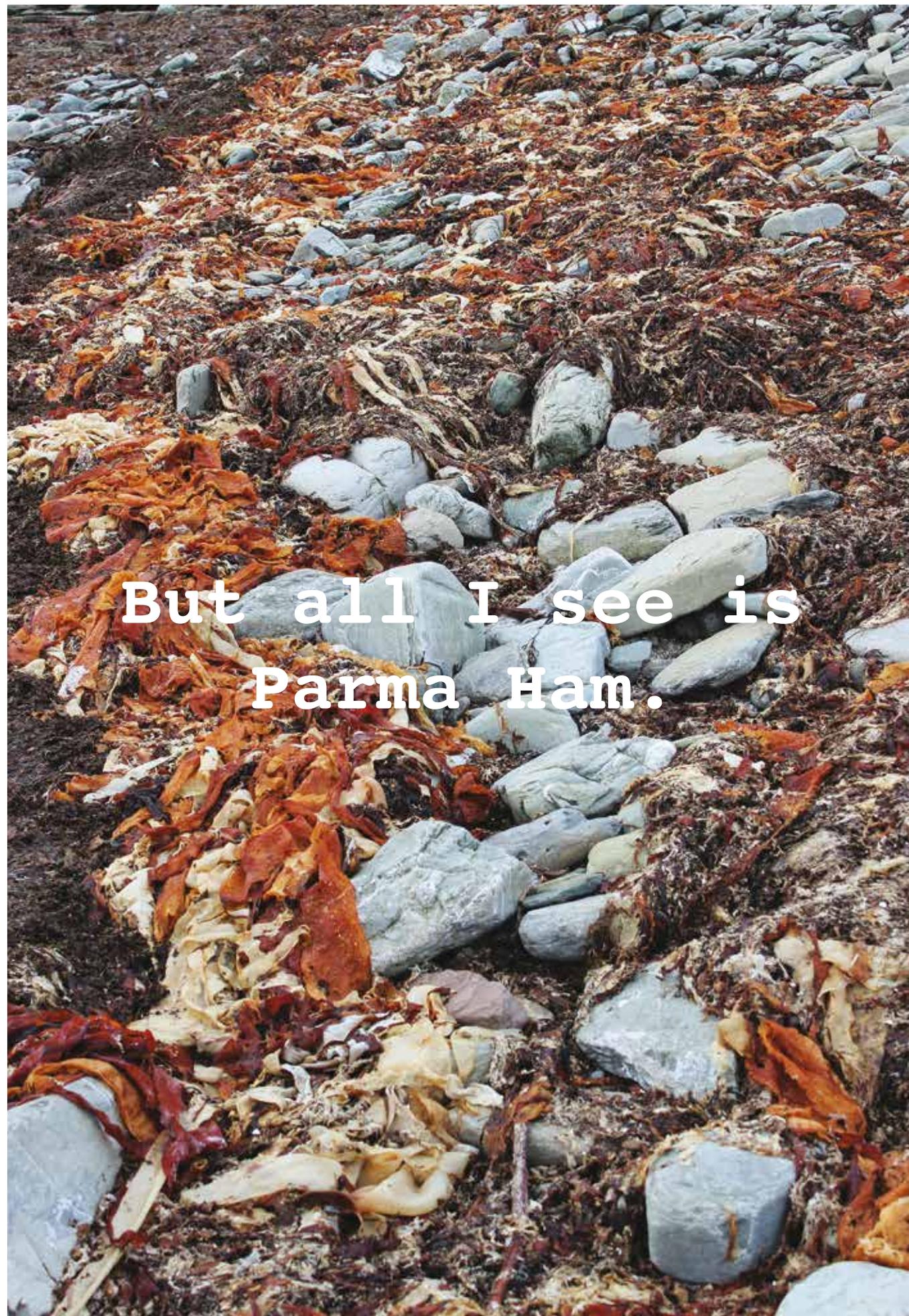
LIKE A GIANT SUBMARINE PERCHED ON THE SUMMIT OF THAT TINY NEIGHBOURING ISLAND.

