

LANDSCAPE IN THE IMAGINAL

An Imaginally Enriched Episteme of Place



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SUMMARY

A place can be more alive than merely living, it can be tangibly alien and unending, as real to you as a lover, as mutually disclosing yet always receding, it can hold the weight of all your earthly doubts and crumble them in a seed. Here everything begins to shake, sway and shiver, words are wind whispers of an unabridged lore, it says “Remember To Die.”

This Masters of Fine Arts thesis consists of the artistic component, “Leposaari,” exhibited in Kuvan Kevät 2024 at the Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki, and the written component, “Landscape in the Imaginal, An Imaginally Enriched Episteme of Place.” The artistic component of the thesis consists of a hand drawn animation, a three dimensional lithograph, two drawings on found papers, a paper based sculptural form with printed components, a drypoint drawing on plexiglass and a sound work. The greatest commonality among them is the use of drawing both directly and through resultant prints. The works have a common prefix because they are each one part of a larger whole, all contributing to the emergence of the spirit of Leposaari.

The various artworks that make up “Leposaari,” appear out of the gradual development of a relationship between myself and the eponymous island in Eastern Helsinki. This island is arranged in concentric forms, the outer perimeter a shoreline of rocks and trees, held apart by a fence into a cemetery; the trees, rocks and gravestones all converging on a small chapel. The project of “Leposaari,” begins from a sense of existential necessity to move out of the mode of mere materialism, and into real contact with the eternality of experienced phenomena. In this project these poles are seen as the difference between abstract *space* and known *place*. Through ritualised visits to the island, with the intention and expectation of seeing beyond its constitutive parts, Leposaari gradually became a mythology, a truth in form, of the relationship between the living and the dead, and what holds them both together. The tree sentinels, the crow necromancer, the veil of the iron gate, and the promise of a love binding.

The artistic and written component of my thesis centres around the question of ‘relationship’ as it relates to a depicted landscape. In the written component, I consider and analyse the ideology and epistemology that underwrote traditional landscape art, and allied it to the colonial mission and the view of nature as merely a resource for human usage. I connect the loss of experiential transcendence post reformation, and the glorification of propositional knowledge of the enlightenment, to the eventual desacralizing of nature, and the eventual loss of meaningful connections between people and places. I make the argument in this paper that the view of landscape as space, is the view of a desacralized external world, which should be replaced by landscape as a reflection of an imaginably enriched relationship to a particular place, as the antidote, to the nomothetic quality of a materialist understanding of landscape. In this text I explain how I came to this reconfiguration of landscape art, and how this understanding eventuated in a practice involving an active relationship with the island Leposaari. I describe how this relationship informed my artistic practice and how this was made evident in the works themselves.

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LIST OF WORKS

Alexi Johnstone (1999)
Leposaari (Encounter)
2024
Engraving on plexiglass
154cm x 108cm

Alexi Johnstone (1999)
Leposaari (Map)
2024
Handmade paper, etching on paper
115cm x 102cm

Alexi Johnstone (1999)
Leposaari (Interior)
2024
Lithograph
20cm x 20cm

Alexi Johnstone (1999)
Leposaari (Myth)
2024
Hand drawn animation
1:53 min

Alexi Johnstone (1999)
Leposaari (Grid I)
2024
Drawing on found paper
63cm x 55cm

Alexi Johnstone
Leposaari (Grid II)
2024
Drawing on found paper
63cm x 55cm

Alexi Johnstone (coll. Iikkamatti Hauru) (1999)
Leposaari (Voice)
Soundtrack
2024
13.5 min

All works were exhibited at Kuvan Kevät 2024, at the Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki.

LANDSCAPE: MAPS AND TERRITORIES

I began the work as an artist firmly rooted in the realm of “Landscape Art,” and it was through an active reconsideration of the genre itself that the work that would become my thesis took shape. I have noticed that in the popular imagination, the idea of landscape art can leave a dusty aftertaste of the bygone, of dry earth, overused and under nourished. It can seem to nurture a type of conservatism that is responsible in part for the issues faced by its subject, that is, the chasm between humanity and the environment we live in. In order to continue working in this field, I felt that an audit of the assumptions, ideological stances and well trodden paths of landscape art was a necessity for moving forward. A critical inquiry that nevertheless maintained a hopeful optimism looking towards a practice and theoretical positioning that could circumvent these quandaries. So the question arose, is there a quality of traditional landscape art that allows its cohesion to a worldview that denigrates and imposes authority over the natural world?

“It is the “representational” character of landscapes that underpins its ideological character [...] It is often seen as tied to the way in which landscape ‘objectifies’ and even ‘commodifies’ that which it presents. The external environment is thus treated as an object made amenable to human purposes and interests - whether as an object available for enjoyment or contemplation or for production, development or exchange.”

(Malpas 2011, 7)



Fig. 1. John Glover, *Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point*, 1834, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Australia Archive. Available at: <https://searchthecollection.nga.gov.au/object/141634>.

In the above quotation, philosopher of space and place, Jeff Malpas, outlines what I too have recognized as the key issues of the common conception of landscape art, they are as follows; spectatorial representation, objectification and ideological projection. When thinking of landscape art, an image that is often conjured is a painting made in the 19th century, of a vast panorama, grand and demanding, a man standing on a rocky precipice

overlooking and somehow commanding the great wildness before him. Or perhaps a view of European rural life, tilled fields stretching across the terrain, blue haze on the horizon. Or the example Malpas gives in his text, "Place and the Problem of Landscape," of artist John Glover, an English settler in Tasmania in the early to mid 1800's, whose work, *Mount Wellington and Hobart Town from Kangaroo Point*, (Fig. 1.) is held in high esteem for its recording of the burgeoning settler colony. It displays clouds rolling over the mountain scape, blue skies, a serene and calm body of water, on one bank bathed in warm light the growing settler town, and on the other side in shadow, a group of native Tasmanians dancing and gathering around a campfire.

It is obvious from a quick reading that the historical value of the work is deeply biased, the painting coloured by a false romanticism that is incommensurate with the historical reality of power struggles over land and the oppression of the native Tasmanians. The over aestheticization of a land not bathed in golden light, but deluged in floods of violence, is a perfect synecdoche for the apparent issues of landscape art. Firstly, it is clear to see how such a work aligns itself, and bolsters the imperialist project. The creation of such works and promulgation to the masses back in mainland England, effectively functioned as propaganda for the colonial project. By working with such rose tinted glasses, the artist glorifies (or at least creates an apathy towards) the processes of imperial power. What is central in this issue is the assumption that the artwork functions as a historical record. This presupposes a certain objectivity, that the work simply presents the scene as it was, not only in terms of visual accuracy, i.e. placement of objects in perspective, precise colouring, attention to botanical detail, but also accuracy of atmosphere and character. This is the construal of landscape that assumes a detachment and separation or as Malpas calls it, a 'spectatorial representation', that is, when a landscape is "the [presentation] of the world as an object, as seen from a certain view, structured, framed and made available to our gaze." (Malpas 2011, 6) While this may seem to be simply another example of the issue of false objectivity, universal to artistic creation, I believe the way it appears in landscape art is of a particular order, of its own pernicious quality.

This spectatorial representation is a symptom of landscape seen as a static object, uniform and unchanging, and therefore completely outside of the domain we ascribe to living phenomena. A question arises out of this, from where does this static view of nature as seen in landscape art arise? In Malpas's text he explains that landscape art began to flourish in England in the 18th and 19th centuries (though the origin of landscape as a genre in Western European culture is linked to the 16th century, post reformation). (Malpas 2011, 14) This rise in popularity corresponds to the increased separation of people with nature, as rural life began to dwindle and industrial urban culture took over. Not only did this result in the migration out of the countryside into urban centres, but it also resulted in the eradication of the commons. The commons being the areas unsuitable for agriculture, and therefore left unowned and unmanaged, but available to the groups living near them. These would be the areas a population would hunt wild game, forage for berries and mushrooms, cut timber and collect clay for buildings and shepherd their domestic herds. This semi-wild domain provided agricultural populations with a connection to nature in an embodied, existentially significant and, in most cases, spiritual form. As market economies, industrialization and the spirit of colonialism expanded, the necessity to ascribe ownership and therefore guarded boundaries rose, which eventually led to the eradication of the commons as central to the lifestyle of the masses. American poet and essayist, Gary Snyder

makes the case that the eradication of the commons is a primary factor in the eventual commodification of nature as such. (Snyder 1990, 32) Access to nature became a luxury, and the experience of nature, an object for human usage. It is also worth noting that this is the period of time in which European imperialism reached its ultimate heights. Here there is a two-fold genesis of the detached mode; firstly as populations in their native land became dispossessed and disengaged with the natural world, and secondly, as the intellectual and metaphysical spirit that governed market economies and the colonial enterprise became the bedrock of western civilization.

This is where I believe the locus of the issue of landscape art lies; not in ontology, i.e. the form itself, landscape art as a category, but in epistemology, that is the ideological and metaphysical stance from which this popularised convention of the form arose. In Malpas' language, this is the acknowledgement that landscape is always "a view of a view," (Malpas 2011, 12) and therefore "depends on an involvement and orientation with respect to some place or locale." (Malpas 2011, 12) Another angle I took to arrive at the notion of the centrality of epistemology in landscape art, was to ask, what exactly is a landscape? The issue of "landscape," as such, is its wide reaching grasp. What makes a landscape, where do its borders end? The more I considered the nature of a landscape, the more I found it impossible to delineate; it is known intuitively but is not easily categorizable. In socio-geographer, Timothy Cresswell's, *Place: An Introduction*, he states that a landscape is "a portion of the earth's surface that can be viewed from one spot," (Cresswell 2015, 18) in this way a landscape is both restricted to the subjective experience of a singular point of view, yet extends to the entire scope of visible perception, a landscape is all that can be perceived in a given moment. From this it can be concluded that to consider landscape, is to consider perception itself.

Cognitive scientist John Vervaeke proposes that the concept of "relevance realisation," is central to perception, relevance realisation being how and to what effect the infinite scope of information is filtered and condensed so that a singular thing can be perceived at all. (Vervaeke, 2019) In this frame of relevance realisation, a host of prior assumptions, totally unconscious, are the foundations of our perception, and the relevance of certain information is made apparent through these presuppositions. Our perception, in its most basic sense, is ordered by what is considered most meaningful or important or useful to the perceiver. Considering this, and the notion of the singular point of view in landscape, it was made apparent to me the significance of subjectivity in the realm of landscape art, and therefore to wonder what were the basic assumptions of the Western consumerist and imperialist mindset, identified earlier as the genesis of the pernicious form of landscape art. Additionally, it required *me* to consider what might be the prior assumptions that guide *my* perception.

These prior assumptions are the intellectual and spiritual food we are raised on, the way we understand truth to be revealed, both in the grand sense of truth, of the nature of reality, and the more simplistic sense, what is useful or necessary. In this way, these prior assumptions are the forms of experience or understanding we consider to be legitimate forms of knowing, and which forms of knowing we value more highly, profoundly informs our perception. When considering the time period that landscape art flourished (18th, 19th, early 20th centuries) in Western societies, there is a clear chronological correlation with the so called Age of Enlightenment. This intellectual revolution was also called the Age of

Reason due to its exoneration of rationalism and empiricism. However, I would argue that the true origins of the particular worldview I will be discussing begins earlier, as with the beginning of landscape art in Europe, with the protestant revolution. Looking at the two frameworks important to the two eras, that is the Cartesian duality of the enlightenment, separation of mind and matter, and the insistence on individual salvation and personal belief in protestantism, we can see a throughline.

