

Lesley Punton

mountains without end



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with texts by Thomas A Clark, Alec Finlay
and Dr David Watson

Foreword by Sandie Macrae

R O O M B O O K S, London

Foreword

Sandie Macrae

My first introduction to Lesley Punton was through the letterbox. An exquisitely hand made folder landed on my doormat, containing ideas and images for a drawing show in 2004. This folder gave me enough information to offer the artist an exhibition as soon as it was opened. Lesley appeared in the folder. That small modest object revealed the thought, craft, sensitivity, quietness and uncompromising integrity which inhabits her work and her personal life.

The show consisted of large drawings of different places, from photographic negatives, onto the surface of thick, smoothly sanded oil paint. All the information in the negative (including the grain of the photograph) was reduced to the same mechanical mark made at a constant even pitch, regardless of form or tone, minutely recording detail over the entire surface of the painting. A very physical experience of looking. During the making of the drawings, the negative itself would fade while in the slide projector, the whole process becoming a slow race to fix the image before the negative itself disappeared. The image was fugitive in the most literal sense of the word.

In the last few years, Lesley Punton's work has changed in size to become smaller and more restrained, and the image has become darker and now fugitive in a different way. Her investigation remains, however, how to record and make art about the tonal quality of light or its lack, in different remote landscapes and mountains. She positions herself wherever she needs to be to be able to experience the place as it changes, through her whole body. She carries us with her, through her work to a moment, a place, an evolving experience. We actually feel the moment of translation onto the small board as a series of her views, thoughts and trials. Lesley Punton's work is 'slow art'. It is thoughtful, ephemeral, laborious and physical and to be in tune with her we must slow down our viewing experience. Quietly, and very successfully, she captures for us her deep personal solitude and strength, and produces exquisitely beautiful work.

July 2013



On Looking at Mountains

Thomas A Clark

As a young boy, the American poet Gary Snyder first encountered Chinese landscape paintings in a museum in Seattle. “I saw first that they looked like real mountains of an order close to my heart... they were real mountains and that these mountains pierced into another reality which both was and was not the same reality as ‘the mountains’”. Many years later, Snyder would begin a long poem, intended as his major work, entitled *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, which would be continued for years in imitation of the continuous unfolding of Chinese landscape scroll paintings. The poem would place him, again and again, among real mountains and rivers, confronting “another reality”.

If we leave aside for a moment the question of two levels of reality, the more urgent problem arises of finding a form, like the Chinese scroll, which will not only be adequate to experience but will further it, in an art that will be a continually renewed invitation to experience. Snyder’s “without end” is one solution, in two words effecting a shift from the immediacy of mountains and rivers to their scale and scope, and from the confrontation of looking to a more extended and resourceful acquaintance. A scroll or ongoing poem suggests that the scrolling and going might continue indefinitely, and that time might drop into the timeless.

How long can you look at a mountain? The truthful answer is, not for long! Any such encounter must surely bring up a discrepancy between the immense dignity and geological reach of a mountain and our own limited attention span, our ability, or lack of ability, to remain present to an answering gaze. While the mountain is solid and inescapable, the gaze addressed to it is intermittent, of uncertain depth and origin. This discovery is in itself sublime, as vertiginous as a cliff face. Its fascination and ethical urgency may quickly replace the original object of inspection. Looking at a mountain easily translates or collapses into looking at looking.

But is there not a similar problem with art? Is it not increasingly the case that art gives rise to occasions of bad faith where we shy away from the demands that art would make on us? We are too busy; the gallery is too crowded or too noisy; we are slightly drunk! In contemporary culture, such evasions or excuses are likely to occur whenever art is

not a diversion from everything including itself. Serious art must not only struggle with the motif but with our own resourceful strategies of evasion.

Lesley Punton is a mountain watcher, and a mountain climber, who knows Schiehallion and Stob Coire Easain from distant and from close acquaintance. She makes drawings, photographs and paintings which deepen, prolong and interrogate her experience of mountains, islands and other landscapes. Painting and photography are pictorial media but Punton's interests are less in depiction and documentation than in enquiry: how do you look at mountains, how do you make art about mountains, how do you look at art?