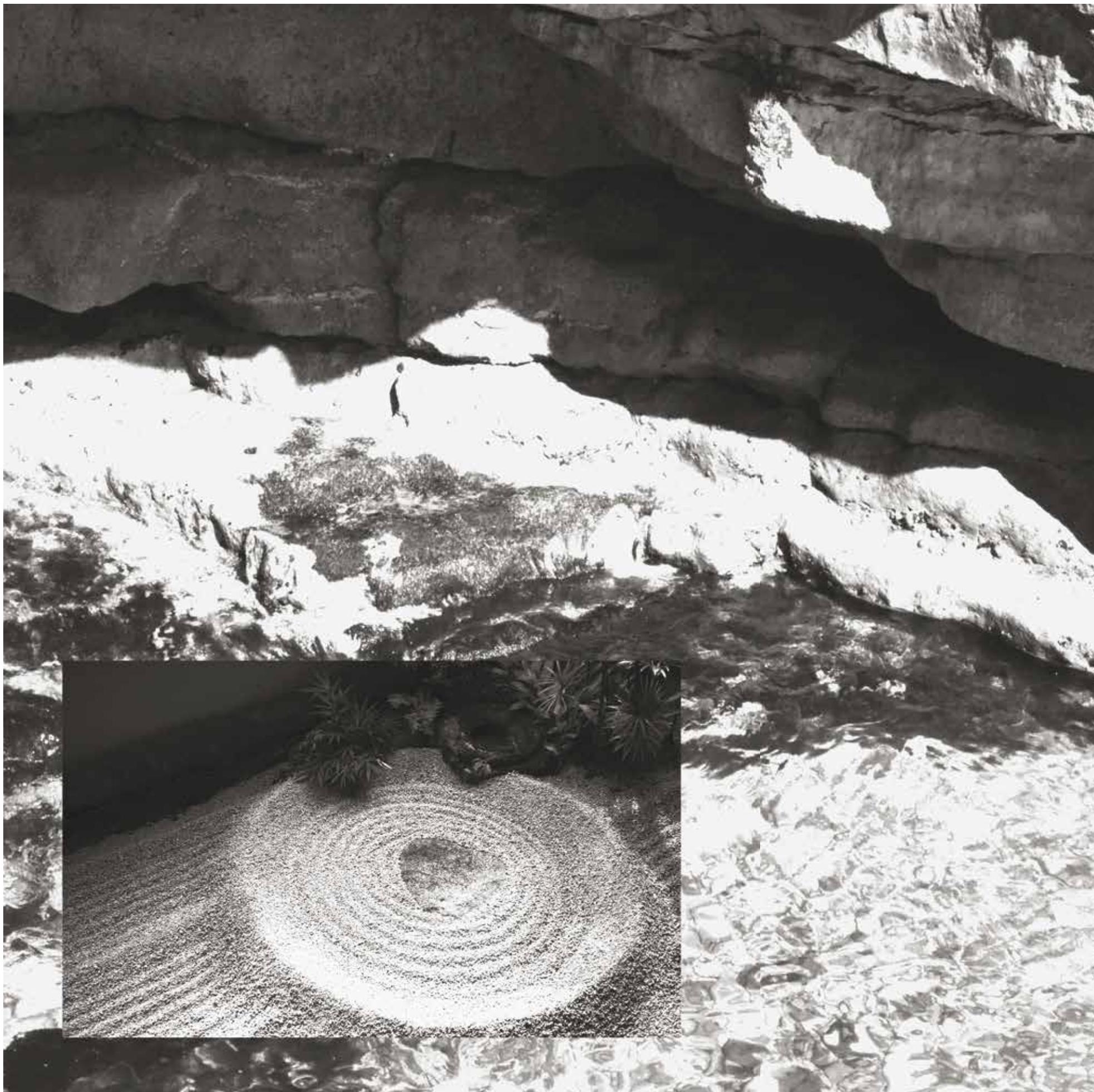
It's so old...but it's still there...When will the time come when the sea finally eats it up and spits it in fragments back onto the shore?

The wind is rattling vigorously against your tent, yet all you want to do is listen more closely to the land...as you imagine it...to each strata of time. You want to hear the sounds that this land has absorbed - that resonate in its minerals.

[Pause]

You cough, breathe, cough again and fall into sleep.





RECORDS OF ISLAND KEEPING

a six course menu

1.

I travelled to the edge of the country
to extract the essence of the island

2.

Shapes (tracing growth and decay)
Colours (green, purple, grey, beige)
Dancing seaweed (movement, peace of mind)
Strata (ancient wisdom, layers of time)

3.

I travelled to the ancient gardens
to extract the essence of the universe

4.

Rocks (mountains of hidden origin, bones)
Gravel (showing the sea, blood)
Composition (the ear of the gardener)
Rake (practicing concentration)

5.

A garden is a window,
an island is a universe,
a body is an island

6.

