

# DIGGING

Danny Leyland

Bryony Rose



PV 2/8 6-8PM

3-5/8 12-6PM

Embassy Gallery OFF-SITE project  
at Basic Mountain

+ clay workshops with Lydia McGinley

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**a serious note on action and things**

a text by Danny Leyland to do with the exhibition *Digging* (2018)

I have crossed the dunes with their whistling bent  
Where dry loose sand was riddling round the air  
And I'm walking the firm margin. White pocks  
Of cockle, blanched roofs of clam and oyster  
Hoard the moonlight, woven and unwoven  
Off the bay. At the far rocks  
A pale sud comes and goes.

Seamus Heaney, 1972,  
*Shore Women*

Under boards the mackerel slapped to death  
Yet still we took them in at every cast,  
Stiff flails of cold convulsed with their first  
breath...

... experience and memory are situated on the  
intersection of our personal lives and collective  
culture... they are thus simultaneously culturally  
constructed and personally lived.

Gender in the fishing community is both categori-  
cal and processual, both bodily and performative.  
Men and women, understood as different kinds of  
persons, demonstrate such differences through  
performance, and through the relationships they  
create.

In the beginning was the deed, Smiley liked to  
say to him, in his failed-priest mood, quoting from  
Goethe. For Jerry that simple statement had be-  
come a pillar of his uncomplicated philosophy.  
What a man thinks is his own business. What  
matters is what he does.

Anke Bangma, 2005,  
*Contested Terrains*

Cecilia Busby, 2000,  
*The Performance  
of Gender,*

John le Carre, 1977,  
*The Honourable  
Schoolboy*



above  
ceramic fish object  
gift from friend

This text is not an attempt by me to explain  
my work... Artist processes and investigations  
are not generally about universal truths, they  
take place in the realm of the unknown; they  
ask questions, instead of answering them. Ex-  
plaining my work, then, would be difficult, if not  
an impossibility. Rather, I would hope to raise  
points of interest. I would hope that people, you,  
other artists, will join me in a discussion about  
the ideas raised. I'm sure the ideas are not new,  
that they are shared concerns. I'm sure I have  
misunderstood many of the concepts I go on to  
talk about. Certainly, I've used them to my own  
advantage. I don't want to use text to buy cur-  
rency with my work in order to give it value. I  
want to use text to exchange my work for food,  
for fuel, to energise future discussion, and, of  
course, the making of future artwork.

What then is my focus? I was going to write  
about fish, because many people were asking  
me why I feature fish so widely in my work. And  
I do write about fish here, but I do not fully ex-  
pand on the subject. My focus, my point of inter-  
est, is more broad, more elusive, more (to me,  
anyway) confusing.

Actions. How do our actions define us? How are  
our actions situated in time and space? How are  
actions and objects related? These have been  
my concerns for at least the last two years.

Before Seamus Heaney's poem, *Shore Woman*,  
the epigram is given, 'Man to the hills, woman  
to the shore'. I do not imagine, here, that per-  
sons are bound to forever play roles defined by  
their biological sex. I imagine different people  
being called either 'men' or 'women' for acting  
differently in different places, and for the terms  
to mean different things too.



In different places, people can be different, can embody difference, by doing different things. This understanding encompasses a fluid understanding of the gendered body, and also of personhood more widely. Thus, in Rita Astuti's book, *People of the Sea*, persons from the Madagascan interior become Vezo (that is, of the Vezo people) by changing the way they do things, and acquiring a 'new identity in the present'. Villagers who move from one village, Belo, to another, Betania, begin to sail in a different fashion.

In the Keralan fishing communities, in opposition to the Shore Women epigram, it is the women who stick to the land. They go to market, and control the family's purse. Children have a freedom to explore, but when a girl grows up, she is no longer supposed to step on to the beach. It is not her realm, unless she is there with other women to bargain for a good catch to take to the market.