The problem of time is tackled directly in a dyptich by Punton, called *Duration*. A white painting (silverpoint and gesso on board) bears the inscription 186 Days, being the number of days of light at the north and south poles. A black painting (oil and gesso on board) carries the words 179 Days, the number of days of polar darkness. What are we to make of this information? What are we to do with it? Might it not have been as effectively conveyed if typed on a sheet of paper? Are we supposed to empathise, to look forward to the light, to endure the days of darkness? The contrast within the dyptich dramatises a real difference which seems to demand a response.

The paintings are beautifully made, the surface built up and sanded down, layer upon layer, to give a depth of texture and colour. The white is creamy and tactile. The black turns out to be a deep Prussian blue. Spread across the centre of the paintings, the words stand in the way of access to this tonal richness. A gap is opened up between concept and craft, or between discourse and content. After all, what does this information tell us about polar experience? Can there be any equivalent of, or substitute for, living through darkness? Perhaps the distance between information and knowledge is the ultimate concern of these paintings.

If so, the distance is partially crossed in two fog drawings. While the shapes of foliage and branches are barely discernible, wrapped in a graphite blanket, the drawings are

less concerned with the obscuring properties of fog than its insistent presence. A visual impoverishment concedes to tactile awareness. The touch of fog on face and hands is duplicated by the touch of pencil on paper; graphite clings to the paper as fog to the branches. The softness of the touch of the pencil creates an intimacy, bringing the viewer closer, increasing visual, tactile and aural acuteness in proportion to the reduced circumference of perception.

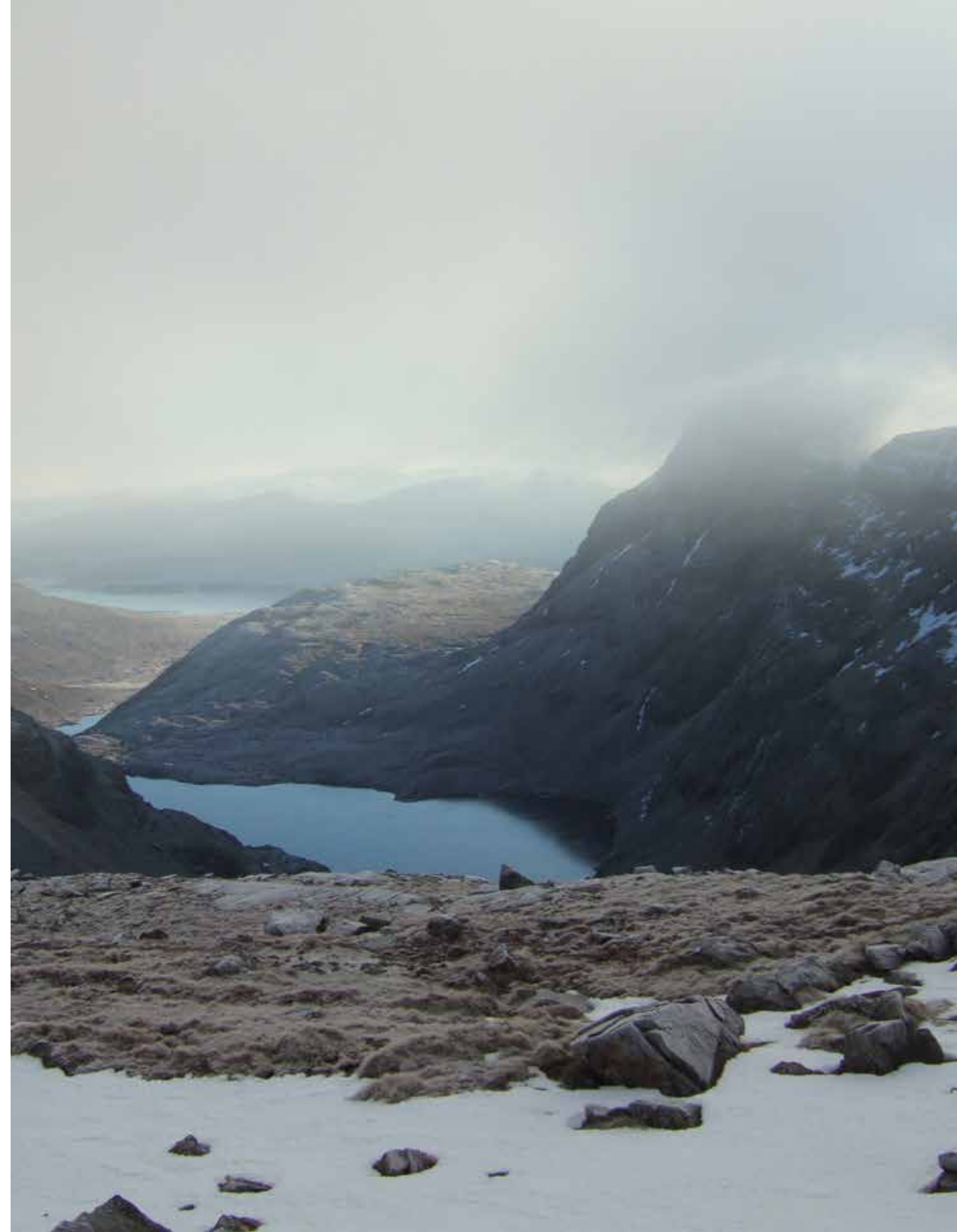
Can a drawing drench you like a fog? Can it dampen down ambient sound, sealing you into a hermetic reduction, a light grey parenthesis? Looking at these drawings is very close to touching them. You want to stroke them with a finger, to recover a little of the tenderness of the mark-making, of the pencil passing over the paper. The even pressure across most of the drawing amounts to a more-than-local condition. Everything slows down. There is nowhere to go. In the middle of the drawing, with the pencil touching the paper, time and self are suspended. Where have you put yourself, in the absence of external referents?