I invite you to enjoy six courses
in island keeping, searching for
memories of the sea, mountains, wind,
using five senses to remember
those feelings, the power to break the
surface of the water

All at Sea

Alexander Stevenson

The charming keeper Billy Muir meets me at the airport and we drive across the tiny island of North Ronaldsay to the two lighthouses at the far end. The land is flat and you can always see the sea, often more of it than land, here at the top of Orkney. The dark coastal rocks like broken teeth, the rough sea, ruined plantigrues and dwellings all give a slightly spooky feel. But I'm assured by Billy that these are places of hope and reassurance. There's nothing spooky about old lighthouses or beacons.

I'm here to think about artworks. As an artist in Glasgow I've worked with galleries like GoMA and with theatres like The Arches with a mixture of sculpture, photography, drawing, theatre and film. I've also created residencies on islands before, primarily with the Isle of Eigg back in 2008-9. So my time on NR will be spent mainly thinking about what kind of an artwork could come out of spending a week with a lighthouse.

I ought to point out that there are actually four other artists placed on other islands all over Orkney during this week, and that we will all meet up in Stromness to present our ideas to the public, as a conclusion to the project. One is on a golf course on Papay, and another is in a bothy full of climbers at Rackwick. But unlike them, I have a significant connection to my subject the NR lighthouse, as I am a Stevenson. Before you say it, no I am not entirely sure if there is a close family connection to the Lighthouse Stevensons, but my aunty who is currently researching the family tree swears we are, and for now at least that will have to do. Thus, I take this tenuous thread of a connection with me to the Lighthouse that Alan Stevenson built in 1854.

The history of the Beacon following the sinking of the treasure ship the Svecia in 1740, its eventual replacement with the current Lighthouse over a hundred and fifty years ago, and the 24 wrecks that have occurred since (the last in 1984) is a huge wealth of information to draw upon for any artist. In fact it is probably

too much! Everywhere you go on NR and pretty much anywhere on Orkney, every rock and boulder has some historical significance and the huge weight of history bears down on anyone attempting to interpret it. There is of course also so much to be said about the unique flash pattern, day markings and elevations and construction of every NLB lighthouse. So I quickly decided to change tack and head for more immediate physical responses to the lighthouse itself, monument to my ancestors (perhaps).

Here you can see me posing beside NR like a brother or twin. For me, this image conveys some of the difficulties of trying to relate to a body of history, and a possible genetic connection with the designer, but the image isn't very successful on a practical level. It doesn't show the 16 beams of light that the crystal produces 140 feet above me, but it is quite charming all the same. These beams of magnified focused light can be seen 24 nautical miles away and rotate as 16 flashes over 160 seconds. There are so many wonderful figures and measures and timings at NR as I'm sure there are at every lighthouse; a fog horn burst 5 seconds every minute in low visibility 24 hours a day, N.R. in Morse code once every 6 minutes, 176 steps, the shift rotors of the lighthouse keepers, the revolution speed of the governor mechanism and so on and so on. It is some of these details that begin to interest me more and more with every visit and every climb to the top.





The residency itself is brief, just a few nights. But my head is overflowing with information and fantastic ideas for future artworks. I say goodbye to Billy, the sheep, and the light. I meet the other artists in Stromness and present my findings to a modest crowd of Orkadians. I talk about how hard I found it to relate to a brick tower as though it were a family member, and about how 24 nautical miles of light couldn't save those 24 ships since 1854.

I describe a project where I could place 16 capsules at the 24 nautical mile extent of the NR arc of illumination. Each capsule containing something like the gold disc of genetic information that NASA once placed on-board space ships, except with the genetic codes and family trees of the Lighthouse Stevensons, or my own family tree, or instructions to build a lighthouse.

I suggest another artwork involving a re-enactment from a page of the Orkneyinga Saga, where warning beacons were lit on Fairisle in error, causing beacons to be lit across all the ward hills of Orkney, but where each fire would pay homage to the unique day markings, flash pattern and colours of the lighthouses of their islands.

And finally I talk about filming the NR Lighthouse from above, showing the shadow of the lighthouse turning clockwise each day and the lights turning counter-clockwise each night, as if winding and re-winding the clock.

The residency project *Odyssean* was hosted by Unit 7 Projects, and was kindly supported by the Orkney Council Culture Fund.



*The
lighthouse,
phallus of my
(possible) ancestors*

A good size it is, reaching higher
than any other in the land.

Aye-aye, I could be related if this is
the measure!

Here I, the seed of those ancient
loins, perhaps, now sit and
contemplate where to place the seed
of my own ideas.

At its base, cottages like swollen testes,
housing the irregular lineage of the
keepers and their families.