In Professor John Vervaeke's Lecture, 'Awakening From the Meaning Crisis - Martin Luther and Descartes' he considers how the Protestant revolution laid the foundations for the desacralizing of the world and the eventual materialism characteristic of post-enlightenment ideologies. (Vervaeke, 2019) He explains that after Luther's condemnation of the Catholic church, the form of christian spirituality that replaced it was one of a particularly individualistic mode, wherein the capacity for spiritual salvation relied only on a statement of faith and the randomly applied grace of God. (Vervaeke, 2019) What resulted from this theological revolution was a demystification of the world, the relationship between the human and the transcendent retreated into mere belief with no capacity for actualization through ritual or practise. As a result, an embodied, experiential spiritual life is replaced with a mental, propositional maintenance of belief. Vervaeke explains that this retreat of the sacred into the individual mind laid the groundwork for an experience of the world devoid of experiential meaning, where "the cosmos is not experienced as cosmos, meaning a beautiful order that we can participate in," (Vervaeke, 2019) instead revelation of truth can only be found through the holding in faith an abstract and unexperienced truth. In a worldview where phenomena outside of the internal frame is not inherently meaningful, there arises a two fold issue, meaninglessness and uncertainty, and Vervaeke claims that thinkers like Descartes took on their scientific worldview as a tool to face both problems. (Vervaeke, 2019) This refers to the Cartesian emphasis on mathematics as a language to understand phenomena and as a result the assumption that factual propositions confirmed by empirical data provided epistemic certainty. This type of epistemic certainty and categorical clarity, seemingly corrects for the issue of chaos and opacity in a universe that is no longer a cosmos. However, the question of whether this solution solved the issue of meaninglessness, is to me the hole in the worldview of the enlightenment.

The prior assumptions of the enlightenment, and a type of scientism that followed it, bolster a particular form of understanding the world. In Vervaekean language, this is the realm of the propositional, this term refers to the type of knowing that governs facts, data, equations, and more generally truth claims, i.e. a tree is a plant, the square root of 16 is 4, a water molecule contains two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen. The estimation of this way of understanding, not only provided a desired clarity, but also a desired power. To be able to understand the mechanisms of the natural world in such a way allows for highly effective manipulation of them, and therefore a great capacity for the assertion of power over them. As the strength of a particularly scientific, and therefore rational and empirically oriented worldview took hold, the more the nonhuman world became knowable, graspable and available for use. The result of which is a relation mediated only by the abstraction of the phenomena, into species type, chemical composition, mathematical equation etc, which in turn strips the experienced other of their existential significance outside of their resource potential. Returning to the idea of relevance realisation, mentioned above, the post enlightenment enthroning of the propositional, is

not merely an issue of academic consideration, but an issue of perception itself. For the unwaveringly scientific, what is available to be perceived and imbibed is necessarily coherent with this world view.

The over emphasis of propositional knowledge is not merely a cultural artefact, but a limiting factor of what we can perceive in the most fundamental sense. This overemphasis of factual knowledge produces a reduction in the scope of relevance realisation, it makes the borders of the knowable contract to a point of extreme blindness to the world at large. In philosopher Charles Taylor's book, *A Secular Age*, he explains that to live within this propositional model is to experience the world in the immanent frame. (Taylor 2007, 541) The immanent frame is an image of a world governed by 'natural laws.' The immanent frame is a closed system, wherein phenomena act and react according to laws that remain constant over time and space. This type of self-world relation creates the image of the human as intrinsically self-sufficient, what exists outside of the individual mind does not impede, alter or influence the inner life. (Taylor 2007, 542) This is the subject-object dualism that the modern human assumes, that the human mind is contained but agential, and the outer world is extensive but not intelligent. This form of relation allows for the scientific process to be extremely effective, to assume the outer world is a static object provides the capacity to search and decode the natural laws. I am not arguing against the reality of the natural laws in this paper, as described earlier the power given by the knowledge of natural systems is evident throughout the world, often in alarming ways. Instead, the issue of the immanent frame is that it denies the possibility of transcendence, transcendence properly understood as extra-ordinary interventions that break with an assumed order. To accept the immanent frame, is to reject the notion that the natural world is a reflection of the godhead, a field of spirits and agents, inherently connected to the divine. In the immanent frame, the natural world is merely material existing according to an unbroken natural law.

PLACE AND SPACE

“By losing its ties to divinity, nature had nothing attached to it that raised it above the political and economic interests of acquisition and exploitation. Rather than something higher to which sober attention and even a form of reverence shown, nature falls under human subjugation”

(Kort 2011, 34)

“It is becoming impossible to escape the notion that nature is being murdered by anti-nature - by abstraction, by signs and images, by discourse as also by labour and its products. Along with God, nature is dying.”

(Lefebvre 1991, 70)

As the above quotations note, the absence of divinity and sacrality defines the relationship to the nonhuman in a post enlightenment world; it is the assumption of a purely material reality that creates the conditions for a resource oriented epistema. The initial retreat of the sacred following the reformation continued as the secularity of the enlightenment became the obvious rational stance toward the cosmos. In historian and writer, Mircea Eliade's, *The Sacred and the Profane*, he explains how a previously sacral relationship to space, notable for its defined boundaries between spaces that are qualitatively different from each other, is replaced by profane space, defined by its homogeneity and neutrality. (Eliade 1961, 20) This view of space has its presupposition in geometry, space is mere expanse, and it “appears and disappears in accordance with the needs of the day.” (Eliade 1961, 23)

Beginning in the 1970's, socio-geographers began to focus on a study of “place,” in opposition to the spatial science most popular at the time. As Tim Cresswell noted, that using the focus of “space, is amenable to the abstraction of spatial science and economic rationality, [but] place is amenable to discussions of things such as ‘value’ and ‘belonging.’” (Cresswell 2015, 26) What is crucial to the study of place is its necessary involvement in ways of knowing that are distinctly qualitative rather than quantitative, where “space has been [...] a realm without meaning,” in the study of place, “we see attachments and connections between peoples and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience.” (Cresswell 2015, 19) Cresswell considers this outlook to be resisting the insistence of scientism in the world, a way to be free of explaining things merely through facts and data. This place based thinking appealed to me because it is not a study of individual locales, of definition and differentiation, i.e. ontology, but it is a study of a way of knowing the world, place based thinking is a call to relationship and a different form of epistemology.

Returning to the issue of landscape art, early in my own working process I began to notice a tension I believe characteristic of the difference between space and place based thinking. Briefly, my prior working format was to collect various images and sketches of locations I had visited, then return to my studio, often weeks or months later, and complete the work, (a painting, print, etc.). As I continued in this way of working I gradually felt a certain apathy developing; the distance (literally, as well as in time and in feeling) between the inspiration of the experience when encountering an environment and the final production of the work was creating a gaping hole of indifference. My relationship to the subject was

so removed from the artistic engagement, that it no longer appeared in the works as itself, but instead functioned as a placeholder for the idea of a landscape. I soon realised I was employing these landscapes in the same way a scientific diagram is used, as a tool to impose an idea, concept and belief. I was mistaking the reality of my subject for an abstraction that referred to it.

Referring back to the previous section, the elaboration of the zeitgeist that gave rise to popular landscape art, the clarity and objectivity, and the lack of lived relationship to the subject, so prevalent in post enlightenment society, remained present in my own prior assumptions. What became the flaw in the working model was the separation, both internal and external, (subject-object ontology, and physical separateness) between myself and the spaces I was depicting. This came as an uncomfortable realisation, as I had begun working with landscapes for the very opposite reason; my goal was to come closer to knowing them, to revealing their depth and significance. I started working with landscape a few years ago, after having a practice primarily consisting of figurative representation, primarily portraiture. I began working with landscape when I felt the desire to have the same one to one, interconnectedness and devotion to the land as I had done with people, to relate to the land in this way I knew, careful devotional attention. It is primarily a religious drive, of merging, knowing and relating, far over an analytic, conceptual or theoretical position. Recognizing the unconscious influences of the past, and the subsequent emotive dryness in the work, meant for me to fully reform my working practise, not only the means of creation but also the way in which I encountered the depicted landscapes.

Reforming my practice meant a shift from landscape art as the depiction of space, to landscape art as an expression of a relationship with a particular place, and therefore to relinquish as much as possible my western academic framework, in place of an emotional, irrational and relationally generative framework. The issue remained, how and in what frame can these prior assumptions be evaded? Is this possible at all?

In many texts I have read of Place centred thinking, there has been a commonality of looking outside of the western frame for alternative ways of interacting with space. In Tim Cresswell's text, he clarifies the difference between space based thinking and place based thinking by comparing the activity of European settlers and Native Americans, as they navigate a coast line. He describes how the Europeans were baffled by how the native people would "take complicated routes that had no apparent logic," (Cresswell 2015, 19) weaving their canoes through the water without care for the efficiency so important to the settlers. For the settlers, the water was seen as space, mere expanse, understood by distance and geometry; their focus was how to move effectively from point A to point B. In comparison, the Native people interacted with the coastline as a place, where there were "particular spirits and dangers,"(Cresswell 2015, 19) and to pay attention to them was of a higher order than the efficacy of the route. This example underscores not only the difference between space based thinking and place based thinking, but also notes the essential non-rational quality of experiencing an environment as a place. In anthropologist, John J. Bradley's, "Whitefellas Have to Learn About Country, It is Not Just Land," he explains that when living and working with the Yanyuwa people of Australia, an aboriginal society, the people consider the scientific findings of their observers, "childlike or quaint translations," (Bradley 2011, 49) that in comparison, "their words are multilayered and not easily reduced to the language of objectivism, where object and subject, language

The resulting artwork has not the clarity nor objectivity of conventional landscapes, but appears not dissimilar to western abstract art, such as the work of Mark Rothko. The notable difference however, is that these works are not abstractions, they are depictions of a known reality for the artist, even if they appear initially indecipherable (in comparison to traditional landscapes) to the unfamiliar viewer. The work of Kathleen Petyarre has been a part of a long held controversy in the artworld, of where exactly to place the contemporary works of aboriginal artists. Like Petyarre, many aboriginal artists working with the content of the Dreaming, have adapted their works from sand paintings, rock paintings or body paintings, to the format of acrylic paint on canvas. This shift from tradition in form, while maintaining the mythological content and artistic intent of the tradition, has placed these artists in between the world of 'contemporary art,' and 'indigenous art.' But happily, in recent times, these binaries have softened and artists like Petyarre have been understood as equally contemporary and traditional, having managed the feat of not losing their indigenous epistemology in the western dominance of contemporary art. (Coleman, 2009)



Fig. 2. Kathleen Petyarre, *Antangkere Soakage (Mountain Devil Lizard)*, 1940-2018, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 183 cm x 183 cm, private collection. Available at: <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2019/aboriginal-art/kweyetwemp-kathleen-petyarre-atnangkere-soakage>

Getting to know the work of Petyarre and her contemporaries has provided for me more of an inspiration than an aspiration. Meaning, that these works come from a cultural, artistic and religious history, that would be morally reprehensible to appropriate, additionally, these works are, in essence, born out of a particular place, the Australian Country, and are intrinsically dependent on this particularity. However, they are an inspiration for this reason too. My wish is not to appropriate or claim for myself the visual language of these artists, nor do I believe I could understand their realm of the Dreaming. Nonetheless, they are inspirational because they provide proof that landscape art can break the subject-object dualism through an imaginably informed relationship to a place.