Most of Punton's work is small, in part because she doesn't want to confuse size with scale, but also to draw the viewer closer in to the work's concerns. The tonal range is deliberately reduced. We have to make do with what is there, or augment it in imaginative variation. An overall coverage of the surface area avoids the power of the central image. All these strategies are at play in three small drawings of Dark Mountains, recording the light at midnight on Ben Cruachan, Beinn Eithe and Stob Coire Easain. We are given the dark shape of each mountain, reduced to an outline against a dark sky.

It is only for impatience that things are dark. If we wait for long enough, there is always some available light. The three drawings are means of eliciting this resourceful waiting. The two principal tones in each drawing, mountain and sky, are close but might be closer, or more distant. We catch them at a moment that will change. To see the drawings properly is to wait until the tones separate, until we can distinguish mountain from sky; and then to go on waiting, in anticipation.

We might speculate that landscape is not an inevitable location for Lesley Punton's work, that it might be taken up with its own making, or that her interest may be as much psychological as geological. Certainly, the moment when the directed gaze turns back on itself seems to come up very quickly in the pieces I have mentioned. But the involution is never allowed to become all absorbing. This remains an essentially outwardly directed art, concerned with landscape through the full measure of concern. How to be true to it, to keep faith with it, to see it, to stay with it? If there is "another reality" to be discovered, it will be one that engages at a deeper level than that of the verbal and visual information, but also one to which such information may be a hint or lure. Close in, these small paintings and drawings, for all their modesty, seem on the brink of a revelation.

One might say that Punton's methods are more conceptual than pictorial. To show is only one possibility; there is also to say and to do, to inform, to speculate, to re-enact. You can look at a mountain, think about it, weigh it, walk on it, bivouac on the summit. The different devices Punton employs in different works are means of returning to the terrain, of inhabiting the ground, of enjoying the weather, of sharpening the intelligence of both artist and viewer, of slowing down response. These are slender means, given the size of the task, and our own entrenched habits of digression. But concepts are capacities. Like Snyder's little phrase, "without end", Lesley Punton's conceptual ingenuity and focused working methods are just enough to give some purchase on space and time.



Pataphysical Cuillin

Alec Finlay

rebalancing the equilibrium
between climbing & viewing
paying heed to Daumal's notion

thought is motion

movement is all
we share in common

walking
not the physical pretense of walking
but consciously harmonizing
walking at our own pace
there comes an entire rhythm
lighting life with joy & ease

but you cannot always belong
on the summits
you have to come down again
so what's the point?

while climbing
take note of all the difficulties
along your path
during the descent
you will no longer see them
but you will know that they are there
if you have observed carefully

there is an art to finding your way
in the lower regions by the memory
of what you have seen
when you were higher up
when you can no longer see
you can at least still know

(Mount Analogue)

This poem was first published on a web mapping of the Isle of Skye, *Còmhlan Bheanntan | A Company of Mountains*, Alec Finlay, commissioned by ATLAS, Skye, 2013.

