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# WATER – COLOURS . KAREN ROULSTONE ON BARBARA NICHOLLS

I think Nicholls' distinctive engagement with watercolour draws us into its liquidity in the dilution and dispersal of pigment which rides on the play between chance, control and containment on a monumental scale.

*In her most recent solo exhibition, Sedimentary Flow (2017), at The New Art Gallery Walsall, Barbara Nicholls presented a series of remarkable, large-scale watercolours, each more than two meters high. Karen Roulstone sent Turps her response and describes Nicholls' wider processes:*

Set against the backdrop of the vast polished-concrete walls of the gallery, the translucent lightness of the paper works give the impression of tableaux hovering above the ground; each a cellular iteration of colour; each revealing, in turn, the vagaries of liquid material processes.

At first glance, what I find really striking is the stunning richness of the nuanced and vibrant palette of colour presented, but also, the sheer extent of the terrain on which this is played out. In terms of scale, unusually, these are watercolours which relate to bodily dimensions; you confront them viscerally and cerebrally. In some works, the suggestion of organic and bodily aspects is accentuated by a deep blood-red palette and distinctive organ-like forms which, as in the painting *Igneous Intrusion*, appear as if their delicate membranes of colour press up against the clear pane

of a microscope slide. This is, however, a momentary impression as generally the works visually gesture towards wider geological formations and landscapes, both physical and psychical. Referring to the paintings as 'accumulations', Nicholls alludes to geological formations in her naming of the works: *Tidal Delta; Magma Ocean; Seafloor Spreading; Volcanic Boom*. These names are also spaces of the imagination, evocative of worlds constructed beneath hidden depths and the mystery of the unseen. It seems apposite in this context that *Tate Britain's* 2011 exhibition *Watercolour* surveyed the use of the medium over a span of 800 years – medium and the idea of geological time becoming inextricably linked.

The processes that Nicholls deploys involve laying out heavy weight 638gsm *Saunders Waterford* paper on a monumental scale on the studio floor. The performativity of her practice forcefully emerges as the methods she employs necessitate her reaching across and over the entirety of the surface of the paper, at first with water via mops, and then with pigment. The relationship between the action and gesture of her body and its interaction with the horizontal ground is suggestive of sweeping over the terrain; glimpsing a distant aerial view when flying in to land. This topographical analogy speaks of a dialogue between the context of production and the corresponding environmental conditions at hand, which translate into a real lived experience for Nicholls. Her sites of production have been international for many years and increasingly oscillate between the urban and rural. Interestingly, in a similar vein to the German watercolourist Bernd Köberling, who divides his time between his studio in Berlin and working in the landscape of Lodmundarfjörður, Iceland, Nicholls works in the Peak District and London with regular residencies in Germany – her practice flourishing on

**Formation Foreshore**  
2015  
Watercolour on Saunders Waterford HP  
638gsm  
220 x 152 cm

Photo by FXP Photography





the invigorating drama of these contrasts.

Working in her Bollington studio in the Peak District, Nicholls is surrounded by vast, natural open-air spaces – shifting landscapes chased by elemental forces. There is a sense that the sound of the wind and rain are the backdrop to her thought processes. Back within the protected space of her studio, she employs domestic appliances – electric fans and heaters – to create artificial micro-climates which accelerate the drying times of the pools of watercolour; this whilst incrementally shaping and facilitating the layers of pigment to form on the paper through the process of evaporation. On close examination of the works, it appears that the lightest delicacy of touch has imparted a stain of vibrant colour which is immediately dispersed into pale, cloud-like organic forms such as in *Formation Foreshore* (2016). The pigments appear to have gently seeped and silted into the curve of the invisible edges of water, drawn down like tide marks from a receding tributary. There is a sense of liberation from mark-making in this fluidity – the lack of gestural mark

invoking ideas of chance, randomness, and the incidental. In this sense, the virtuosity apparent in the initial parts of this process remind me of the Japanese art of *hatsuboku* or splashed/flung ink paintings. As Vivian Sobchack suggests, “...with the flung ink we not only encounter the spreading ‘stain’, but we also reencounter our own thrown-ness in the world and the logical contingency that informs and irrupts into our ‘rational’ existence.”