It was also so for the Fisherrow Fisherwives of East Lothian, of whom: 'It is said that three Fisherrow women once walked the 27 miles from Dunbar to Edinburgh, with 200 pounds of fish on their backs, in just 5 hours.' They carried the men in to the boats so their feet wouldn't get wet before going out to sea. And when the men came back with the catch, they prepared the fish in troughs of salt water, peppered with floating fish scales, their sharp knives darting and gutting this way and that. A sum of up to twenty thousand in one day has been given for the total of herring cleaned and gutted by one woman alone.

Many women were independent, and followed the herring season from East Anglia up to Shetland for work. As Cave Collective, a collaboration with artist Connie Hurley, we constructed and presented a *Creeler's Cottage* at Studio 24 (now sadly gone) for Rhythm Machine in February 2017, in which we imagined the (mythologised) home space of an independent fishwife. We called it a safe space, and it was full of per-

Rita Astuti (1995) *People of the sea: Identity and descent among the Vezo of Madagascar*.



Cecilia Busby (2000) *The Performance of Gender: an anthropology of everyday life in a South Indian fishing village*.

The John Gray Centre website.  
<https://www.johngraycentre.org/people/east-lothian-folk/the-fisherrow-fishwives/>



Margaret H. King (1992) *A Partnership of Equals: Women in Scottish East Coast Fishing Communities*.



a taste of milk and sugar from a shell, *Creeler's Cottage* (Cave Collective, 2017) at Rhythm Machine, Studio 24

Mikhail Bakhtin (1968)  
*Rabelais and His World*

Louise Milne (2008)  
*Mermaids and Dreams In Visual Culture*

images left from top.  
 holiday slides of Orkney  
 mainland, gift from friend,  
 and bottle cap from  
 Himachal Pradesh

formances, both big and small, with club-goers writing letters to each other, and whirling seaweed around their heads. But now I'm not sure whether it was a safe space. A weird space might be more accurate, a space of the upside-down, in which, through dialogue, through consumption (eating, drinking), and through laughter, a kind of anti-authority or at least anti-normal perspective was embodied. These are Bakhtinian ideas, and I am applying them retrospectively. In our research, we were hugely influenced by our mentor, guru, and friend Dr. Louise Milne, who is definitely the most erudite person I know.

All the artist community of Edinburgh knows that Rhythm Machine is oh-so-much-more than a club night. Fair commissions for emerging artists, safe enclosure for weird/experimental/ brave presentations of art work, and spine tingling music. This and more is provided for.



In August 2017, Rhythm Machine invited Cave Collective back again, this time at Summerhall, where we presented *Palais du Poisson*, something like a narrative sequel in the mythologised world we had created. We presented the character of the Fisher King from Arthurian romance, who invited the club-goers to ceremonially partake in consuming “weird” food and drink, including a gloopy slime (actually iced yoghurt), which, in a room stinking of fetid seaweed, and served from mussel shells, many

were reluctant to try! Fishy minions helped to process the participants, while in the room next door, musicians Bell Lungs and long term collaborator Euan Cowie, in the costumes of drowned sailors, played uncomfortable dirges, songs from beneath the sea. Participants were given a printed text which informed them of both their death and rebirth. I’m thinking of Bakhtin, again retrospectively, whose words about the nature of rebirth in the mediaeval carnival seem relevant: ‘the end must contain



film still from *Habitus* (2018), a work in progress: my Papa untangles the nets



potentialities of the new beginning, just as death leads to a new birth.'

In my work-in-progress film *Habitus* on show at *Digging*, made I should say with a long-term collaborator, the musician Euan Cowie, there is a sequence of my Mormor and Papa preparing an (unsuccessful) catch of fish in Sweden. Now they are old, though I also remember these scenes from my childhood. The motions, the twitch unfastening gill from net, are now exaggerated by Papa's tremor, a result of Parkinson's disease.

Observing his motions, playing out on screen, I daydream about motion capture technology. If I could record the way he handles the fish, I could conjure out of it something permanent. A colossal statue. Or a thousand statues churned from a 3D printer. But there is already something permanent in his movements. Not just the incurability of his Parkinsons, but the permanence of action, culturally and socially embodied, like a myth transmitted and adapted but essentially the same.