René Daumal's *Mount Analogue*, sub-titled *A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing* (tr. Carol Cosman, Pantheon, 1960) is a foundational text of mountain counter-culture.

Pataphysics originates in the work of Alfred Jarry, who proposed it as the science of imaginary solutions, of laws governing exceptions and of the laws describing the universe supplementary to this one. These theories influence Daumal's experimental metaphysics, expounded in *Mount Analogue*. Here the final verses are based on passages from his essay *The role of Movement in the complete education of man*, translated by Mark Polizzotti.



Walking as Knowing

Dr David Watson

I barely know Lesley Punton.

We've met only once – on my side of the earth – the day Lesley and her family dropped in for a cuppa at our home studio after she'd projected images of her resonant work up at Sydney College of the Arts, here in urban Rozelle. Later we strolled a few hundred metres together, with Angus in his pram, around restored harbourside parkland on Iron Cove – named, some say, for the iron shackles worn by convicts there in the 1790's to prevent their escape – north, some dreamt, to China!



An 'enthusiasm' spotted on Sydney's Great Western Highway, 2012

We've kept in touch since, sent each other stuff – catalogues, texts, images – emailed sporadic enthusiasms. Though often months in the making, and usually delayed by the variegated demands of life, our missives are always delivered (somewhat unnecessarily given their lengthy gestation) at the speed of light. No stamps these days, no weeks spent jostling quietly, expectantly with other packets and packages down in a creaking wooden hold.

We early adopters, we privileged navigators of the contemporary West appear strangely unfazed by this new-found duality: the blending of often-unhurried analog experience with usually-instant digital gratification. Lesley and I have tapped out paragraphs on occasion (Generation Y call this 'speaking') about how the cadences, exertion, focus and freedoms of walking help to 'unlock' new experiences of place. Immersion at a meandering pace certainly does seem to help remove a little of the contemporary clamour, the 'background noise'. Perhaps, as Rebecca Solnit has observed, the mind works best at three miles per hour;^{*} Lesley has even wondered, in an entirely 'pre-GPS' sense, whether cognition might be motion-sensitive and site-specific:

^{*} 'I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought or thoughtfulness.' Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Viking, 2000), p. 10.

*The geography of Scotland has started to make sense in new physical ways with rivers, glens, and mountain groups providing every bit as many connections as the roads that previously formed my understandings of how things linked.**

Walking loved places (even unloved ones) delivers tiny epiphanies, imaginings, meditative pauses and memories, personal, occasionally shareable palimpsests of meaning and emotion. Nourished by metaphysical spaces such as these, artists can inflect and embroider, add nuance, help to transform space into place. Lesley's favoured sites – often-remote corners of Scotland – are for her never void of calories:

*The wild places I seek out... are about as full as I could hope them to be, and that includes vast expanses of moorland such as Rannoch Moor or the rock outcrops in the North West of Scotland where not much other than heather and grass can grow.***

Throughout our two-year 'conversation', Lesley and I have spoken often about what it means to walk at a time of accelerated, largely city-based living, and of our love/hate relationship with new technologies. Interestingly, and contrary to our initial prejudices/fears, we have both come to admit that the slow progress of [our] work 'won by walking'*** has been immeasurably enriched, opened up, via access to digital research materials.

For example, instantaneous key-word searches for specific place names (across previously amorphous, inaccessible archival-image collections) had fuelled and

embroidered *Wild Ryde*, my seven-year photo-based walking and swimming odyssey across suburban Sydney.* Via home computer, the immersive 'now' of my transit had been enlivened, entwined with the 'then' of history in (almost) real time: 'fact', fiction, dream... the personal, the anecdotal, the entirely fanciful, borne along, buoyed by until-recently unresuscitated (but far from worthless) digitally derived minutiae and detritus.**

Sometimes I think about Lesley in Glasgow – all those molten earthy rock-laden kilometres away through the earth – and her latest mountain walk, or artwork. Via her website (at the rather poor industry-standard screen resolution of 72 pixels per inch) I can bring to mind but not properly appreciate the true surface and depth of her imagery, nor her oft-laborious technique which, beyond traditional landscape representation, viscerally, softly echoes her journeying***. As I think about our ant-like wandering, wondering, googling and inscribing, upon separate hemispheres, poles apart, I gladly recognise, though, that our practices are more immediately communicable, alignable, mutually sustaining in this 'post-digital' age than ever before in history.