PLACE AND PRACTISE

When I realised I had been treating landscapes as mere space, it became clear to me that the solution to this false start was to find a singular place and begin to form a relationship to it. Unlike artists like Kathleen Petyarre, I do not live in a place I already know intimately and personally (and imaginally), I am new to the places I find myself in and they are new to me. As an immigrant, a feeling of homelessness is ever present. However, this is a feeling I am not unfamiliar with, I have had this experience in other places and in other forms, as an immigrant elsewhere and in my home country.

I was born in Zimbabwe, three generations later after the initial European settlers on the land, this aspect of my biography has laden my life with unignorable questions, and ethical conundrums. I find myself existing both as a Zimbabwean with a personal and wholehearted connection to my home country, but also as a byproduct of what caused the deep scarring and rupture upon the land and people, rupturing its cultural, political and environmental foundations. In this mode I am in limbo, disconnected to the place my ancestors left from, and unable to fully be a Zimbabwean in the deepest way. The customs and culture I was raised in was an import, born out of the torrential rain, rocky crags, foxes and field mice of the British Isles, which supplanted the culture and customs born out of dry grasslands, granite koppies, crocodile rivers, droughts and flash floods of Zimbabwe. This contradiction between the internal framework given to me and the environment within which I lived describes well, I believe, an existence lived in the immanent frame. The assumption being, what is true somewhere is true universally. The reality of the situation we lived in and the ways of being necessary to navigate it, was castrated by an unconsidered trust in an assumed set of principles ostracised from lived reality.

In Gary Snyder's book *Practice of the Wild*, he describes a similar set of circumstances occurring in America. He explains that the non-native American settlers have never fully acknowledged they have a new home, and therefore have not tried to know it deeply. He notes that "there are tens of millions of people in North America who were physically born here but who are not actually living here intellectually, imaginatively or morally." (Snyder 1990, 43) This description feels uncomfortably pertinent to how I have lived most of my life, both at home in Zimbabwe and now here in Finland. To recognize this unconsidered way of relating to your surroundings is one thing, but to move out of it into a real relationship is another. Later in the book he describes an interaction he had with a Native American man, a Crow elder, who told him,

"If people stay somewhere long enough - even white people - the spirits will begin to speak to them [...] The spirits and the old powers aren't lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them." (Snyder 1990, 42)

This reassurance was enough for me to at least begin my work. I set off with these principles as initial guiding lights; stick around and listen.

My first call to action was to choose a place. I decided, for both simple and more complex reasons, to choose somewhere near where I lived. Starting with the simple reason, I wanted to be able to access this place as often as possible, in order to make it part of my life in a

non-spectatorial way. What I mean by this is that I did not want to relate to the place in the same way you would relate to a view from a mountain top. The second and more complex reason is the desire for true homing as described above. Lastly, I was aware from the origin of this work that it would be a solitary affair, it would be human scale. I was not a part of a community relating to their home, i.e. a city or country, but a singular person. This human scale also had an effect on the type of place I would inevitably choose. I was looking for a place that felt large enough to be necessarily complex, but not so large that it overwhelmed my limited capacity for interaction.

The following quotation is an excerpt from my working journal, from the morning I set out to find the location. Apart from the criteria listed above, I left my house that morning with no prior expectations or inner suggestions. I was hoping the place would also find me.

“Today I went to find the spot. Everything covered in a thick layer of snow. I first went to the shore area by the metro station, it felt inaccessible somehow, slippery under my feet. I didn't feel alone there, I felt like I was with all of Kulosaari. I continued down the road, to the land bridge that connects to the cemetery. As I approached a wind blew across me that felt like providence. I spent some time in the wooded grove, I thought about the idea of increasing chaos as it gets closer to the water. I asked the place if I could do my work there, if it could help me, if I could be sensitive enough. It opened its mysteries for a brief moment as a hint and perhaps an agreement.” (Journal entry)

As the tone of the journal entry suggests, I first encountered the place already from a certain mindset. I was looking for mystery, I was hoping to be spoken to. When the wind blew, it felt like providence because I had already decided to listen for it. It is this kind of qualitative comprehension I wanted the work to spring from, not a rational weighing out of pros and cons, but a leap into folly, into an uncritical acceptance of all that seemed alive and speaking. What I wanted to place at the foreground was instances of relation, where it seems that there was a mutual disclosure between myself and the place, and that somehow in these predominant moments, there is a will of the place that is acting upon me and asking me to respond. While the place I ended up getting to know has innumerable qualities that have substantiated the work, it was this simple interaction, as with most relationships, a call and a response, that marked the beginning of my pursuit.

This insistence on relation over observation began primarily through a negation, of knowing what I did not want to be in the place, before I knew what I wanted to be. I found that in the early stages of the work, it was easier to identify the negation over the affirmation, as the common aphorism states, every no can be a yes.

“I don't want to be a cataloguer, I don't want to be an objective observer, and by this I mean I want to implicate myself in the work. I don't want the work to be mere observation, nor an imposition of my thoughts and opinions, but an alchemical reaction between my subjectivity and the agency of the place. I don't want the place to do the work, I want to create. By this I mean I do not want to use 'ready made' objects from the place unless they have been fundamentally altered in the journey from natural material to art object. I feel a certainty in this because I don't think it is enough to simply bring the place in, I must bring myself into the place. When I interact with it, it is complete and total and impressive, and doesn't need to be brought into a gallery to show its value. But it is asking something of me, to bring myself to it,

to be changed by it, and show this transformation, the human hand and work must be present.” (Journal entry)

The above excerpt from my working journal accurately describes my insistence against the observer model. It was in essence, a desire to leave behind the immanent frame, and step into transcendence, to drop a false sense of objectivity, of self containedness. In Taylor’s text where he outlines the nature of the immanent frame, he explains that to live within it, is to be a Buffered Self. A buffered self, is a self for whom,

“it comes to seem axiomatic that all thought, feeling and purpose, all the features we normally ascribe to agents must be in minds which are distinct from the ‘outer’ world. The buffered self begins to find the idea of spirits, moral forces, causal powers with a purposive bent, close to incomprehensible.” (Taylor 2007, 539)

For the buffered self, the ‘inner’ world and the ‘outer’ world are ultimately distinct, and detached from one another. The buffered self ascribes a purely material or psychical quality to experienced phenomena, and in doing so creates a distance between them, a buffer. An example to elucidate this is the attitude towards processes of healing. For the modern buffered self, a medication of particular chemical qualities is ingested to affect the particular chemical qualities that are causing the illness. In this way, the self of the individual is placed at a distance from the phenomena, the illness is not a part of them, it is a set of chemicals and causes that have no existential bearing upon the self. This is to experience a disenchanted world, that is, a world without ‘magical’ properties. Taylor rejects the idea that the disenchanted world occurs subtractively, i.e. through the gradual removal of irrational beliefs, instead he considers the disenchanted world to be an impoverishment, and a form of irrationality of its own.

Taylor contrasts the disenchantment of the buffered self, with the enchanted world of the Porous self, for whom the inner and outer worlds are permeable. Using the example of healing from above, Taylor offers the counter example of an ill person in mediaeval christendom, who would ingest a vial of water from a sacred well to cure their illness. (Taylor, 2013) They would not consume the vial of water believing that its particular chemical composition would counteract the chemical composition of the illness, instead they would do so operating under the belief that the goodness of the holy water would affect the evilness of the illness. The comparison used here is not invoked to consider efficacy, it is invoked to point to the difference in relationship to the illness. The key difference is the assumption of meaning, of ‘causal powers with a purposive bent.’ For the porous self, the self is always held in tension between its own agency and the agencies that pass through it. For the buffered self, agency is found only in the protected, enclosed inner world, the outer world is merely cause and effect without spiritual auspices.

My insistence against taking the stance of an observer, came from a desire to replace a buffered self with a porous self, to not assume a position of distance from that which I am encountering, but to accept - where I can - its intermingling with my own agency, crossing over my inner boundary. This move from the buffered self to the porous self is of course aspirational, because my default mode remains in the buffered state. The primary telos of this project is an aspirational drive towards a porous relationship to the landscape I was encountering.

The place that I chose, the place that chose me, is a small island off of Kulosaari in Helsinki, called Leposaari. Leposaari meaning, "Rest Island," the translation of 'rest' associated with the rest of the dead because it is a cemetery. I will go into much greater detail in the following portions of the paper, but for now a simple outline will suffice. Leposaari is a small, circular shaped island, it takes about 10 minutes or less to walk its perimeter. It is connected to the larger island Kulosaari by a small landbridge but otherwise it is surrounded by water. The island has a concentric structure, first a chaos of reeds, which closes around a ring of nature, trees, grasses, rocks that fold into the water. After this is a fence, the fence guarding the cemetery, which includes grave stones and carefully tended to gardens. At the centre of the island is a small chapel, of octagonal shape, whose doors are always closed bar from funeral services.

CO-CREATION OF THE SACRED PLACE

Once Leposaari became the chosen ‘place,’ the next issue to address was how exactly to develop and initiate an imaginal, non-material, porous relationship to the place. As explained above, the porous self, remained an aspirational model during the working process, it was not a relational stance immediately afforded to me, but a task that required practical and psychological negotiation and transformation to be experienced. The first act of striving towards this was the very act of *choosing*, of marking out Leposaari as special, as particular and individual. This distinguishing is what Eliade considers to be the marking out of spaces of sacrality, against the profanity of endlessness. In a world of unmarked, undivided, profane space,

“There is no longer any world; there are only fragments of a shattered universe, an amorphous mass consisting of an infinite number of more or less neutral places in which man moves, governed and driven by the obligations of an existence incorporated into an industrial society.” (Eliade 1961, 23)

Eliade opposes this view, with the experience of land with sacred places. The distinction between spaces of ‘sacrality’ and spaces of ‘profanity’ creates an experience of *difference*, as the instance of sacrality breaks the homogeneity of space. This homogeneity of space is the view of space as disenchanting, i.e a conception of space in which the changes in material form are inconsequential to the ‘natural laws’ that operate universally. I am reminded of Byung Chul Han’s similar insistence in his book *The Disappearance of Rituals*, about time, wherein ritual creates the breaks that allows for time to be experienced fully, and not lost in infinite sameness. (Han 2020) The perception of breaks, of differentiation, -especially of a spiritual order- is the perception of identity, of ‘personhood’ and of spirit, and therefore is to experience the phenomena as enchanted. It became clear to me over the course of my working practice with Leposaari, that the place was not important arbitrarily out of my choosing, but was in fact in essence, a sacred place. The ‘wind of providence’ did not bring me to an arbitrary location, but to a Zone.