I met the artist Stefan Gant at Moel-y-Gaer hillfort in Bodfari, North Wales. An archaeological excavation in July 2018. Over several years of the excavation, he had been recording the movement of the archaeologists, the different movements orchestrated between trowel and earth, the chink and scrape of metal on rock. He created complex digital drawings which rendered the embodied materiality of these actions.

I also recorded the noise of the trowels. Euan Cowie used these recordings in his soundscape for the *Habitus* film.

My interest in archaeology has given me a new language by which to consider action. In a text for my exhibition *First There Was The Deed* (2018) I wrote about chimpanzees sitting around and grooming each other, an example



Stefan Gant & Paul Reilly (2018) *Different Expressions of the Same Mode: a recent dialogue between archaeological and contemporary drawing practices.*



for reviews, see the BBC Radio 5 Live website, or check BBC Sounds

Chris Gosden & Mark Pollard (2016) *Is the universe sentient, and what implications might that have for archaeology?* Podcast. <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/universe-sentient-and-what-implications-might-have-archaeology>

images left from top.  
beach coral, painted cast of sea rope, found sea rope  
image above  
garden hoe end, found object

taken from Gamble's 'Archaeology: The Basics'. The idea is that, like chimpanzees, we groom and knit our social relationships in to existence. With our fingertips.

Mark Kermode, a film critic I like very much, has often talked about the earthy quality of some films which have 'dirt under their fingernails', such as *God's Own Country* (2017), *Far From the Madding Crowd* (2015), *Lek and the Dogs* (2018), *'71* (2014). He describes watching an Andrew Kotting film as being like squatting down in a muddy field, squelching both your hands in the mud at your feet.

Imagine finding an object. You ask how it was made, what it was used for?

An object is surrounded by a complex network, a world of action, fusing together and organising society. In action we are not allowed to be isolated!

If nothing is the absence of things, then something, a "thing", to be of the world and in it, is to do with stuff. Professors Gosden and Pollard even go so far as to ask, in a podcast, whether perhaps objects create time? What they mean is that objects have their own time scales and interactions – their own agency.

In *Digging* I presented a felt rug. It's a compact piece, with printed fabric, and with toothbrushes, cast in jesmonite, dangling from its tassels. Embroidered into it are words from the Heaney poem *Shore Woman*. 'Under boards the mackerel slapped'.

I started making it on the Graduate Residency program at Hospitalfield, Arbroath, in the autumn of 2017. I'd learned the rudiments of felt-making over the previous few weeks, from a person in Aurignac, France, where I was helping to convert a barn into a working brewery. We ate homegrown tomatoes every lunch. On the weekends I went for long walks. In the evenings

we drank copious amounts of boxed wine, and played bar billiards. I destroyed the old septic tank with a jack-hammer, and rendered walls with lime-and-hemp.

The town of Aurignac gives its name to the Aurignacian period of the Palaeolithic. The area was littered with caves, or grottos, most of which have long since been emptied. Places where stone was worked in prehistory often bear names with a mechanical resonance. A pile of shards from thousands of years ago is called an 'axe factory'. But the factory was founded in the Industrial revolution of the British 18C.

Richard Bradley (2017)  
*A Geography of Offerings*

Jared Diamond (1998)  
*Guns, Germs, and Steel*

Elizabeth Wayland Barber  
(1994) *Women's Work: the first 20, 000 years*



The felt-maker in the house, who taught me the basic process, showed me a book with examples of traditional felt-making techniques from the central Asian steppe. Felt being rolled up and dragged along by horses, to fuse the rough woollen fibres together by the bump and drag of the stony desert. At Hospitalfield, I rolled up the rug and ran with it along the beach, and tied it to the saddle of a bicycle. There was some footage of this in Digging. To get the felt to this state, the wool was lathered up with a bar of tar soap, and I was on my hands and knees in football shorts, rubbing and squelching on a screen of bubble wrap. I squeaked again and again on the bubble wrap. My fingernails became spotlessly clean after two days of ceaseless rubbing.

