



All Rivers Run North
a text by Fiona Curran

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The shore is an ancient world, for as long as there has been an earth and sea there has been this place of the meeting of land and water. Yet it is a world that keeps alive the sense of continuing creation and of the relentless drive of life.

Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (1955)

There is also an ecology of the world within our bodies

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962)

The figure is dressed in black and stands, knee deep, in water. Her arms hang down and her hands are covered in a substance of some kind, a clump of dense black with what appears to be a mass of tendrils spilling from her fingertips. It's difficult to make out where her body ends and this unsettling, creaturely form begins. I think about selkies, those mythical creatures of folklore that shapeshift between being human and seal, shedding their skin as they go. Perhaps this woman is shedding her skin in the process of transformation? I watch as her tendrils spill into the water and begin to spread out, to float, moving with the water's flow, shapeshifting once again into plant-like forms, seaweed or algae. Now buoyant, they seem content to go where the water takes them.

Later, I see these tendrilled black forms hanging on a white wall and only then do I realise that they begin with gloves whose fingers extend and unravel, long threads tangling with one another. The artist tells me that she weaves the gloves flat and then forms them around her hands. Initially created both at one remove from the body but also intimately connected to the body, once complete, the gloves are then worn in performances that take place in water, in rivers or sea. These "lived" moments of the performances and the photographs that document them then inform the construction of larger scale works in the studio in what the artist refers to as a "new representation of place."

It is this bodily connection to working with materials and place that seems to define Rachel Johnston's artistic practice. Working with a range of different media, materials and processes of making across drawing, performance, photography and tapestry, there's a crossing of categories and a resistance to being fixed by a single approach. This sense of movement and multiple perspectives is also reflected in Johnston's exploration of the Isle of Wight, the island off the south coast of England, where her exhibition *All Rivers Run North* is taking place. For the past year the island's story has become her story, its geological and fluvial histories intertwining with her own physical and psychological immersion with specific places around the island's coastline. Geological history teaches us that place – the land that we may appeal to for a sense of timelessness - has always been, and continues to be, in a state of constant change. The continents are still drifting, coastlines continue to erode under the pressures of the sea and tides. 'Here' is a momentary experience of encounter in terms of nonhuman timescales and, as a consequence, stories rooted in place are always unfinished narratives.

In a series of photographs called *River Shoes* we see the artist's feet wearing hand woven shoes standing in water. The images change - in the colour of the shoes or the water, the patterns of light, the presence of pebbles or vegetation - but the subject matter and the perspective (looking down from Johnston's own viewpoint of her body) stays the same. The artist tells me of a conversation with island environmentalist Ian Boyd who explained how all the rivers on the island "run North" and that the rivers are still young in geological terms and are therefore in the process of "becoming". This has something to do with gravitational fields and the particular lie of the land, but beyond the scientific explanation a more poetic sense of things in formation emerges, of the earth as a living process undergoing continuous creation. Tapestry weaving, which is central to Johnston's practice, has the capacity to act as a metaphor for this notion of things in formation. Tapestries have an interwoven structure that gestures towards ideas of entanglement, of threads coming together. Throughout history it has been linked to the telling of yarns through the intersection of warp and weft, textile and text, picking and unpicking. Narratives are composed of webs of time, people, places, animals, plants, insects, materials and things that are woven together and rewoven again and again with each new telling. Rachel Johnston's tapestries draw from these histories bringing them into dialogue with place, with stories of land and sea. In many of the works the warp threads are exposed or left to hang loose at the edges suggesting forms that remain in flux. *Subtle Increase* and *Of Heights and Distances* are body sized, wall-hung works that show their physicality, a visceral sense of their weight. They sag and bend, tilt and fall. Johnston tells me of the importance of the ways the tapestry changes once it's cut free of the loom on which it's worked, how the materials then take over to literally push and pull the work in new directions beyond the intentions of the artist. This sense of uncertainty and "not-knowing" gives the work its meaning and aligns it once more with natural forces that are beyond human control.

In nature nothing is still. The landscape of the island which seems to speak of solidity and permanence bears the visible marks of its movement in the patterns formed within the rock strata. Johnston shows me photographs that she has taken around the coast and speaks of the different impacts of time, weather and water in relation to the particular orientation of the land. I can see the subtle changes in the presence of different minerals which influence the colours, patterns and textures of the rocks and cliffs. These emerge within some of the smaller tapestries where geometric shapes hover over open warps or appear as stacked woven strips. In works including *Clay* and *Strata* Johnston has used ancient knotting and wrapping techniques, mixing dense collections of individual threads that collectively twist around the warp to reveal lines that act like faults and fractures mimicking processes of sedimentation. In *Cosmos* a series of narrow woven strips in different colours hang down vertically in a row fixed at the top. The pieces move and sway in response to the air in the space, creating their own rhythm reminding us that it is cosmic forces - the sun, moon and distant stars - that set the tides in motion, but it is local topographies that determine their specific pattern and movement.

A further reference point in Johnston's work has been the Scandinavian tradition of Rya weaving which involves building up a densely textured surface through knotting techniques. The finished textiles originally mimicked fur and were used by mariners to protect them against the harsh

weather conditions in the North. I picture fisherman covered in Ryas, shapeshifting into creatures, part-human, part-animal, like the selkie I imagined on first encountering Johnston's work. She speaks to me of the importance of the "heft of things", a beautiful Middle English word that describes weight through the feeling and sensations of the body rather than through abstract measurement. This notion of the heft of things, of feeling the world *through* our bodies (like the weight of a Rya rug worn against the skin) seems to me to capture all that is present in the works in this exhibition with their entanglements of body and world, of memory and duration, of local place and the wider cosmos.

Fiona Curran is an artist with an interest in the poetics and the politics of landscape space. She teaches at the Royal College of Art in London and works from her studio at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridge

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Commissioned as a response to the exhibition

All Rivers Run North

Rachel Johnston

WEST GALLERY, Quay Arts, Sea Street, Newport Harbour, Isle of Wight,
PO30 5BD

30th October to 2nd January 2022



Supported using public funding by

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