The term ‘Zone’ is used in this paper analogously to the term sacred place, in the following portion of the text I will explain and elucidate this connection between terms, and the value of comprehending a place as such. My understanding of the nature of ‘the Zone’ has been made apparent to me by the words of J.F Martel and Phil Ford, artistic philosopher and musicologist respectively, who in their show *Weird Studies*, analyse the film *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky. (Martel, Ford, 2018) I will be using both my understanding of the film, as well as the ideas of the Zone given by Martel and Ford, to understand the nature of Zones, their relationship to the idea of sacred places, and the affordances that encountering a Zone can produce. This film has long been an artistic influence for me, along with Tarkovsky’s other films, but *Stalker* in particular bears important light on the topics discussed in this paper. Briefly, *Stalker* is a film about three men travelling through an uninhabited area which has been cordoned off from the public for unknown reasons, one of these men is a stalker, i.e. a guide of this area known as the Zone. The Zone is an overgrown, but otherwise not unusual place to the eye, but from the moment the Zone is entered it becomes clear that it should be treated in no way like regular space. The Zone is a maze of unseeable, unknowable traps, the only way to move through it is to follow its own illogical

logic. The stalker shows the way, and they follow, zig-zagging across the terrain. The high point of the film occurs when the men reach the centre of the zone, a room that is said to make true the deepest desires of those who enter it. The men choose not to go in and they leave the Zone, but they are forever changed by it, the stalker lives his life longing to enter it again.

In Martel and Ford's show, they outline the key motifs of a zone, they are as follows;

1. A zone is an enclosed space.
2. A zone can be entered but it cannot be habitable.
3. A zone has a logic different from the logic found outside of its perimeter.
4. A zone cannot be defined by its constitutive elements.
5. A zone has a centre from which it emanates forth.
6. A zone has its own agency, its own spirit, its own intelligence.
7. To enter a zone is to enter a new plane of being.

While I will return to some of these points later on in the text, for now I will focus on points 1, 3, 6 and 7.

In the Weird Studies episode, Martel explains the etymology of the word 'zone', which comes from an older Greek word that meant belt or girdle. The zone is an enclosed space. In *Stalker* this form of enclosure is the electrified fences separating the Zone from the rest of the habitable area. The aspect of enclosure is important for the nature of zones because of what it provides, it provides the instance of the threshold, an instance of distinction and difference from what lies outside of the perimeter. In Eliade's text he explains that for a sacred place to be conceived as such it needs a threshold, a way in which to distinguish itself as sacred. (Eliade 1961, 25) The distinction of barrier or threshold provides an instance of *shift*, ritualised by the crossing of a boundary. The shift is however, both physical and spiritual. Martel likens the enclosure of a zone to the instance of a 'magic circle'. (Martel, Ford 2018) A magic circle is used by practitioners of ritual magic, often drawn in a material like salt or chalk, forming a protective barrier for the practitioner as well as creating an instance of a distinct space of spiritual activity. There is here a consonance with Leposaari, it too has as a part of its structure an aspect of enclosure, in fact there are two, firstly the water surrounding the island is a natural instance of the enclosure, and internally there is a fence which encloses the inner cemetery. In encountering the island, you pass over two thresholds, firstly that of the land bridge that connects the island to mainland, and then the gate into the inner chamber.

The crossing of the boundary or threshold of the Zone, is to move from one plane of being into another, it is the act of "suspending the common sense laws of the everyday in order to bring new potentialities into being." (Martel, Ford 2018) Eliade explains that this is why in many religious spaces there are rites associated with the crossing of the threshold, because they are "symbols and at the same time vehicles of passage." (Eliade 1961, 25) Observing the threshold of a place is a reflection of observing a metaphysical threshold. In *Stalker*, of the three characters, there is the stalker, who is accompanied by a scientist and a writer. In the film, the scientist and writer function as placeholders for the modern sensibility, it is their crossing over into the zone that allows for their presuppositions to be questioned or made fragile. In this way it becomes clear how my choice, both consciously and unconsciously, of Leposaari is a 'tool' that can allow for this breakdown of the buffered self. The

simultaneous physical crossing over of a physical boundary, made available by the landbridge of Lepossari, as well as the inner crossing of a boundary between chosen and unchosen, allowed me to ritualistically “leave” my prior assumptions on one side of the divide, making room for a potential newness on the other. What is striking to me in hindsight, is that the ‘wind of providence’ that drew me to Leposaari occurred at the threshold, on the landbridge to the island, it was at this moment that I first dropped my buffered self.

What has been a remarkable outcome of working with Leposaari - a place I had not previously assumed any type of quality to - is that it has appeared before me as a Sacred Place. I mentioned earlier an ‘unconscious’ knowledge of the qualities of the place, but perhaps the terms ‘synchronous’ or ‘providential’, may be a better way to understand what I mean. That is, I made no logical decision in my choice of place, it was a simple gesture of a sweeping wind that drew me to Leposaari. The affordances that later arrived from it are as much its gift to me as they are conscious reasonings on my part. In this way, my experience of Leposaari, is not unlike the scientist and writer of Stalker, our entering of the respective ‘zones’ did not begin from a prior understanding of what the zone would incite.

After deciding I would strike up a relationship with the island, I began a very simple practice, that I conceived of in the most grandiose of terms, I would make regular ‘pilgrimages’ to the island. The simpleness of the practice was in its practicality, I would simply go to the island, walk around within it and try to listen and look, as deeply as possible. The more complicated or grandiose aspect of the ‘pilgrimage,’ comes from the intentional framing of the visit, and the practises involved in generating the frame. I took on certain practises largely borrowed from religious traditions, and others self created, particularly in the preparation for the visit. Firstly, I would engage in a type of ‘fasting,’ in this case not of food and drink, but of other consumptions, namely media, no reading, no listening, no watching, and usually no talking to others. Instead, I would begin by doing a short writing exercise, describing to myself how I felt about going to the island, the general conditions of the day, as well as using the tool of writing to ‘drop off’ any unhelpful unassociated stresses or concerns. After this, I would engage in my chosen form of meditation. This meditation was not only a practice to ‘clear the mind’, but also an active inner movement towards the heart, towards openness and sensitivity. For me, this meditation was always the first step in faith, it was to acknowledge and affirm the existence of a transcendent reality. This meditative practice was never mere mindfulness, but always a call to connection with a greater other, apart from my own subjectivity. I would try to hold this inner openness with me as I encountered the island, allowing space in myself for every blade of grass, every bird call, every wide reaching tree I came across, to be more than it appeared, to be alive and speaking.

There will be an aspect of my explanation of the practise that will remain outside of comprehension without a certain suspension of disbelief. By this I mean, my personal belief in a transcendent other is not a belief I feel capable of explaining, and my experiences in Leposaari are first and foremost my subjective experience. They are not objective, they are not verifiable, they are deeply and unwaveringly personal. I can however provide an example of what such an experience felt like, how certain insights appeared before me. In the following excerpt from my working journal, I describe an insight that became apparent to me on the second day I went on ‘pilgrimage’ to Leposaari.

“As I walked through the wooded grove, my mind was a flutter with noise, I found myself wishing I wasn't as preoccupied when I got there. I tried to get meditative but at some point my desire to be clear headed seemed a bit silly and unnecessary, it was as if I was being told to lighten up, that ‘it's not meant to be a strife’. I ventured off the path, thinking about if I was as small as say, a squirrel, I could seek shelter in a “cave” made by a fallen log or upshooting root, whose green moss and deep brown underbelly looked almost out of place or impossible in the deep white. I imagined making a little homunculus of myself that could fit in the tiny places, and could know this place from its hidden spots.”(Journal entry)

This moment in Leposaari profoundly informed how I would aim to encounter the place from that day onwards. My frustration about being mentally unclear, and the subsequent feeling that striving for this clarity was in effect pointless, did not feel to me at the time to be wholly self created. There was a sense that I was being directed, challenged and questioned by the place. There occurred at this moment profoundly phenomenological reasons for my thinking this. I have experienced in my pilgrimages to Leposaari many perceptual abnormalities, I am not speaking of anything fantastical or necessarily unfamiliar, but rather a very real perceptual depth. I noted that during the initial visit, when Leposaari *chose me*, I asked the place if I could do this work with it and I experienced an ‘opening of its mysteries for a brief moment, which felt like an agreement’. This ‘opening’ was an actual perceived experience, of momentarily *seeing* the place in greater detail, in such great detail that certain abstractions, such as tree, leaf, snow, fence, fell away. Instead these phenomena, in their overwhelming *realness*, appeared as deeply alive. There is a quality of the alien in this perception, but not because the phenomena appears necessarily different, but because their sudden realness, their aliveness, has a quality of agency. You are no longer perceiving a tree like all other trees, you are perceiving a being in its distinct particularity. To be in such a state was to be in the meeting point, in dialogue and no longer operating at a distance but truly interacting. In this way, I could track certain reactions to my behaviour, my inner activity, from the place by this shift in opening and closing, or intimacy and retreat.

This in fact both proves the point I felt was being made to me in the above extract, while explaining how that was made aware to me in the first place. This is the co creative work of dialogue. To be extremely explicit, as I walked around Leposaari that morning, frustrated that I could not get a song out of my head, or that my mind was too busy interpreting to notice, it felt as though the place was retreating from me, it felt perceptually far off and ungraspable, the trees were trees, the snow was snow. However, as I had the thought that I should relax and not fight against this tension, that I should allow the free flowing associations, the messiness of my mind, the place came closer to me, an intimacy grew. In this way, there was a form of personal affirmation or validity to my thoughts and actions, there could be a certain *resonance* when I approached the phenomena with the right frame of mind, and ‘interpreted’ it in a coherent way. At the same time, there was an affirmation of this very thing, that I had to approach the place with an internal freedom, a loose touch that was not striving for clarity, but was bringing my - albeit, messy and often confused - subjectivity to bear upon it, and in doing so I could come into contact with the subjectivity of the place. Looking at the latter portion of the excerpt above, there is a symbolic image of this attitude, if looked at through a psychological lens. My desire to make a homunculus of myself, to make myself small, to make myself able to see the details, is in a way to become

childlike, a childlikeness that is open to possibility, willing to see fantasy in reality, to look at every detail as if it were a whole world.



Fig. 3. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Encounter)*, 2024. Installation view at Kuvan Kevät 2024. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.

DRAWING THE IMAGINAL

“I looked at the dry grasses poking out, their leaves hung over and burdened, sisyphian, they were so weary but so strong. I watched the grasses noting their shape, how the snow pooled and sunk around them, their gentle shadows, the deep dark of where the main stem reaches the ground, how could something so fragile withstand this winter? Complete acquiescence to suffering, and they are so glorious in it. I want to pay homage to the delicate grasses and their heavy burdens.” (Journal entry)

“I hopped over the fence at the back of the chapel, I walked through the gravestones praying, when suddenly I noticed, right next to me, a newly dug grave, its shape perfectly personlike, covered in orange and yellow roses, impossible life in the dead of winter, some star gazer lillies by the head. The reality of where I was dawned on me, I was overcome by the humanity of the person shaped earth, the tousled flowers with their scattered petals said everything about grief. I felt anew this sensation of the wonder of human love, and how these trees protected it, how they could hold it, the soil too. The ripping of the curtain, God everywhere.” (Journal entry)

I went on regular pilgrimages to Leposaari for almost a month before beginning the work proper. In this month, I focused on building a relationship, the outcome of which were my journal entries and a collection of drawings, both loose sketches, both searching for something to land on. I had to accept early on that I could not do the work there. Firstly, I was doing this in the dead of winter, I could be out there for about an hour and half before my body told me I needed to go inside, and I chose to listen to it. Secondly, it felt like a suggestion of the place, similar to the instance described earlier, I had taken a sketchbook a few times to the island, and every time I would take it out to draw I would feel this similar retreat. After one such trial, I wrote, “I notice a sort of guilt from taking, from possession or utilisation, of this living phenomena.” To draw in the place felt like imposing my judgement upon it, my internal world would no longer be in this state of all acceptance, but would have to decide, ‘is this tree worth drawing, is this path a worthy artwork.’ I felt the same way about writing in the place, the act of visiting was a conversation, it was full in itself, and I felt I needed to be fully enmeshed with it while there. Instead, I found that the act of recalling, of returning to the place once I had left it, felt less possessive, less intrusive. What I felt in doing this was not necessarily that I was calling on memory per se, instead it felt like I was *actually* revisiting the place, but in the imaginal, in a mystic reality that both conformed to and defied the confines of space. In a reality that Leposaari and I had co created.