I am seed, perhaps, but no seaman, and
for all the life that trickled down from
Stevenson to Stevenson, perhaps, many
had to die in the days before the life-
giving light.

Before that was the beacon, which lured
them upon the skerry and the reef, looking
as it did, like a ship at anchor.

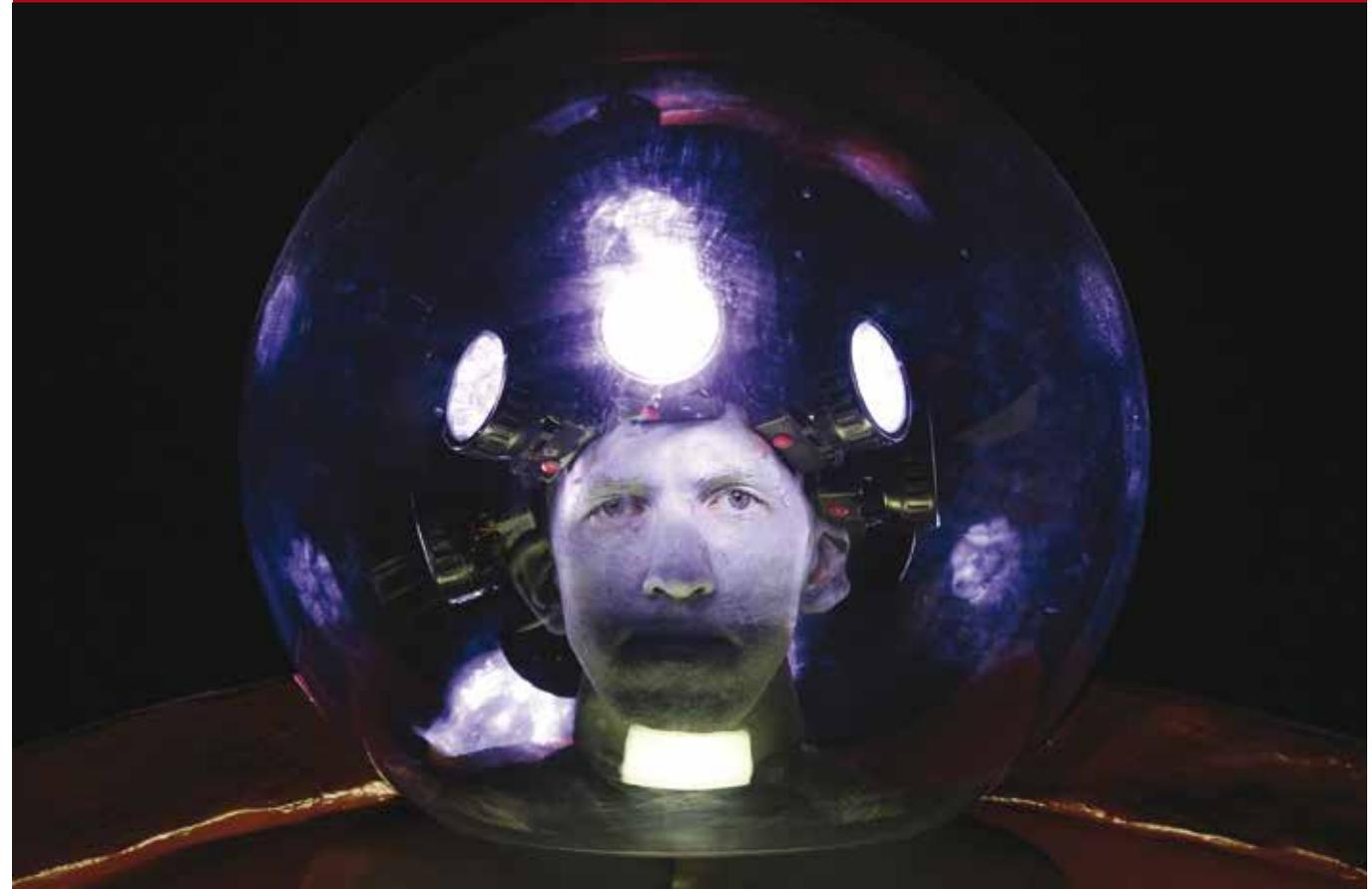
So it was my ancestor, perhaps, took
away the beacon's light leaving the island
impotent for 50 years.

So many seamen lost, swallowed in the
oceans maw, till Alan a relative of mine,
perhaps, began his great erection to safeguard
our seamen, for the safety of all.

