

BOLEE AND WORKMAN

In the field: Uncovering the work of Jonathan Michael Ray by Dr Matt Retallick

—

The Orkney imagination is haunted by time¹ – George Mackay Brown

Field Work is an exhibition about a distinct moment in time in Jonathan Michael Ray's life, but it is also an archaeological dig through impermanence. In 2023, Ray spent a month on residency in Orkney and, as an artist who lives and works in Cornwall, the isles of Mainland, Hoy or Rousay at first offered a certain coastal familiarity. However, in his explorations across the sparse Scottish archipelago, a wealth of unforeseen inspiration was revealed. The discoveries he made while on Orkney have led to a body of work rooted to the culture of its unique landscapes, history, folklore, poetry, art and music. These newly conceived works, including wall-based sculpture, assemblage, drawing, and photography are brought together here for the first time.

In the assemblages *Fieldwork* and *Seaview*, objects and images coalesce in shrine-like communion. The exhibition title piece, *Fieldwork*, includes a photograph of a standing stone of sorts: a fence post wrapped in barbed wire, an example of immovable boundary markers seen across Orkney. On a shelf below the image are stones collected on the coast near Yesnaby and Birsay: sandstone, flagstone and basalt. Having sought the advice of a local archaeologist Christopher Gee, Ray's interest in Orcadian geology grew while tramping across the landscape, taking photographs, and collecting specimens. What he found most curious, though, was the human use of stone, as tools and markers, and the visible evidence of the human interaction and creativity left behind. The roughly sculpted stones on the shelf are experimentations. Loosely based on the mysterious neolithic "art objects" found in Orkney digs, they are a means of understanding the physicality of material and use, with carving marks and furrows visible as lasting evidence.

Seaview presents a photograph taken at the window of a ruined crofter's cottage in Rackwick, on the Isle of Hoy. Now nearly uninhabited and magical in its remoteness, it is a place repeatedly referenced in local folklore, and once a retreat for various creatives: the composer Sir Peter Maxwell Davies spent thirty years there, and landscape artist Sylvia Wishart repeatedly painted its views from her window. Wishart's compositions include the reflections of the room in the window glazing, and objects and ornaments from her home such as a ship in a bottle, fruit, and shells, and these Ray references directly. His explorations in how lives shape the area quickly turn into a fascination.

¹ George Mackay Brown. *An Orkney Tapestry* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1969), p. 26.

Take, for instance, his visits to St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, where he focused his attention on its highly stylised and imposing 17th-century memorial stones that line its interior. Although initially perceived as elaborate, with their carved script and symbols, they offer little sense of the person they aim to commemorate. In his poem *The Year of the Whale* Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown wrote, '*the kirkyard is full of their names, chiselled in stone.*'² To read them is to be faced with an existential emptiness, an uncanny memento mori. Ray responds to that acute feeling of eeriness in a pair of works titled after two Mackay Brown poems, *Beachcomber* and *Taxman*. It is somewhat rare that a poet is exclusively associated with a particular place, but through Mackay Brown, Ray gained a heightened understanding of Orkney's intricacies: reflecting his practice and experience. *Beachcomber* echoes his constant searching for, and the gathering of, objects and images. *Taxman* offers confirmation of that uncanny experience, a hauntology of momentary traces:

*Friday I held a seaman's skull,
Sand spilling from it
The way time is told on kirkyard stones.*³

Mackay Brown considers the eternal cycle of life, and the spectres of those lost to the ocean are felt in Ray's work *Fleeting*, formed of three reclaimed slabs of sandstone from Orkney, and faced with a jumble of black lettering. Poetry is again the starting point: in this case the concrete poetry of former Orkney resident Ian Hamilton Finlay. The inscribed letters take the names of the twenty four German battleships and cruisers that were scuttled in Scapa Flow on 21 June, 1919. Names like Baden, Dresden and Friedrich der Grosse, muddle together. As the viewer, you pick through the letters, aiming to make sense of them. Scapa Flow's turbulent history returns in this artwork: a strange sense of an experience out of reach, or something beyond the bounds of clear understanding.

Pilgrim is also a reliquary and memorial, comprising of items Ray inherited from his grandmother, Pamela June Orris, following her death in 2022. Although these objects are of little monetary value, there is a strong sentimental attachment. The John Barleycorn jug, the Lladró porcelain angel, sea shells, a golden carriage clock, handwritten notes, a radiator key, a button from her tam-o'-shanter. These everyday objects, collected by Pamela throughout her life, have become important symbols of recollection. In this respect, Ray is interested in how we project meaning onto things; the Barleycorn jug, much admired by him since he was a boy, transpired to have meant very little to his grandmother.

Shroud, in a similar way, is about the experience of a loved one, in this case the artist's four-year-old daughter, Arden. When she and Ray's wife Hannah visited him in Orkney, Arden, then three, accidentally swallowed a 5p coin and was taken to A&E, a 30-minute drive away.

² *The Year of the Whale* by George Mackay Brown. *The Year of the Whale* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965)

³ *Beachcomber* by George Mackay Brown. *Fishermen with Ploughs. A Poem Cycle* (London: Hogarth Press, 1971)

The image in *Shroud* is the X-Ray of Arden's chest, from that visit, now framed and enshrined by a curtain, a feretory where the relic it contains is revealed on raising the cloth. Ray spent time visiting Orkney's many vacant neolithic burial chambers, thinking about the skeletons that were once at rest there. This X-Ray bridges a gap between the past and present, something that seemed too alluring to ignore, and spoke of an overarching impulse of his artistic practice.

Jonathan Michael Ray is a seeker of chance. His practice, firmly rooted in encounter, sees the gathering together of the various materials, artefacts and stories that he finds, in order to communicate the layered uniqueness of a place. Ray's source material, accumulated like a Wunderkammer, is seemingly ancient and solid. But his work inaugurates diversified relationships that require us to think again. These are explorations in narrative through assemblage, where the slippages of time are made palpable. Everything is always changing; nothing stays the same.

Included in the exhibition are two specially assembled vitrines, filled with artefacts on loan from the Gardemeles Museum. Situated on Sanday, one of the outer isles of Orkney, the museum archives an ever-growing collection of objects brought in and left behind by humans, sea and sky.

Many thanks to Rosey Priestman, founder of Gardemeles Museum, for her generous involvement in the exhibition, and to the Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust, Visual Arts Scotland and Pier Arts Centre for supporting Jonathan's residency on Orkney.