

# Immediately Intimate

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My practice begins with an initial connection to landscape. This project emerged while climbing Cadair Idris in Snowdonia, Wales. I felt continuously drawn to the mountain landscape but was aware that my interest extended beyond the material features of place. I wanted to explore a connection that intertwines the physical and metaphysical experience of nature. Influenced by zen practice, I was drawn to Nan Shepherd's writing. Her book, *The Living Mountain* explores ideas of embodiment and Buddhist philosophy through her relationship to the mountain, this both inspired and instigated questions of my own connection and detachment to landscape which would come to inform this body of work. Drawing on the sensual experience of landscape, I began to explore ideas of transformation and memory that would navigate between the geological and psychological experience of landscape. I noted how different senses were engaged as I climbed, the mountain seemed to slowly reveal itself through sounds, textures and smells. Reaching the mountain's first peak, it begins to surround and engulf, there is no external view as you enter the belly of Idris, perspective shifts from the exterior to the interior terrain. I felt the impact of this shift in mind and body. As I walked, I gathered visual information, taking photographs and videos, making notes and recording words or sounds that came to mind.

Developing ideas in the studio, I felt the need to anchor my work in the physicality of place, I returned to the sounds and sensations of water in Cadair Idris. The immersive roaring of waterfalls and rivers, the stillness of the lake, the blinding fog that moves and morphs perspective, water carves and caresses the mountain, it has an ever-shifting structure. The power of water is in its dichotomy, its ability to be at odds with itself. Both deafening and silent, moving and still. Creating this body of work, I attempted to explore dichotomies that interweave landscape, memory and experience, observing a fragility and transience that exists simultaneously with an endurance and permeability. I began to work in relief, making large detailed images of the mountain exterior. Working from photographs, I disrupted images through blurring or adding a bitmap dissolve the solidity of the mountain. Printing the woodblocks, I could engage further with the theme through masking and distorting the mountain image. As I printed the woodblocks, I applied masks that changed the form of the image, each print would reveal more or less of the mountain. I wanted to acknowledge shifts in memory over time through the mountain growing or eroding within the series.

The landscape alters through time, land emerges from the sea, erupting, growing and standing tall until it erodes, cracks and falls, finding its way back to the sea. Our environment is an ever-changing cycle that exists over deep time. The Andes and Himalayas will be unrecognisable in 300 million years. Oceans, islands and deserts all altering over great expanse of time, almost impossible to fathom from our minute lifespan.<sup>1</sup>Mountains like the mind are in a constant state of flux that is not always apparent. The mind frames and selects memories that shift, transforms and erode through the currents of time. Climbing higher, thick clouds of fog distort perspective, dissolving all views. Everything except the immediate foreground is obscured, as you edge closer, contours emerge and shift, there is always a distance exists between you and the full picture. Considering this distance, I began to create more delicate work in Lithography, suggestions of water and mist on transparent Japanese paper that would veil and layer my relief work, concealing parts of the image.

I began the series focusing on a set of large exterior images, I now wanted to develop the work further through examining the internal details within the mountain. The textures and marks I could touch and examine only on close inspection, I wanted to create a sense of separation, a trace of time found in the landscape. I felt I could achieve the intimacy and soft aesthetic I was after through etching. I extricated details from my photographs, closely examining their significance, I treated them like particles of memory about to dissolve. Time slowly changes the form of all things, certain elements of memory are accentuated while others fall away, the residue of experience remains like a fossil in the landscape of our mind. I worked with small copper plates, masking shapes and creating soft tones and edges in aquatint and spit bite. The details and scale of the images appeared abstract, separated from the landscape from which they had emerged. Working back and forth through different prints, I could more easily understand what each piece required, I began to print the small etching on large sheets of Rospaina paper, the negative space allowed me to depict a sense of time as it intensified the dichotomy within the work and accentuated the concept of separation and connection running through the series. I felt this would initiate a dialogue, inviting the viewer in to a more intimate space and perhaps prompting a consideration of the relationship between memory and experience.

Working on several pieces at one time, I found a rhythm that fluctuated between abstract and representative. I responded instinctively to each proof, sometimes drawing on a new plate or finding a detail within a print that I wanted to refine or reassemble. I moved back and forth between proofs, listening to each print and making subtle interventions, building and honing a language that felt appropriate. As the series developed, I became more purposeful, asking myself to describe the feeling I wanted from each piece using keywords. I would write lists of words I had collected from the mountain, words that kept reemerging as I worked: separation, connection, absence, presence, movement, stillness. How can my materials reflect both tension and release? How can an image be moving and still? If I found myself repeating a word or describing an emotion that was not evident in the work, I would rethink and remake until I felt it embodied that description. Through this continuous questioning I felt the work became more honest. Engaging in various processes, I found a continuity in the work through my materials, I worked primarily with Japanese paper which allowed me to maintain a harmony within the series. The delicate texture and resilience of gampi and Kitikata aligned well the visual language I was developing.

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<sup>1</sup> Macfarlane, R.(2003) *Mountains Of The Mind*. London: Granta Publications p.43

Several of my final pieces, were printed and waxed as separate elements, I felt subtle components of stitch would allow me to connect the layers, both physically and metaphorically. I created complex digital drawings, searching for a sense of rhythm and flow intrinsic in nature. I made preliminary tests on the machine, checking how the stitch and tension would behave on my prints, the process was playful but challenging, my fragile Japanese paper often bunched or tore in the machine. I responded accordingly, adjusting my drawings or manipulating the machine settings. My initial embroidery pieces seemed too descriptive and created imbalance within the image, I needed to allow space for both elements to co-exist harmoniously. My drawings developed intuitively as fragmented areas of stitch mapping the landscape. I became receptive and in tune to the possibilities and limitations of the process as my results began to influence my prints.

I pared back detail, extracting outlines and shape allowing the stitch to form light and energetic lines that would separate and become raised from the paper, creating a sense of space that amplified the contradiction between movement and stillness. This in-between space transformed the work as sculptural and vivid allowing the gap between memory and experience to be read more clearly. The stitch felt lyrical and true to the sounds and silence of Cadair Idris, as Thomas Burnet had described the Alps in 1681 as '*These sonic mountainous parts*'.<sup>2</sup>

Working in a series has enabled me to create in a way that recognises and accepts the connection and co- existence of dichotomies within landscape. Moving between processes and prints has allowed me to develop a greater understanding of the interwoven nature of mind and landscape. Working for over a year on this series, I could dig deeper into abstract concepts, the space and dialogue I developed between making and unmaking allowed me to weave a richer narrative through my work. I created, only to unravel, I built layers so I could unpeel them, finding a language that could hold work suspended between movement and stillness, resistance and surrender and an apparent longing to reconnect the fragmented.

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<sup>2</sup> Macfarlane, R. (2003) *Mountains Of The Mind*. London: Granta Publications p.24