

Building between Tides

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In my early thirties I wished to understand my own artistic language better. I chose to live on an uninhabited coastline on the west coast of Jura, North West Scotland, a five-hour walk across moorland. I wanted live in and study the landscape in depth, to discover how I would respond to this environment and how it would influence me over time. To be in solitude. The idea had come fully formed to me when walking and camping the previous year. Taking shelter from a storm I found a cliff arch of cathedral-like proportions and slept the night there, pitching my tent in the lee of its east wall. On waking I knew I would come to live here to work.

To make it more habitable I first made a wind baffle from driftwood, a sheltering wall from the cold northerly winds that I faced on arrival by boat my first year there. The second year I integrated a small driftwood-structured house that I lined with polyethylene and a heavy flax linen, the cloth house. I was painting and drawing the landscape daily. The building inspired me to think about how I could make work outside in the landscape using materials to hand that was a more direct expression of where and how I was living. I swam in the sea every day and had to collect water, build fires to cook on. I wanted to create a work that brought all the four elements together.

Discovering the *Firestacks* was a revelation. The rhythm of my working was entirely dictated by the tides,



The Arch, Jura, West Coast, Scotland

building between tides. I discovered bodily the knowledge of this rhythm, the opposite from learnt and borrowed knowledge. The *Firestacks* were physically demanding and always surprising. I was contending with unexpected swells in the sea and often had many falls without firings before I was successful.

I fired them through the night and discovered how little I knew of the

dark. How much scales in the landscape change, the perception of our own scale. The pale round stones in the curve of the bay bathed in the ephemeral beauty of reflected light, the ribbon of firelight dancing on the sea water, drawing on the sea.

The tension of an oncoming tide, keeping it stacked with driftwood to sustain the fire but knowing the precarious balance between fire and

water and the stones themselves. A stronger swell bringing in bigger waves that crashed against the stack, water crashing against fire. The impossible delicacy of balancing stones after an initial fall.

In that state of fitness an unexpected energy and balance arises that enables recognition of the new underpinned by the discipline of my practice.



Firestack, Autumn, Aird Bheag, Outer Hebrides, 2016

The *Firestacks* continued to inform how I make other work. The balance between what is made and what is unmade, can be a simple realignment of materials. The form is often inspired by what is already there and perhaps I am placing a temporary formality within the space, a straight line cutting diagonally across the horizontal plane of the ground; a shallow curve to counterpoint the vast desert horizon.

After 20 years of working on the west coast of Scotland—Orkney, Jura, Mingulay—I knew intuitively I needed a change of environment. I went to the deserts of Libya.

Living and moving through different landscapes forces me to change. I have to listen carefully with my eyes. I seek local guides who know and love their landscape, know how to live with little water and a harsh sun,

know how to navigate vast uninhabited folds and rises of black volcanic rock with few obvious landmarks. The Tuareg showed me with just a scuff of the feet the layers of different colored soil and sand beneath the visible surface. They showed me how to bake bread in the sand, how to keep water cool. All these things have a place and feed into the work subconsciously in a way I cannot explain.

When I went to Northwest Namibia, I had to start all over again. Good work requires a playfulness, the courage to try things out, not knowing—don't think too much, just do it. This breaks the stiff inhibitions that keep me from connecting with where I am and the work. I travelled with Himba guides through dry river beds. We were surrounded by wild animals, their markings striking to the eye. Masterful calligraphic marks of blacks

and whites that I saw enable them complete efficacy of concealment in the fragmented light and shadow of the bushes. The shadows there are absolute.

The river banks were inherently sculptural. My first work revealed to me that what I make is often not the work but the means to the work. Each river bank work revealed something unexpected. Carving time, lit-

eral layers of it, hard and soft. Sharp shadows fall and become voids, the essence of sculpture, space defined. My perception of scale shifted and changed. I saw new relationships that were there, but invisible until there was a re-definition of form.

