Draw from the well

Draw from the well. Dig, drive, drill or use your hands. Is this what pain feels like? Whatever means you think necessary to scoop the words and ideas of women into your lifebelt. When running away from, became running towards; at the moment two tides breaking simultaneously.

The Bays of Metaphor

An ear

That can hear

Two tides

Breaking simultaneously

I am thinking about Sam Ainsley’s new work that she has made for the Isle of Mula, off the west coast of Scotland, whilst I am up north. Here I am, standing on a sand tombola that links Shetland’s South Mainland to St Ninan’s Isle. This tied isle was last inhabited in 1796 – a sand tombola that links Shetland’s South Mainland to St Ninan’s Isle. This tied isle was last inhabited in 1796. She ranged Back and forth, Over The Constant Hills That had been Placed there By others.

In 1930, the same year as the St Kildans left their island for the mainland, Jenny Gilbertson (1902-1990) moved in reverse, from Glasgow to live on Shetland. In 1931, as an independent documentary filmmaker, she made her own magnum opus, ‘A Crofter’s Life on Shetland’ (Length: 46 mins). Rather than forever fixing the crofters, like pinned photographs or filming this final leave-taking. She filmed a wedding on Fetlar, walking over three miles with the wedding party from the boat to the church. She also set off over hills on hearing word-of-mouth change-over of the lighthouse crew, coined as ‘The Loneliest Place on Earth: St Kilda’. In her work there is the pull between dualities, for example between the natural and manmade, or the body and landscape. This oppositional dynamic allows for the metaphorical to come into play.

The Plain of Tenderness

Where territories join

And continents collide

To create a Brave New World.

In an earlier conversation about her new work for An Tobar, Ainsley had looked out a series of quotes and a list of women writers for me to draw from – her well. In the folder of papers that she handed over, the quotes are often handwritten in looped script, sometimes electronic, often circled with fluorescent pen or bearing her thoughts in the margins, indicating these are words she often re-visit.

In actuality, there is no trace of the last moment when feet exited from home ground to water. Whilst newspaper journalists and photographers officially documented these last days, the government had placed an embargo on taking photographs or filming this final leave-taking. Salt spray, acid soil and strong winds have ensured this is a land of no trees. Therefore, those St Kildans who stayed in Scotland, were given mainland employment as foresters.

Salt spray, acid soil and strong winds have ensured this is a land of no trees. Therefore, those St Kildans who stayed in Scotland, were given mainland employment as foresters. In a sand tombola that links Shetland’s South Mainland to St Ninan’s Isle. This tied isle was last inhabited in 1796 – a sand tombola that links Shetland’s South Mainland to St Ninan’s Isle. This tied isle was last inhabited in 1796. She ranged Back and forth, Over The Constant Hills That had been Placed there By others.

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A high number of the suggestions are of women who have written science fiction amongst other material, including Doris Lessing (1919-2013), Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-) and Marge Piercy (1936-). This source of avid reading makes tremendous sense when looking at the co-existent worlds Ainsley creates in her works. In Le Guin’s ‘The Left Hand of Darkness’ [SF Masterworks, Gollancz Publishing, (2015), originally published 1969], islands are: ‘...apartment-boarding house buildings that house the greater part of the urban populations of Karhide. Islands contain 20 to 200 private rooms; meals are communal; some are run as hotels, others as co-operative communes’. [P.9]

Here the natural island is an urban unit. The metaphor allows something to stand in as something else. Recognisable anchors, such as the premise of ‘island’ are untethered from direct association, often from time itself, to allow for new narratives. In the small drawings and collages presented in grid formation at An Tobar, a heart walks; capillaries become ghost trees; engorged veins are underground tunnels. Meet me

At The River of Inclination
You stand on your bank
With Respect.
I only hold
Gratitude.

Architecture, nature and our relationships with them are oft-referenced in Ainsley’s work. She presents ideas of the city, how we live, what we live in, and how that influences our behavior. ‘Memories from Katsura’ presents a harmonious scene from Japanese architecture, with a tree growing up through the middle of a room. The rain lashes outside. Nature and connectedness! However, death and ruin are presented in other works. ‘If Not Now, When?’ (2017), holds a retrograde vision of the contemporary destruction of ancient Mosul. Classical columns are on fire. The precariousness of life is a heart placed on a pedestal.

Ainsley imposes the orderly device of a grid upon these thirty six detailed scenes, with each square, a room. Their proximity, in this formation, allows the eye to wander and make connections. This movement echoes Lessing’s narrator in ‘The Memoirs of a Survivor’ [Flamingo, 1995, originally published by The Octagon Press, 1974] who finds she can mysteriously walk through a wall into the unknown space beyond her apartment: ‘Looking back now, it is as if two different ways of life, two lives, two worlds, lay side by side and closely connected’ [Ibid, P.25]

There is clear indication
That from the Sea of Love
To The Mountains of Strife
Life lies Somewhere in-between.

If the grid is the room, the blueprint of civilization, then the circle is the microscope, the microbe, the atom, the ocular, the island, the world. For her second body of work, made on circular frames, the relationship for Ainsley between the circles and squares, is both a practical and an aesthetic one, allowing her to range like Lessing’s Survivor, from the micro to macro. The circle is the magnifying glass for the sub-atomic world. Zoom in. It is the singular zero in the binary code. Then draw back and the earth is a tiny blue dot.

Cyberspace and body space! Donna Haraway states in ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, [P11, Manifestly Haraway, Donna J. Haraway’, University of Minnesota Press (2016)]: ‘Our machines are disturbingly lively and we ourselves frighteningly inert’. For her third work for An Tobar, Ainsley explores the imbalance between isolation and connectedness, in a wall painting of a map of real and imaginary islands. Re-calling its 17th Century source, the ‘Map of Tenderness’ by Madeleine de Scudery, words for emotions are the landmarks and territories to be navigated, suggesting a different anatomy of landscape. To conclude, in a note from Ainsley’s folder with fluorescent marker en-circling it:

‘In 1984, Adrienne Rich called for a ‘politics of location’ beginning with the geography closest to it – the body, more exactly my body, my place to see from (and be seen) my place to ask questions (and to listen) my point of multiple perspectives (and my part in the problem):’ [Notes towards a Politics of Location’, Adrienne Rich, (1984). P.7, Women, Feminist Identity and Society in the 1980s: Selected papers, Edited by Mynam Diaz-Diocezat and Iris M. Zavala [Critical Theory 1] (1985)]

Body and Geography! Ainsley continues to excel in her ongoing enquiries, following down her own unique visual language. Her subsequent emotional mapping folds both time and space, addressing the complexities and simplicities of being alive.

Jenny Brownrigg (2017)