Get your head down and rub the wool, boy!

During the residency, I was walking about the town with a camera strapped over my arm, and a man, who recognised the model, stopped to talk to me. He yelled when he spoke. Young people don't know how to work, he said. None of us do any work, he said.

People often assume that, with the dawn of agriculture, life became easier. The ground gave up more fruit, more surplus, and so we didn't have to work so much. Apparently this was not the case. There is a wonderful book called 'Women's Work: the first 20 000 years', by Elizabeth Barber, in which a startling account of working life after what has been called the Agricultural Revolution... includes a description of kneecaps worn to the cartledge from sitting at a grindstone. Teeth were worn away to bare gums,



(above left)  
paper anklets, film still  
from *Untitled* (2017),

(above right)  
photograph of me at the  
beach in Leven, 2018, with  
sea weed wands about my  
ankles

where they chomped pathetically on hard, pro-to-grain. These people were hungry. They had short, hard lives.

The ancient "Lion Man" sculpture from Hohlenstein-Stadel was featured in both the recent BBC series *Civilizations*, and also the British Museum series *Living With the Gods* (2018). The Lion Man is an astonishingly visually articulate and psychologically complex object. Experimental archaeologists have estimated that it would have taken an artist 320 hours to carve the ivory.



We talk about one artist.

Is it important to lose, or to find, the individual in the past? I don't know.

The problem quite often has been that the individual is always assumed to be a man. In ancient times, women have been allowed to be the muse, the goddess, but not the bard with a voice. Joseph Campbell makes a bizarre distinction. For him, it was men, clearly who produced the cave murals of which Lascaux is probably the most famous, while women, clearly, made the 'plastic', sculptural figurines.

Certainly, most contemporary thinking after Foucault would rather uncover the thought-systems of the past than just the nature of the thing or event itself.

Heaney talks about reclaiming the individual in relation to the Beowulf poem. This is not just a fancy, it is about having a better understanding of the poetry. The 'word hoard' is an heirloom, a cultural possession. But the figuration in rhythm, and in tone is of one collecting voice... The individual is the poem itself, not its creator.

By contextualising... are we in danger of losing the thing itself?

We have to place the Lion Man artist's actions, the movement of their chisel, in a larger web of actions. A web of meaning around an action, like a team of bodies focused on the grinding of the grain.

As an artist, you are as the trunk of a family tree, the singular point, and all above you is the ascending and expanding world of heritage, and influence. The branches are focused in you and your movements.

For archaeologists, concepts of labour and action are at the heart of defining and explaining society and culture, while such concepts owe an increasing debt to Bordieu's theory of Habitus, defined by Christopher Renfrew as 'permanent disposition, embodied, schemes of perception and thought, at a deeper level, in the form of bodily postures and stances, ways of standing,

Robert Graves (1948) *The White Goddess: a historical grammar of poetic myth*

Joseph Campbell. (2013) *Goddesses: myths of the feminine divine*

Michel Foucault (1989) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

Seamus Heaney. (1999) *Introduction to 'Beowulf'*

images

below. lead man, poured from mold with my dad, across from top.

painted wood objects, painted plaster cast of thistle, wood object far right. photo taken by Bryony Rose of St. Ninian's Cave (2018)



The concept of Habitus defined by Christopher Renfrew. Quoted on archaeologist Michael Shanks' website. <http://www.mshanks.com/2004/02/04/bourdieu-habitus/>





sitting, looking, speaking and walking'. For Busby, *Habitus* allows 'us to understand both the diversity of bodies and the similarity of the processes by which such diversity is produced.'

In preparation for *Digging*, I visited the town of Pittenweem in Fife, along with the other featured artist Bryony Rose, and Connie Hurley, this time in the role of curator with EMBASSY. It was rather an epic journey, and, by the time we got there, Connie had to rush back to Edinburgh for work in the evening after a grand stay of about ten minutes. After Kirkcaldy, we'd stopped in Leven. Bryony found a brick she liked, and took it home. It featured in the show. I think most people would find this a strange act. But Connie and I, as artists, encouraged it. 'It's a nice brick, you should probably take it.' I don't have much time for ascetic, digital artists, whose studio is the cloud, whose mind is a white box. Studios



should resemble a serial killer's bedroom in a bad movie, with objects and images obsessively categorised, various states of intense mess, and bits of string connecting disparate ideas. In the digital age, people's lives may theoretically rub less with the material world. It is essential for us artists to dig our heels in, and collect loads of stuff.