This male members' club, in which no women
ever served, nor on ship nor land, has yet a twist
in its tail.

The great stone projection thrusting from the
land casting seamen away from the rocks for 24
miles in all directions, the keepers have the station
of captain and their vessel that of ship.

Thus the lighthouse, despite appearance, is a her.



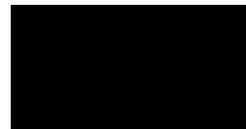
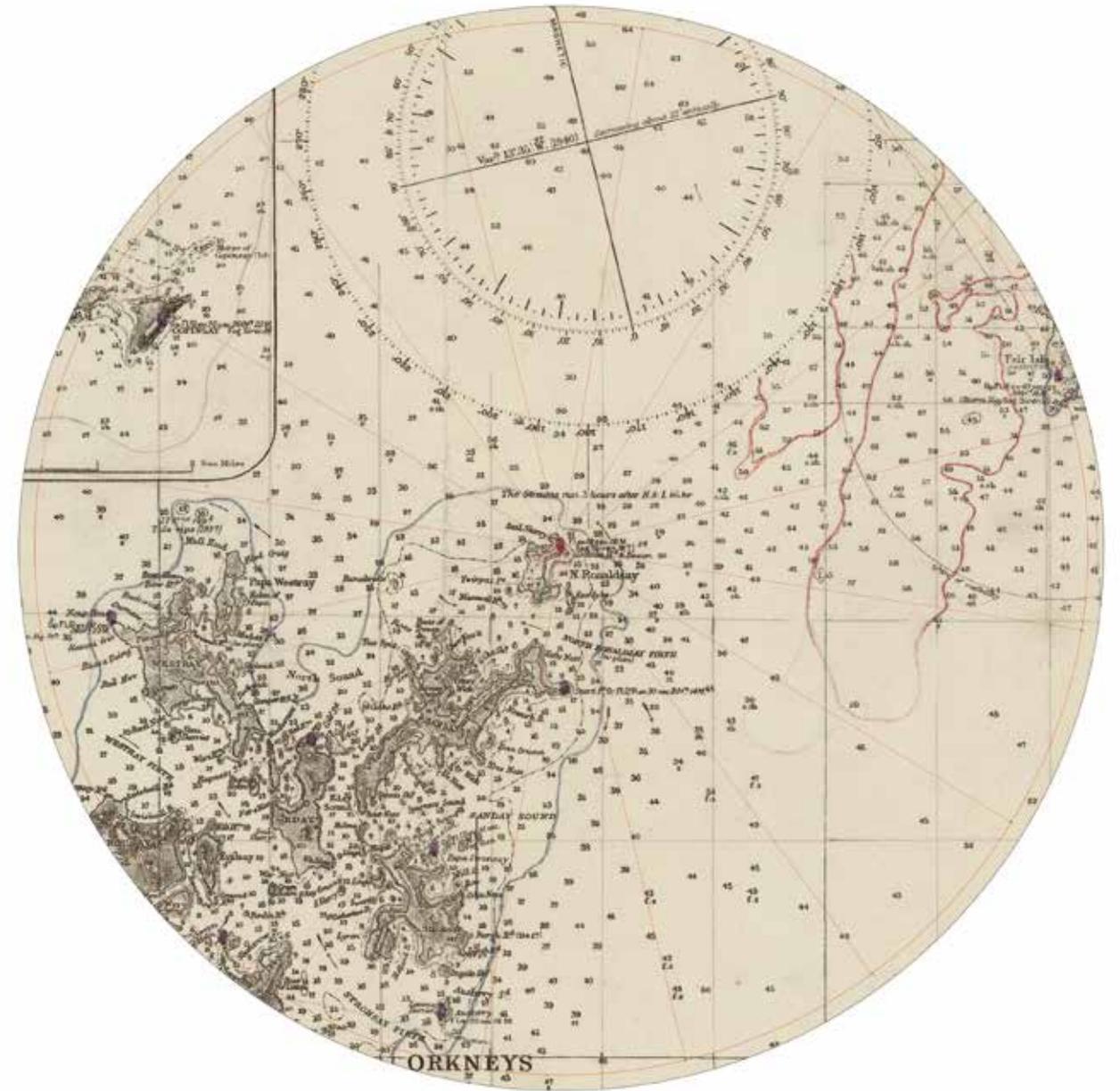
Thanks/credits

Rowan Lear
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Jonathan Ford

Special thanks to the people of Hoy and Papay for sharing stories and making us so welcome during our visits.

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Unit Seven
OSR Projects

Designed by Chantelle OSR Design





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