I would like to call upon an anecdote from Gary Snyder’s *Practise of the wild*, he recounts the time he spent with the Pintubi, of Australia, and was taken to the Honey-Ant Totem Dreaming Spot. He recalls that as they approached they fell to their hands and knees, crawling to the sacred place; a basin surrounded by balancing rocks, within which was a great nest, home to hundreds of thousands of honey ants. (Snyder 1990, 91) This was for the people the creation site of the honey ant, and the spot from which all qualities of ‘honey antness’ was manifest. The people of the honey ant totem would make pilgrimages to this place, a spot that united the material reality of the honey ant habitat with the spiritual nature of ‘honey antness’ in the world of the Dreaming. For the Pintubi people, this sacred

place is both an actual location, and a location that can be visited in the world of the dreaming, i.e. without actually being present there. However, this capacity to encounter the honey ant in the dreaming is co created with the real access and visiting of this location. This was the attitude and practice that became relevant to me, that is, the ritual of visiting Leposaari was a *ritual*, that is, an activity which enriched my imaginal world through real contact. This enrichment of the imaginal, meant that Leposaari became a living phenomena inside of me, a real place that exists beyond space and time, yet still relying upon its physical reality.

As I worked on the pieces that would eventually be exhibited in Kuvan Kevat, I continued to visit Leposaari, I continued to write about these visits, and I continued to draw it. It was the act of drawing that felt the most conducive to productively entering the world imaginally, and is the backbone and throughline of the artistic component of this work. The act of drawing has given me a number of affordances, firstly there is the aspect of direct contact, a continuity of mind, hand and image without disjunction or separation, the drawing material can move with the same ease, speed and flow as the inner world. At the same time, the hand remains an agent of its own, particularly in the flow state, where the mind is not in a critical mode, forcefully directing the hand, but is reacting and responding to its movements, its push and pull. In this way, a somewhat unconscious activity is taking place, something beyond my capacity to mandate or control, and as a result, the latent image belonging to something beyond me, can be manifested. I hold the belief in my practice that drawing is a legitimate form of gnosis, of coming into contact.

I would like to emphasise however, that I do not practise 'automatic drawing.' While my works are intuitive and expressive, they are not the result merely of my internal dynamics, but are a documentation of a dynamic or interaction between myself and Leposaari in the imaginal. When creating the work, I try to hold my subject as close to the work as possible, by this I mean the reality of Leposaari I have encountered in the visits. I am keeping the phenomena as they appeared before me in the forefront of my mind, but there is always a sense that they are slipping from my grasp and I am trying to find it again through the drawing as well. In this way, my practice is one of long and careful perception of the subject. However, there is an aspect of the work that is not congruent with a type of formal realism, something that is photographic, there is a quality of the alien, of the sur-real (beyond real), present. An artist that deeply influenced my approach to depicting phenomena is the artist Charles Burchfield, whose works have a simultaneous devotion to the reality of phenomena, real places, real trees, real flowers, which are perceivable and recognizable, but not 'naturalistic.' He does not provide clarity or precision, categories or statements. Burchfield's works are not picturesque, they are not moments of rest, they are zones of emergence, they are the befriended alien, they force a recognition of mental limitedness as they bend the comfort of assumptions. It was this holding to the real and the unreal that I felt elucidated the quality of the imaginal, and what I strove for in my works.



Fig. 4. Charles Burchfield, *Autumnal Fantasy*, 1944, watercolour on paper, Burchfield Penney Art Centre. Available at <https://burchfieldpenney.org/art-and-artists/artwork/object:l2010-001-047-autumnal-fantasy/>

To further examine this quality of the works, I will pay closer attention to the largest work exhibited, 'Leposaari (Encounter)', fig. 1. The depicted image is the view of Leposaari from the landbridge, the path leads to the chapel in the centre around which the trees, reeds and grasses converge. All of these elements are perceivable in the work, but they are present in a way that is not tied solely to their form, their material constituents. There is no wood, there are no leaves but there is the spirit of the tree. There is a quality of the drawing that is *energetic*, the mark making is reminiscent of flames, of the movement of wind, the elements of the drawing do not have firm boundaries, they are interwoven with each other, mutually reinforcing. It is this quality of the work that speaks to 'Leposaariness' rather than 'this particular tree in Leposaari, this particular path, this particular reed'. The central chapel is the most 'concrete' form in the piece, it is the grounding point, the point all owe their relation to. In the earlier examination of the nature of a 'zone', an important property is the existence of a centre from which the zone emanates. In my zone, Leposaari, this central point is the chapel. It is the centre of the mystery, I have never been inside and most that visit the island have not either, it is opened and used for funeral services, it is the place where the soul is celebrated and sent into the beyond. It is the direct meeting point of heaven and earth, and it is closed, veiled, hidden, yet present, its solid shape, its firmness hold together everything. But on this solid structure, there is a doorway that seems to look you right in the eye, an invitation as well as a foreboding. It is both an opening and a closing, it is the hidden mystery, the soul.

The process of creating the work also holds an aspect of its nature. Briefly, the work began as a to scale charcoal drawing, made in this flow state of dialogue between the hand and the imaginal. The plexi glass was then placed atop the drawing, and blindly, the image is etched on, each mark an indelible scratch upon the transparent plane, but a scratch unseeable to the naked eye. The plate is then prepared as an intaglio matrix, and the image, in its finality, revealed. This process, the etching of the plate in particular, was an act of faith. It was to walk blindly into mystery. While the charcoal drawing provided a sense of placement of the forms, each mark was a singular act, held apart from my perception, ultimately my control. The final image that appeared after inking up the plate was an apparition to me, it was only then that I knew what had taken shape over the course of the etching process. The transparency of the plate was alike my inner transparency and openness when first encountering the place, and like with each unretractable mark, each interaction, dialogue, encounter of Leposaari, over time and in faith, eventually formed an image of the spirit of this place.



Fig. 5. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Encounter)*, 2024. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.

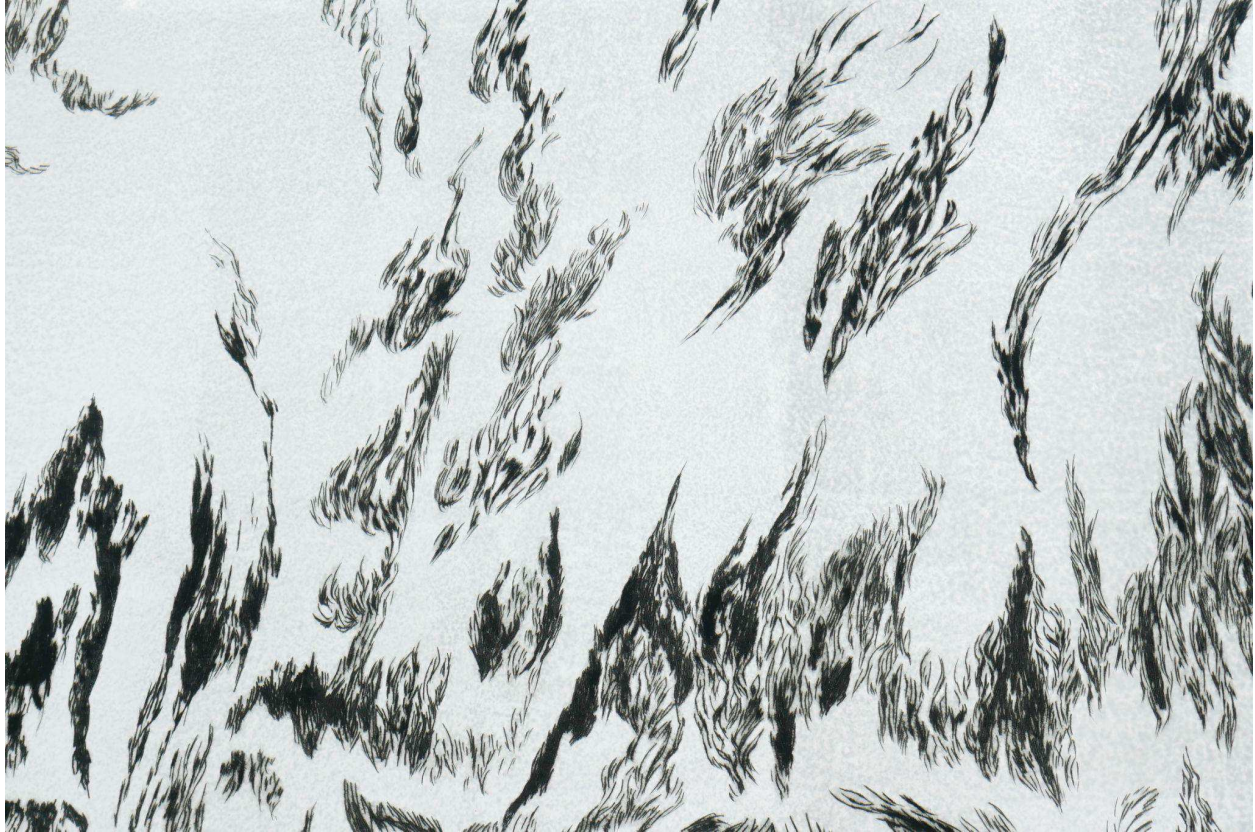


Fig. 6. Leposaari (Encounter) 2024, detail. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.

In displaying this work, *Leposaari (Encounter)*, the plexi glass was hung in front of the window that opened to the street view and the bay, on the window was painted a white a rectangle the shape and size of the plate, and a set of lines moving towards the image, reminiscent of the perspective grids found in other works displayed. This installation choice placed the image of *Leposaari* in context with the space of the outdoors. The blocking of the view to reveal the image, was a reflection of my choosing *Leposaari* as a place in opposition to the endless space around it. The perspective grid lines were used to both draw the eye into the image, and create a sense of spaciousness, of *being within*. But along with these specific considerations, the inclusion of the perspective grid in many of the pieces, was for me a way to acknowledge the aspirational quality of this endeavour.

Two works that use the perspective grids in the most formative way are, *Leposaari (Grid) I, II*. The works are drawings on found paper, the papers were originally used for architectural students in the 1970's. I received them from a professor a few years ago, and I brought them with me when I moved from America to Finland, knowing that there was a latent potential in them that would one day surface. In some way much of this work springs from them. I made a few drawings when I first began this MFA program, loose, fragmented landscapes in charcoal, and the drawings hummed with potential. The powerful dynamic of the chaotic organic marks and the strict, clean lines of the grid, sung to me, they spoke to a truth of my inner life. A modern person with modern sensibilities, collapsing under the reality of true wildness, deep nature, uncompromising soul. This dialogue between clarity,

geometry, objectivity and ruthless spirit, is the point of friction, the question from which all of the work emerged. However, in this particular body of work the grids and other formal structures used, took on a slightly different role, they were no longer only opposing the natural elements, but were also in service to them, they softened and broadened and lost their imposing power in the face of the imaginal, in the light of Leposaari.