But in spite of the errant fluidity of water, and what would seem to be the potential for chaotic interactions of colour on such a large scale, these are very considered and deliberate organic lines of demarcation. The rules of engagement for the work have arisen from long-term and extensive experimentation with the properties of watercolour, notably carried out in 2013 during a year-long studio residency with *Winsor and Newton* in London. Nicholls worked alongside scientists who were developing an extensive range of organic and inorganic paint products, to produce a systematic and methodical mapping of the spectrum and properties of colour. In fact, an understanding of the alchemic

Left: **Barbara Nicholls Studio**

Right: **Sedimentary Flow**  
The New Art Gallery Walsall (Installation view) 2017

Photo by Jonathan Shaw

Photo by FXP Photography

Opposite page clockwise:

**Sink Hole Hole Return**  
2016  
Watercolour on paper in sand

Gampang NSW Australia

**After Mungo no 2**  
2017  
49 D Watercolour on Saunders Waterford HP 638gsm

**After Mungo no 6**  
2017  
49 D Watercolour on Saunders Waterford HP 638gsm

Photo by FXP Photography





dimensions of pigment has been central to the way in which the work has evolved. This knowledge has been underpinned by thinking through processes observed in the landscape relating to water and pigment which have translated to the use of materials in her studio practice. Specifically, in 2013 she worked in a studio at Telpost, Millingen, a watchtower on the Rhine, an experience that enabled her to imagine how the varying weights of pigments might travel along the river, suspended in water, later to be deposited as sediment and strata. Lighter pigments such as quinacridones would travel in water and set on the bed of the paper, whilst weightier pigments such as cobalts and earth pigments would drop down, each creating new boundaries and edges within the work. It is through this symbiotic relationship of knowledge of material properties and the context of production that the extent of Nicholls' integrated methodology is illuminated.

This concern with context became very clear when looking at work she created in 2016 while participating in a residency on the ancient site of *Mungo National Park* in New South Wales, Australia. Nicholls literally worked on her watercolours in the landscape, burying them in the sand in an arid environment where old lakes had dried up and only the accumulations of centuries of sediment and clay remain. The resonance between her processes and the formation of the natural environment is unmistakable. This connection extends to her decision to create circular watercolours, slightly sunken in the sand; the instant evaporation leaving behind a residual stain of pigment. Inspired by the accounts of an indigenous guide, Tania, who described the method through which her ancestors filtered water from a nearby lake by creating of a series of sink holes, Nicholls used the story as a visual device in her production of a series of watercolours which formally referenced

the process. Set against the variegated layers of sediment in the Mungo Lunette, portals of vibrant watercolour dot the landscape, reminiscent of a testing palette writ large. The paper works present crystalline, jewel-like sections, suggesting a glimpse into an inner chromatic, iridescent natural world.

Just as Helen Frankenthaler's 'soak stain' technique transformed the way in which the materiality and properties of paint might be understood, I think Nicholls' distinctive engagement with watercolour draws us into its liquidity in the dilution and dispersal of pigment which rides on the play between chance, control, and containment on a monumental scale. There is something lyrical about the transformative nature of the process of solid pigment dissolving into liquid and the evaporation back to dry sediment again – the transition of states of matter, particles, and their movements. The lusciousness of the pigments captivates and transports the viewer. What I am left with is a residing sense that, in this moment of animation, translation, and resolution, her paintings come to me as the ethereal colour of liquid thought.



**Ascent, Blå Huset – Karen Roulstone**  
2015  
Oil on wooden panel  
30 x 40 cm

*Courtesy of the artist*

Opposite: **Seafloor Spreading**  
2015  
Watercolour on Saunders Waterford HP  
638gsm  
220 x 152 cm

*Photo by FXP Photography*