Bryony's work in the show was a trace-journey of objects. A row of delightful keepsakes. A series of mirrors glimpsing memories of the little.

photos on left, and bottom right, taken by Bryony Rose (2018): Penpont, and St. Finian's Cave  
photo below is of offerings left at Wayland's Smithy, Oxfordshire, taken by the author (2018)



here". But also corn sheafs, orange peel, copper coins, and feathers. These things cannot be understood to result from actions which mean the same as that which would have produced offerings in the ancient past. The sociocultural contexts, then and now, exist as across a gulf from one another. Notice how these things I described are of no commercial value. Of course, people may have left something valuable, and another person might have stolen it, but it is not likely. People have left something they hope will stick around. Something to be left alone. In the past, as we know, people offered things of immense value. By offered I mean that they were taken out of worldly circulation. By value I mean things that were relatively difficult to acquire, or produce. Ceramics, left destroyed at the bottom of flint mines; swords and sickles, deposited in the River Thames; vast quantities of gold, de-

**Materials** suggestive in a space, like incantations or charms.

Over the last few years I have made a special effort to visit some ancient monuments across the UK, including the stone circles of Avebury, Stenness, and Callanish; the passage tomb Bryn Celli-Ddu; and the long barrow Wayland's Smithy. This year, on New Year's Day, I swam in the waters of St. Anthony's Well in the Forest of Dean. In all of these places, things had been left behind by visitors. Graffiti in some cases. "I was





posited in ake Guitavita by the Muisca people in South America.

Offerings today mean different things to different people in different places, but they perhaps suggest what individuals, and society, want from the past in the present.

In a recent exhibition, *Spellbound* (2018), at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, a display of padlocks immediately evokes a vision of hundreds of bridges across Europe, where romantic couples have fastened these little gifts, these quaint promises to each other. What strange deeds.

At home, a person builds a hoard of objects. When a hoard is displaced, beware. It may be cursed, or a dragon may be guarding it.

When only the objects are left:

‘...I am left with nobody  
to bear a sword or burnish plated goblets,  
put a sheen on the cup. The companies have departed.  
The hard helmet, hasped with gold,  
will be stripped of its hoops; and the helmet-shiner  
who should polish the metal of the war-mask sleeps’  
*Beowulf*, translated by Seamus Heaney, 2252-2257

We mould ourselves against our objects; when our bodies, and our lives decay, objects fill the gap. A photograph becomes, at least for a time, a surrogate for a lost memory, or a lost life.

Once, I heard a poem on the radio. I can’t remember who wrote it or what it was called. In the poem, after the death of their father, the bereaved daughter, or son, had gone to the garden shed. An axe was wedged in a wood block, and, when they went to touch it, the handle was still warm.

For an exhibition called *Jouissance* (2017), I gave a talk (available online) called *My Small and Precious Objects*, about the memory, and performativity of objects. I am an object-sentimentalist.

below *An Uninhabited Longhouse* (2018), Bryony Rose



Fekri A. Hassan (2006)  
*Objects of the Past: re-  
focusing archaeology*

recorded artist chit-chat  
at *Jouissance*, with Cora  
James, Gemma Batchelor,  
Hannah Ustun, and  
myself. available online:  
[https://soundcloud.com/  
user-736103985](https://soundcloud.com/user-736103985)

The Guardian. Saturday  
23rd May, 2009. Robert  
Macfarlane. *Walk the Line*

Robert Macfarlane (2007)  
*The Wild Places*

artist & exhibition profile,  
Glasgow International  
Website. [https://glasgow-  
international.org/artists/  
megan-jones/](https://glasgow-international.org/artists/megan-jones/)