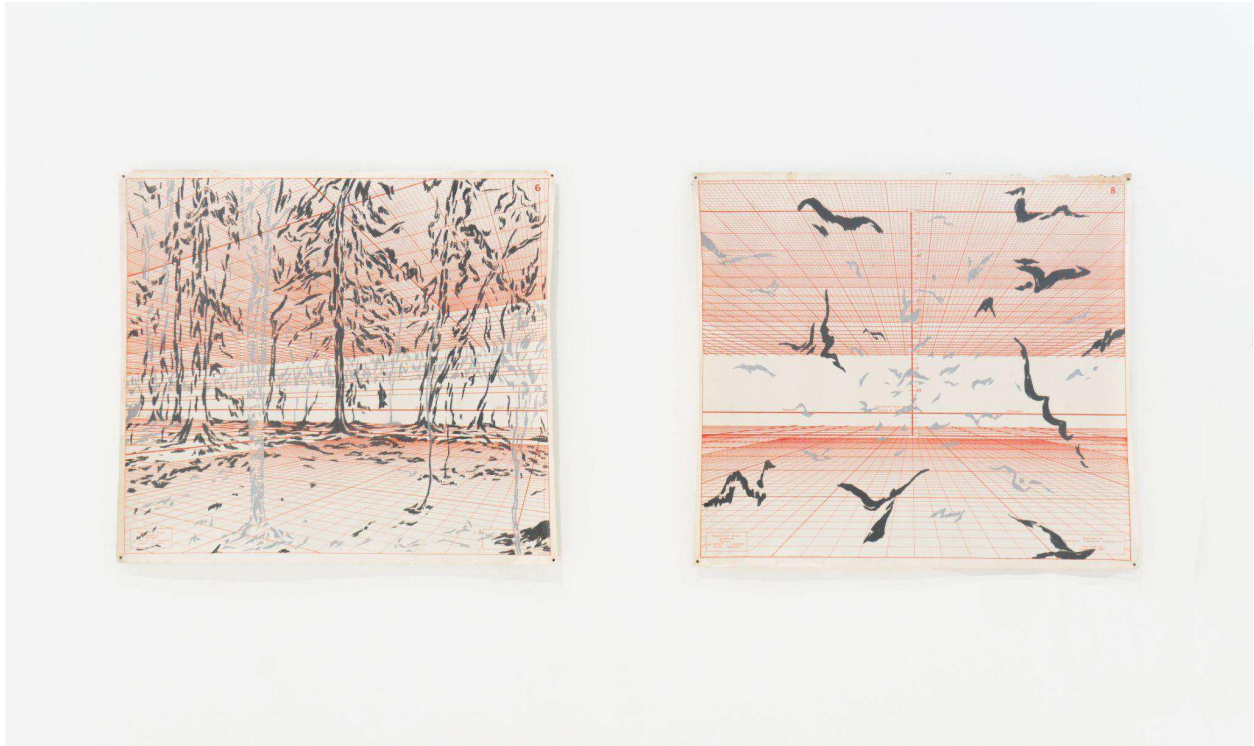


Fig. 7. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Grid I, II)*, 2024, drawing on found paper. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.

Instead of including the structures to be, as it were, sparring partners for the more imaginably informed elements, I aimed to use them *in light* of Leposaari. To begin with I will look at the work, 'Leposaari (Map)', the piece is made up of two elements, firstly a sculptural form made from paper pulp, loosely in the shape of the island, the other element a monoprint including an etching, which extends in a convex form out of the paper structure. The work is a double form map, the larger paper structure cohering to the shape of the island from a birds eye view, and the print, a depiction of an experiential journey of the island. I thought of these map forms as 'soft structures' ; they perhaps contain an aspect of 'map-ness' but no longer the elements that allow for the extractive, exploitative, cataloguing quality that conventional maps maintain. Firstly, the paper structure which holds the shape of the island is more like a gesture than an outline. The material of the paper pulp, in its tenderness, has the airiness of the heavens and the groundedness of matter; over and above a conventional map it is a work of abstract art, it suggests rather than demands. The secondary component, the print, is a mapping of the land but it follows no conventional logic, it sweeps across the terrain, some elements far in the distance others are seen immediately before you, with no cohesion to spatial logic. The work as a whole, particularly as seen from a distance, has an 'eye-like' quality, to look at the piece is to have the whole of Leposaari looking back at you.



Fig. 8. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Map)*, 2024, paper based sculpture and etching. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.



Fig. 9. *Leposaari (Map)*, 2024, detail. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.

The convention of the ‘eye’ is present in many of the works, in ‘Leposaari (Encounter)’ the chapel in the centre has also an eye-like quality, and in another work, ‘Leposaari (Interior)’ there is a similar instance. This work is a lithograph formed into a three dimensional object, it is in some way associated with convention of art books, using paper, cardboard and other bookbinding materials to form an object with multiple “pages” to be read individually as well as all at once. In this piece, as with *Leposaari (Map)*, the inclusion of structure is in the final viewing in service of the mystery at the centre of the work. The work is made up of five inner planes, four converging into the central square, which contains a mysterious and abstract eye-like motif. In fact this central image was inspired by the forms found on the birch trees in *Leposaari* that often felt like eyes watching me as I wandered. Two of the other planes, on the left and right of the centre are imaginal renderings of walking down the paths of *Leposaari*. The top and bottom planes depict grid formations moving towards and collapsing into the central plane. The secondary quality of the grids in this work is their connection to my particular subjectivity, the lower plane has remnants of footprints, the upper plane contains text that reads “You may have been here before,” akin to the inner dialogue, but at the same time a suggestion or question to the viewer of the work. The converging nature of the planes is reminiscent of the convergence towards the pupil in the eye, the pupil being the strange point where it is felt the soul resides. The work as a whole is a description of imaginably walking through *Leposaari*, it is an invitation to step in.



Fig. 10. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Interior)*, 2024, lithograph. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.

'Leposaari (Grid) I and II' are always meant to be seen together, they are like two sides of a coin, the view of the ground and the view of the heavens make a depiction of the whole, of the meeting place of earth and heaven found between them. 'Leposaari (Grid) I', is an ode to the trees, nature, the paths I walked down, 'Leposaari (Grid) II' an ode to the more inherently sacred aspects of the island, the spirit that guided me down them, and into their depths. I chose to work in metallic coloured pencil rather than charcoal, the luminescence of the pigment felt more congruent with how I felt about Leposaari as the end of the project approached, these were the last drawings I made for the project. The depictions have the same imaginal quality as works like *Leposaari (Encounter)*, but the marks are more gentle, more filled with air and light. At this point in our relationship it was to me all spirit, all feeling, all transcendence. When I made my last visits to the island, I was in contact with the soul of a beloved, a beloved that showed me how to see past myself. When I look at these two works now, the perspective grids are no longer breaking apart and disconnecting the mystery, they are serving it, they too are reaching with the images towards a far off horizon.



Fig. 11. Leposaari (Grid I), 2024. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.

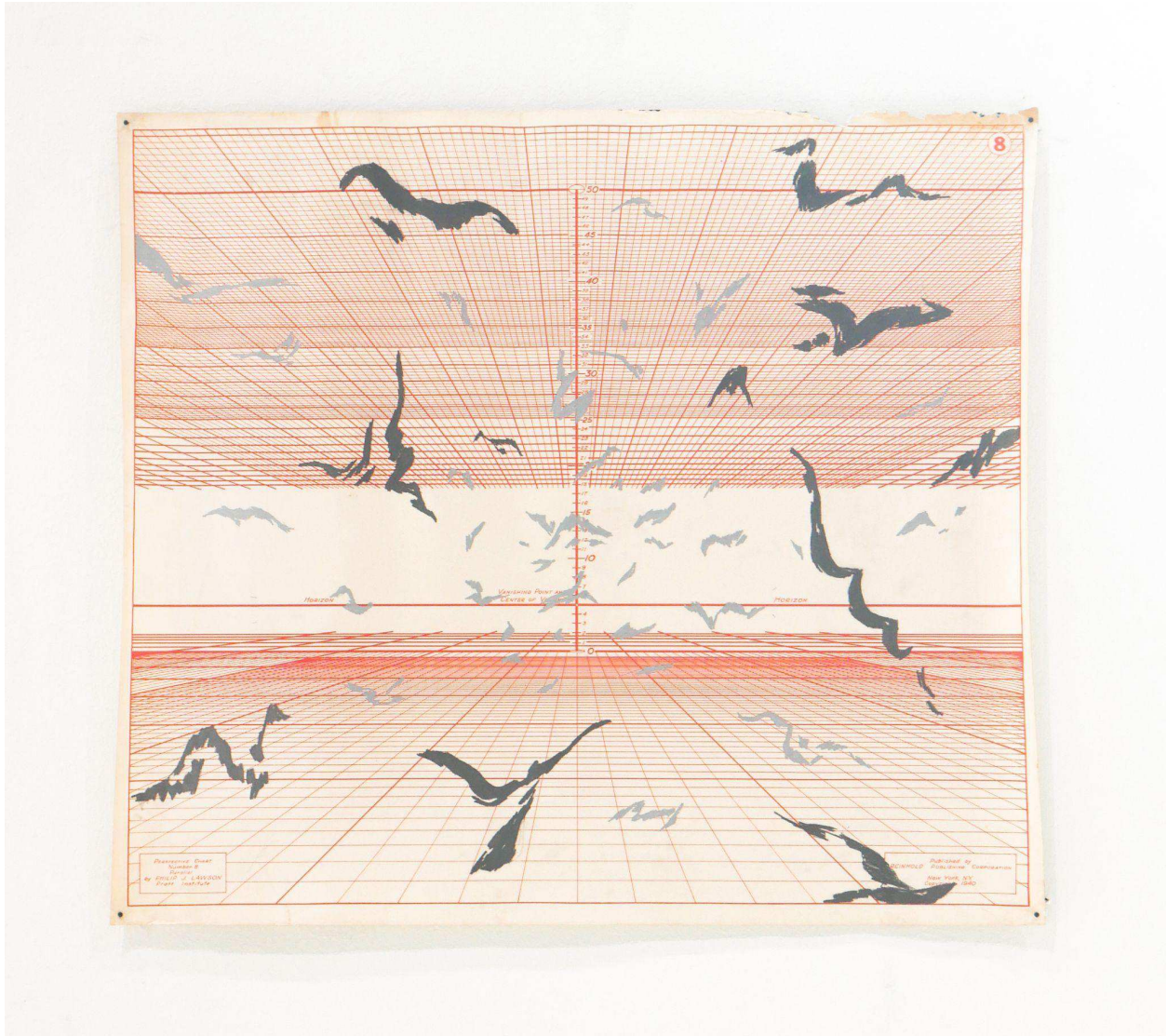


Fig. 12. Leposaari (Grid II), 2024. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.

'I have been calling to you since before your first life,
I am a path you can not stray from,
You run, you hide, I find.
The gate is real as iron,
Flesh, blood and bone,
But only chest high.
The Death i guard is my own,
Welcome to my mystery.
I've kept for you a flame of my fire.
Rest easy, burn bright,

Remember to die.'