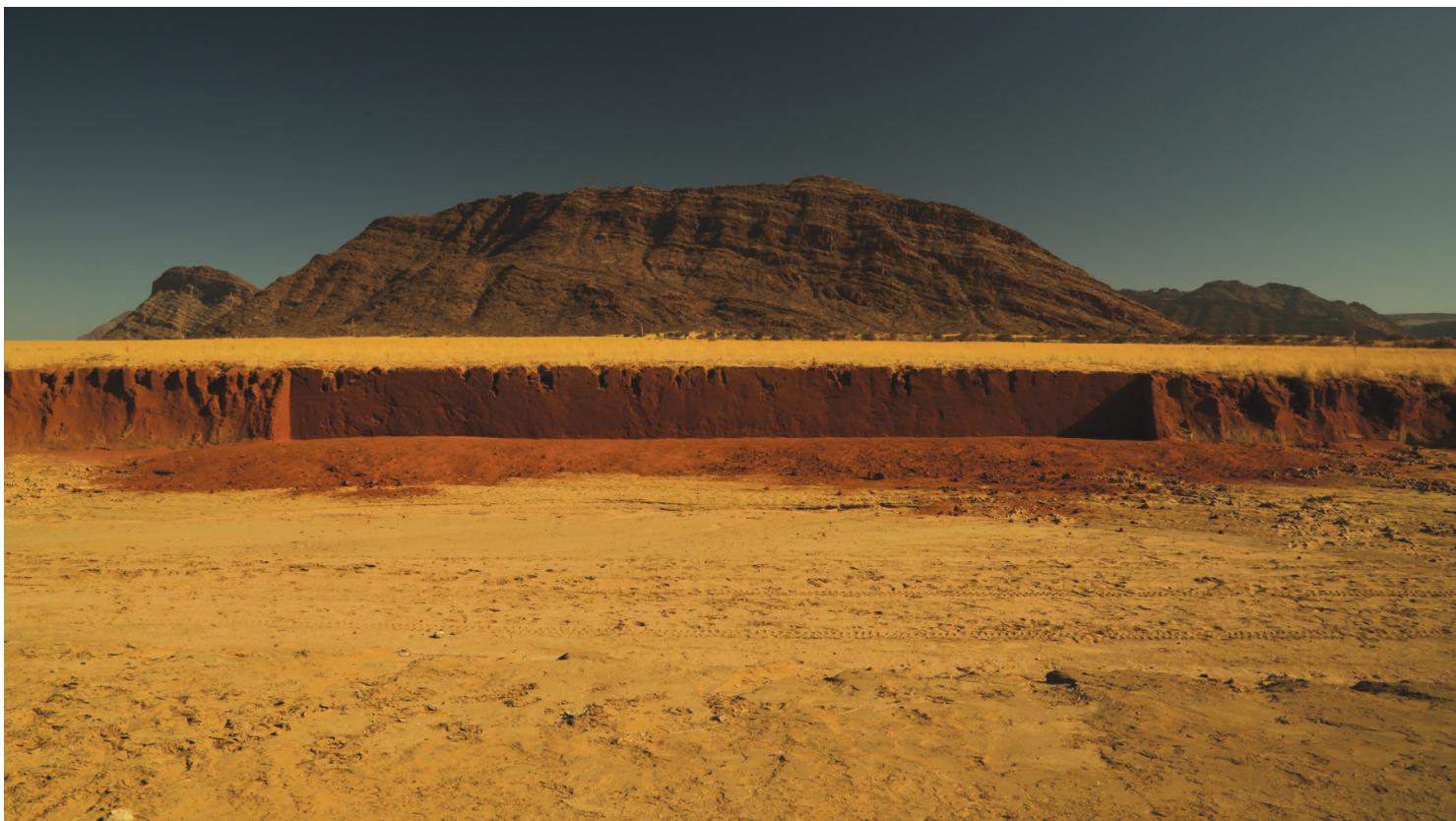
I began to build spaces. Straight and curved passageways narrow enough that my body brushed between the vast boulders, timeworn and bur-

nished by elephants rubbing against them and the walls I built around them. The sensuality of stone, space, light, and shadow, warm and cold. Spaces that catch the morning light as it slowly rises, one of the most beautiful occurrences for all the implications of what this light enables. That tremulous turning point between no light and a thread of light that for a moment you feel you can hold in your hand before

it brightens and hardens to move through its day.

The marble quarry inspired a more formal relationship with the work, white stone on white, sharp verticals and horizontal lines. Divided blocks returned to the extracted spaces, a dagger of light piercing the cut planes of the quarry walls. The marble had a crystalline texture that became alive in the rising light, each second





River bank 6, Curved, *Al Haruj Al Aswad, Central Libya* 2009



River Bank 7, Red, *Marienfluss*, 2012



Divided Block 2, evening light, *Onjuva, Orupembe, 2014*



Divided Block 3, *Onjuva Quarry, Orupembe, 2015*



Firestack, *Autumn, Aird Bheag, Outer Hebrides, 2016*

a change of nuance in the color and tone of the shadow from deep Prussian blue black to a rich hue of brown madder.

Pure light for its own sake. It rises, moves across the plane, returns to the shadows, every day.

Film and sound has enabled me a more immediate and visceral expression of the sculptural work where I can invite the audience into these spaces, these subtle shifts of light, the sound and weight of the earth.

Exploring the *Firestacks* anew on a different coastline in the Outer Hebrides, 25 years later I understand that their power is their choreography of time. The *Firestack* is a visual catalyst for observing and experiencing the push and pull of the tide, the gravity of the moon, the unseen made visible. The physical experience of the resistance of the fire and form to the inexorable rise of the water. In Winter the storm surges bring the sea flow in fast, one wave almost overwhelming the fire when seconds before the entire stack was exposed, before drawing all the way

out again leaving a suspended pause of silence before the next wave. You find yourself holding your breath. Their destruction is an inherent part of their being.

In summer, the sea was calmer, the tides rising incrementally allowing me to observe the more subtle qualities of movement, the pulse of the underlying sea swell, and still that tension of resistance is there. The seawater was unexpectedly clear, the transparency of the water illuminated by the firelight gave a different dimension of depth and gaze. The

wind made visible as it swept and trilled the surface, murmurings of shifting tones and ruffled surface. The hydrophones picked up the moments of fire meeting water, the grinding of stone against one another as the sea swell shifted their weight without making them fall.

The right rhythms found in the film material from a cycle of building, firing and falling, or a single image can continue to convey that sense of the present in time. A moment of distillation that goes on resonating,