‘Thinking, as an embodied  
act, becomes weighty and  
almost corporeal when set  
to the continual cadence  
of movement within the  
landscape.’ *De Mirabilis  
Urbis (Glasgae)*, Megan  
Jones. Text for *Say What I  
Am Called*

website for Withkin project.  
Megan Jones. [https://with-  
kin.wixsite.com/withkin](https://withkin.wixsite.com/withkin)

**My bedroom objects are of the greatest significance.**

What I am exploring here is an idea of exchange, of negotiation. In my painting, *Untitled*, on show at Digging, I painted some of these objects. A ceramic fish. A headboard, etched with magic charms. Though I no longer live in that particular bedroom, I still have the objects. When they are about me, it is easy to feel like I still live there, to imagine the space, to see the tree outside, to see it play shadows across the wall. There are feet in this painting, rubbing up against the wall and the headboard. Feet are dirty, earthy, hard, real. They are very much of the world.

Under my toenails I trap the dirt of the world.

I want to keep Bryony’s sculptures, and take them home with me, but I think she has other plans for them.

The riso-printed map, available along with the show, illustrated some of the geographies associated with her sculptures, the pilgrim route from Galloway to Fife.

Pilgrims, visiting places, invest them with meaning.

Writing about Richard Long’s work, Robert Macfarlane goes back to a terminology rooted in hunting: ‘A creature’s “foil” is the track it leaves on grass or other surfaces, such as shale, snow, sand, forest floor.’ Elsewhere, Macfarlane has written about the Holloways in the English south. Holloways are deep tracks, pitted and overgrown after sustained use in to the earth, like worn steps...

I went to Bryony’s group show, *Say What I Am Called* at Glasgow International 2018, installed in the ruins of Caledonia Road Church. It was my favourite show of the festival. Later I met Megan Jones, a medievalist who wrote a fascinating piece as part of the project, and whose previous project, called *Within*, I promptly looked



up online. I recorded a conversation (available online ) with Megan in Glasgow because I wanted to talk about walking in art, but we ended up talking about all kinds of other things, including the rising interest from the American far-right in Western mediaeval culture. The “mediaeval thing” was also of interest to the fading British aristocracy in the late 19C. Flamboyant pageants and jousts were re-enacted for an audience who wished to reconnect with the emblems of a timeless heritage, to reaffirm a dwindling code of authority. Re-enactment can be seen to offer a framework for a re-structuring of the past for contemporary needs, as it often is for the needs of a wider audience. As we know, ‘the past influences the present and shapes the future.’

At the Whitechapel Gallery I saw Patrick Hough’s film *And If in a Thousand Years* (2017). We observe a sphinx, left behind in the Californian desert from the set of *The Ten Commandments* (1956), released from the ground in which it has been sleeping. I loved the idea of this. The trickery! An imitation of an ancient sphinx, uncovered through archaeology, a process associated with the discovery of objects-of-the-past. A process born of industrialisation, and colonialism. Nothing makes a thing more ancient than being left in the desert. The Hollywood glamour becomes mythic.

In my work-in-progress film *Habitus* I focused the lens on actions, some of which, such as kneading dough, preparing fish, and making paper paste, while not strictly re-enactments are yet embodied actions, or imitations of them. In contrast, I re-enact in the film a furious battle charge, which is strictly ludicrous, affected, but which comes closest to an action that is (I fancy) released from embodiment, is individualistic, subversive in disjunct.

I like the idea of my work being a re-enactment, and not just the felt-making, and the rolling of the felt on the beach in mime of the felt



being rolled on the central Asian steppe, but the painting too, and drawing, and the smaller interventions: the twiddling with clay, the small features of “artistic-action”, the products of which only make it as far as my bedroom-shelf.

above  
film still from *Habitus*  
(2018)  
right  
section of *Under Boards the Mackerel Slapped*  
(2018)







photo of install at *Digging* (2018) with, foreground, sculptures by Bryony Rose, and, background, paintings by Danny Leyland