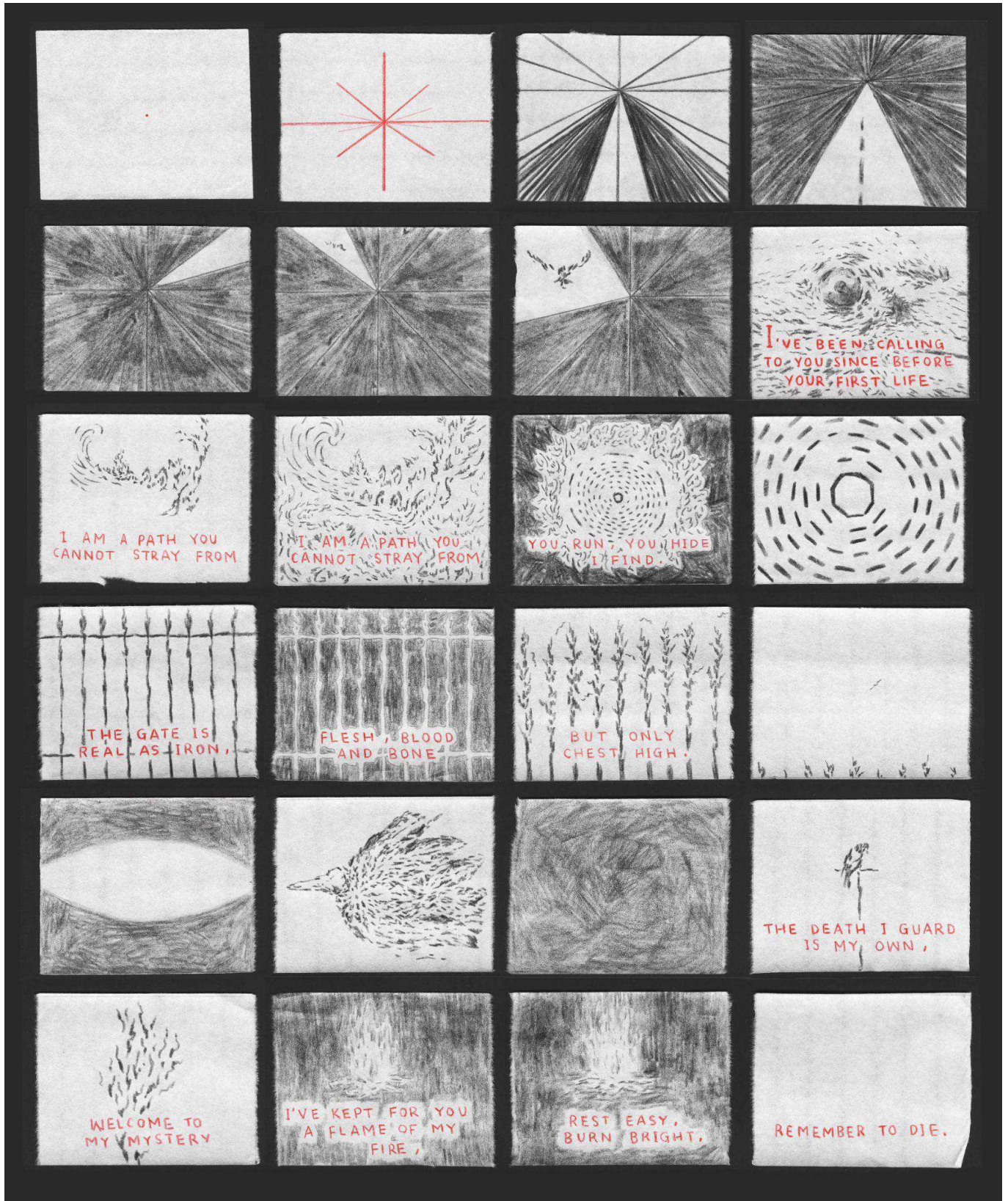


Fig. 13. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Myth)*, 2024, hand drawn animation, selection of frames. Full length animation available at: <https://vimeo.com/1009593166?>.

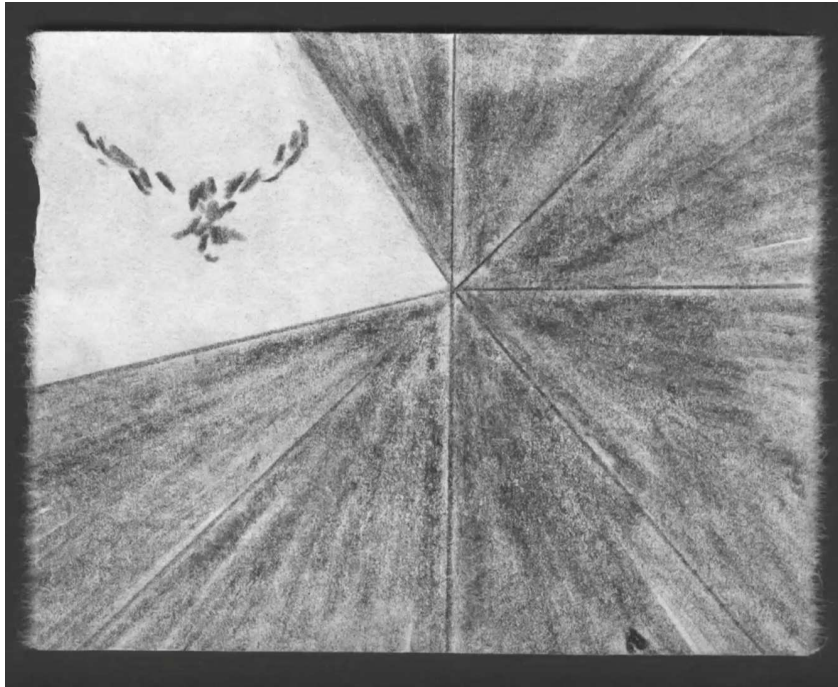


Fig. 14. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Myth)*, 2024. Animation frame.

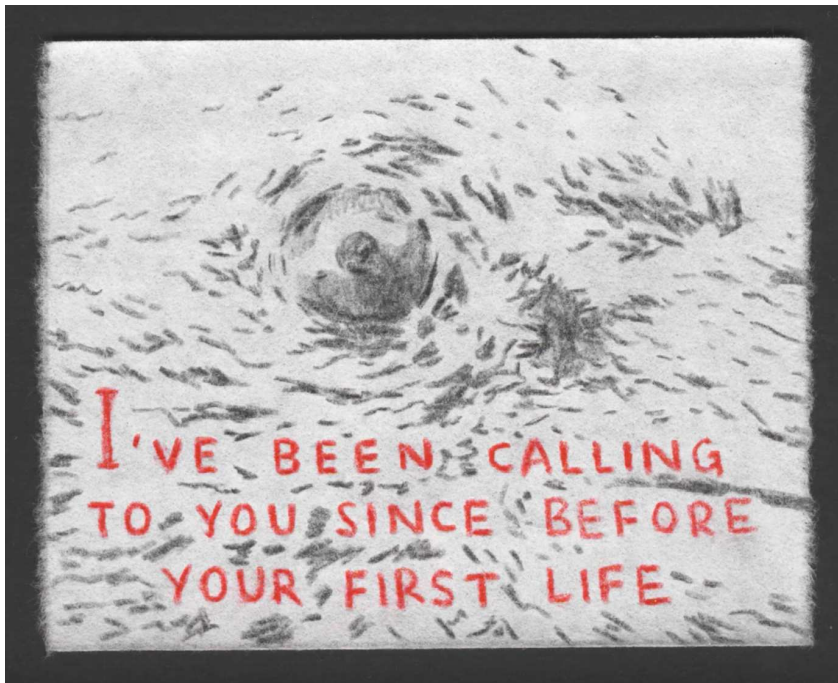


Fig. 15. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Myth)*, 2024. Animation frame.

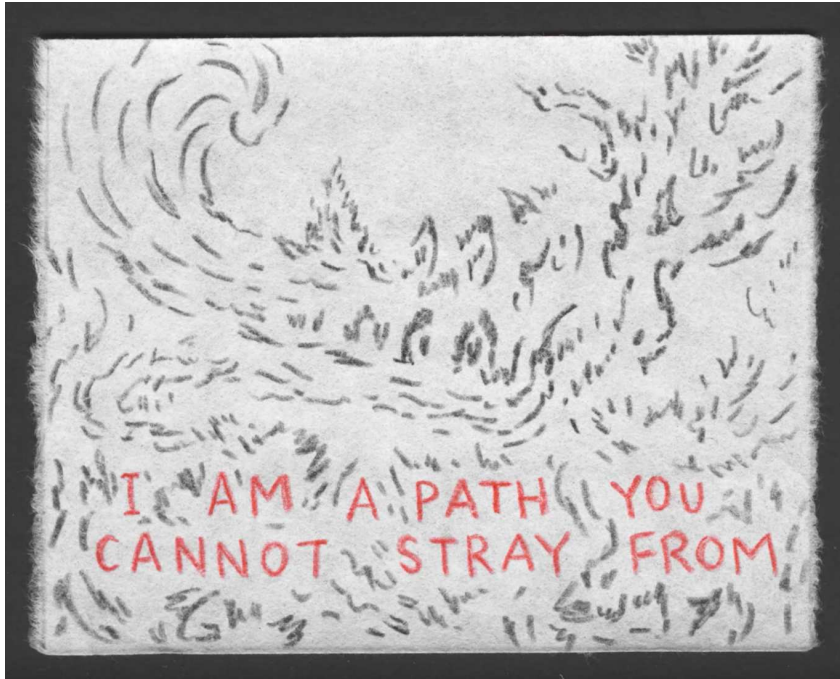


Fig. 16. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Myth)*, 2024. Animation frame.

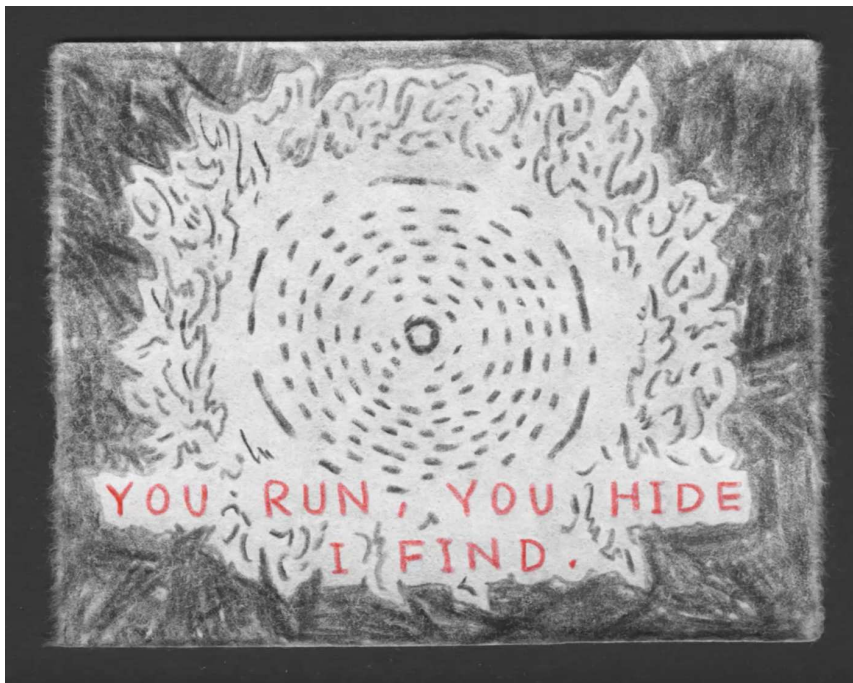


Fig. 17. Alexi Johnstone, *Leposaari (Myth)*, 2024. Animation frame.

SONGS, STORIES, MYTHS

The hand drawn animation ‘Leposaari (Myth)’ was in many ways the coming together of all the elements of this body of work, into the most explicitly narrative, mythological and direct communication. It was purposefully displayed on a small screen, tucked among the other works, because I wanted the viewer to *choose* to engage with it. The medium of animation requires prolonged attention from the viewer, it can not be accessed from a distance or upon first glance. I worked in this medium to infer the same extended attention that was integral to its creation, that is my development of a relationship with Leposaari. Through watching the animation, the viewer can access in a condensed form the whole span of the relationship.

The narrative has two characters, the viewer and the crow. Of course, it is also my perspective, but the aim in the work was to invite the viewer to implicate themselves. I began with the perspective grid, it seemed to me the necessary starting point, the immanent frame from where I began, I also knew the grid would have to collapse, to be subsumed into something of a different order. The emergence of the crow out of the collapse of the grid, is the emergence of the agent. The use of the crow to symbolise the spirit of Leposaari was not an arbitrary choice, but eventuated from the number of striking interactions I had with crows in Leposaari. As I stated earlier, the work was done in the dead of winter, very few creatures were present, but the crow remained.

“Crows everywhere, hopping among the graves, flying noiselessly between the ring of birch trees on the outer perimeter, the two sentinels. I walked through the graves, noticing their semi regular intervals, as if there was a logic to their layout unavailable to my mind. As I came close to the recently dug grave, the recently buried body, I saw the old flowers had been removed, instead a cluster of daffodils were planted where the head would be. As I looked at this mound of dirt, the crows in the trees became restless; they began to squawk, and many flew nearer to where I was, some darting overhead. A dark cloud of the uncanny moved over me, I moved away from the burial site, a premonition that I was being ushered away. Night was drawing in, I realised what would have been obvious to any person past, that a cemetery at night does not make suitable encounters for the living. The sense was that these crows were gathered to guard this place through the night, their warning was frightful but not out of malice, but counsel from a wise necromancer, who has a job to do, that I am hindering. At first I thought to move only away from the grave, but as I continued the crows came down among me, I watched one moving sticks and bracken away from the front of a tombstone, it looked like each hedge sectioned grouping had its master, hopping and fluttering about. My aliveness, my curiosity, my inevitable return to my life, felt like a careless intrusion. I didnt know which patch of earth was right to step on, where my eyes shouldn't land. I left the cemetery, closing the gate behind me with a clang, my last disturbance. I walked away, not from fear, but from overwhelming gratitude.”(Journal entry)

This particular experience was a pivotal inspiration for the animation, as is described, the crows of Leposaari showed themselves to be the guardians of the island, the all knowing movers. They were the body, the form of the spirit of Leposaari. In the animation I tried to merge the identity of ‘the crow’ with the identity of the island at large, primarily in the imagery, but the crow remained the guide in between these states throughout, through the

text. It made sense to me to use an animal as the speaker, not only because of the long history of 'spirit animals' and similar associations, but also because it can be easier to perceive spiritual agency in an animal than a whole island. There is a greater capacity to see it as agential, as having an intelligence like a human, having a soul. There is also the counter affordance, which is that if the crow is agential, intelligent, ensouled, it likely has a different agency to that of a human, perhaps even one of a higher order. As my journal entry suggests, this was how I experienced the crows, they appeared to me much more knowledgeable of and sensitive to the deeper levels of the nature of the island, and were in fact fully conformed to it.

Importantly, the crows could interact with death, in fact it seemed the whole island could. On many occasions I felt as though the island was holding death itself so that the living could go on, it could hold the grief, the liminality of dying. This was for me an aspect of the work I think was not explored to its ultimate end, the reality that Leposaari is a cemetery, a place of the dead. While there are nods to it in the animation, and subtly in other works, I did not manage to describe and display this with as much clarity and force as I would have liked to. I think an aspect of this failure is due to a personal moral deficit, of not having the inner strength to face it fully, and therefore to acknowledge my own mortality, perhaps if I had worked there longer I would have been able to face this and incorporate it more intrinsically to the work. Nevertheless, it was in the animation that I aimed to bring this to the fore as much as I could.

The written component of the piece is poetic and must necessarily remain mostly unanalysed for its own sake, however there are tonal qualities to the writing worth noting. Firstly, it is in a poetic form, there is soft rhyming and rhythm, used to give it mythic associations, of song or memorised story. The language of the speaker is one that moves across time and space, it 'knows' the viewer now and before they were alive, it guards its own death, but remains alive. This breaking of spatial temporal bounds, is the call to the imaginal, to what isn't alive, but isn't dead, to what is here now and has always been. The final part of the writing is a command, 'remember to die.' This is an interpretation of the stoic phrase, 'memento mori,' it has a different quality than the command to remember death, instead it is a call to die so as to be reborn anew, and then to die again. This continuous death is a call to drop what you think you are, to shed your known world and enter into life anew. It is after this statement that the image flickers on the white of the paper, and eventually loops back into the animation

The animation is an intersection of many aspects of the body of work at large, not only through its containing of multiple sets of imagery that connect to the other works, but also in its process. The animation is made up of hundreds of drawings, a reflection of the practice of drawing that underrode the whole artistic component of my thesis. This was a work that was made in conjunction with all the other works and nourished and informed them along the way, as they did it. My inference of the intersection is not a statement of value, of it having a place of higher importance in comparison to the other works, they are as I see them, a multitude that makes up a whole, much like Leposaari itself.

THE EXHIBITION AS A ZONE, FINAL REFLECTIONS

The final artwork to be considered is the sound piece, displayed using a sound shower which would be at its highest volume and clarity when standing directly in front of the work on the window, which was also the central point of all of the works. I made this work in collaboration with artist Iikkamatti Hauru, and it involves a flow of slow moving notes atop a sweeping horizon, and very occasionally my voice saying this poem:

“Winds of providence opened its mysteries,
Said, ‘Greet me like a child, walk with me.’
The grass’ acquiescence and eyes in the trees.
How to face the grief of a person shaped earth?
I see a searchlight finding a seed,
The crow flies towards me.

The Chaos in the Waters,
The Breath in the Trees,
Guarded Death,
And the Binding of the Three.”

I chose to include the sound piece in the exhibition as a means to unify and gather together all of the disparate works into a centre, and to create a feeling of a distinct atmosphere, a zone. Looking at the effectiveness of this endeavour, I notice some flaws. Firstly, there were technical issues with the sound shower that meant some visitors did not get to experience it at all, additionally it did not have the limited range that I expected, and instead the sound dispersed quite far out into the space shared. This meant that the volume had to be low and the effect less apparent. In review, I believe this body of work would be served best by being within its own room. This would both provide the instance of the threshold and allow the sound work to function more appropriately. However, regarding the display in Kuvan Kevat, I think that the space I was given gave the work an airiness and openness, the large windows with streaming natural lighting, and the high ceilings of the Kuva Tila space, allowed the work to breathe.

As I review the thesis project as a whole, I return to the question I began this writing from, that is the issue of landscape art and whether there is a practise and theoretical framing which navigates past the objectification and spectatorial representation common to the genre. I believe I have given a reasonable explanation for the necessity of moving outside the immanent frame of the buffered self, and into the enchanted world of the porous self, as an antidote to the ideology and epistemology that gave rise to the pernicious version of landscape art described at the outset. The question remains however, what does this porous self, this enchanted frame show up as in the realm of landscape art.



Fig. 18. Installation view at Kuvan Kevät, 2024. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.

Before concluding on my own work, I would like to point to two other artists whose works have appeared before me as imaginably enriched landscapes. The first to note is my supervisor for this thesis, artist Elina Merenmies. I sought out Merenmies' supervision after seeing her works in Amos Rex a few years ago. To see them, was to encounter a real presence, a spirit in form. In the works were indeed all of the constituents of a landscape, but they broke my capacity to objectively view them, to set them apart from myself. Instead, they seemed to charge at me, breaking apart my buffered self. Merenmies views her practice as a form of prayer, and the contact with spirituality is ever present in the work, and in my estimation this aspect can not be overlooked. To look at the work of Merenmies, is to encounter the spirit as it resides in material form, to be within the imaginal. Encountering this work was an affirmation of the possibilities of landscape art, approached from a spiritually rich episteme.

The second artist I want to mention is Joshua Hagler, particularly his project Nihil. The work comes out of walking through the barren New Mexico terrain and stumbling upon abandoned and forgotten places. He both makes the work about these places and his findings there and often exhibits the final work there as well. His work is developed through this relationship to place; real encounters which he strives to depict in their own terms. Hagler veers away from distinct forms or external influences, instead he has set up a system of practices that removes as much as possible his ability to impose meaning and

category, such as scraping away layers of the painting and painting atop, or a procedural map of colour choices. This aspect of Hagler's work, what he calls 'the tenets of Nihil,' are not only practical systems but also relational, they are values and aspirations for the work to move within. What is crucial in Hagler's work is not necessarily the procedural rules, but what they afford; genuine revelation without imposition. His ceding of control while remaining faithful to the phenomena, is to me the move into reality, into the world of the porous self that does not define the boundaries of personal and external intention but marries them together.

The commonality of all these artists is their insistence in the inherent meaningfulness and spiritual agency of a landscape. I, along with Hagler, have realised to come into contact with this quality requires an active and imaginal relationship to a place. It is to know your home as you know yourself. This was also the binding contract, and the faith upon which the whole body of work rests; to trust in the emergence that arrives out of relationship, and that this emergence is necessarily beyond mere materialism; it is profoundly ensouled. The concept of agapic love is the centre of this faith. Agapic love is a transformative act whereby perceiving the divinity of another in love, transforms a phenomena into a person. It is to assume all the agency, all the personality, all the depths that you can experience internally exists in the other. To transform a thing into a person is not anthropocentrism. I think it is not helpful to reject the possible 'personhood,' of non humans. Personhood is not a given, as history tells, but it is an act of bestowing divine meaning, to value something as an agent with a life of its own that transcends its use or capacity to be manipulated, and for it to have an infallible right to exist. I think it is a critical problem in our time that we do not see the natural world as a multitude of beings which have rights, but rather a set of resources to be exploited. To see the 'personhood' in a place, in a landscape, is to see beyond the immanent frame, beyond objectification and into an enchanted, *meaningful* world.

What this shift in mentality has afforded to my practice, is a sense that I am not alone in creating the works, and therefore I can set aside a certain type of unhelpful criticality and be more cognisant of affect, of emotionality and tone, and real contact. The practice that led to this thesis, and is revealed in the artworks, has afforded me an experience of the enchanted world. I can no longer perceive Leposaari as mere matter, a series of quantities, I can perceive its moods, its longing, its quality. Leposaari made demands of me, it listened to me, it grieved with me, it called me to it. Leposaari is not only a place to me, it is a person, an identity, it is a friend and a wise teacher.

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Fig. 20. Photograph of Leposaari. Photograph by Alexi Johnstone.