When Lesley mentions Scotland's fiercely defended 'right to roam' in an email, for example (in response to my outrage regarding the access coal seam gas companies are being allowed beneath people's farms up and down our east coast: unchecked legal pilfering which has lately spawned the unstoppable *Lock The Gate* protest alliance) I flash back immediately to indigenous notions of walking and caring for country here in the South. In seconds I'm able to recommend that Lesley read a new book, Bill

* Email correspondence with Lesley Punton, 15 August 2012.

** Ibid.

*** 'Only those thoughts won by walking have any value' Friedrich Nietzsche, *Maxims and Barbs*, in *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 9.

* David Watson, *Wild Ryde* (PhD diss., Sydney College of the Arts [Photomedia], The University of Sydney, 2012); David Watson, *Swimming Home* (2012) [7-minute video] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAueTqffyDY>.

** David Watson, *Swimming Home* (conference paper, Sydney College of the Arts, 2011). [sydney.edu.au/sca/pdfs/GS_conference_papers/David-Watson.pdf]

*** Lesley Punton, *Back to the Things Themselves* (Lesley Punton/Judy Spark) proposal, Glasgow International Festival of Visual Arts, 2012.

Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth – How Aborigines Made Australia*, about the extensive, until now barely acknowledged good stewardship of aboriginal people via the walking and firing of 'country', over millennia.^{*} I can even attach a PDF review of the book with a couple of swiftly empowering keystrokes.

Alongside and despite the lure and marvellous utility of the virtual, it becomes clearer to me by the day that most human beings, whether indigenous or newly-arrived (Lesley, I know, regards herself as a 'native' of Scotland) still crave an immersive relationship with 'country' – within their most familiar, loved, often local physical environments – whether they be urban or rural, built-up or people-free.

Aboriginal people regard 'country' as:

a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived and lived with. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place, such as one might indicate with terms like 'spending a day in the country' or 'going up the country'. Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind and spirit; heart's ease.^{**}

^{*} Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth – How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011).

^{**} Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), p. 7.

Last year Lesley sent me some extracts from *The Living Mountain*, a remarkable 1940's prose meditation by the Scottish writer Nan Shepherd. Like Lesley today, Nan was a lover and climber of mountains. During her long life she covered thousands of miles exploring the Cairngorms (in North-Eastern Scotland) on foot. In a 2008 review of her recently republished paen, English nature writer Robert Macfarlane observes:

The book is about the Cairngorms in the same way that Ulysses is about Dublin, or Mrs. Dalloway is about London – which is to say, it is attentive to the specifics of its chosen landscape, but also passionately metaphysical.[†]

Lesley Punton's work is similarly extracted, abstracted. Derived directly from the places she walks and pursues connection to, it also simultaneously experiments with (in her case visual) language, which seeks to parallel the experience.

Macfarlane goes on to note that most mountain literature is written by men 'focused on the summit', and that in utter contrast, Nan Shepherd goes into the Cairngorms 'merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend, with no intention but to be with him'.^{††} "And" is one of her favourite words... being the conjunction which implies connection without hierarchy', he writes.^{†††} Shepherd speaks of recapturing 'the pristine amazement not often savoured', and of sleeping upon the summit, where 'emptied of preoccupation, there is nothing between me and the earth and sky.'^{†††}

^{*} Robert Macfarlane, *I walk therefore I am*, The Guardian, 30 August 2008.

^{**} Ibid.

^{††} Ibid.

^{†††} Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (London: Canongate Books, 2011), pp 80-81.

Walking barefoot (a favourite Sydney pursuit of my own, not always achievable in Scotland) the author muses – so memorably you can feel it – that ‘a flower caught by the stalk between the toes is a small enchantment’.^{*} Concluding her ode, Shepherd writes of ‘living in one sense at a time to live all the way through’ so that ‘the body may be said to think.’^{***} Schooled in Buddhism, Nan Shepherd’s spirit and approach to ‘country’ sound, at least to these white Australian ears, extraordinarily, refreshingly aboriginal: indigenous Australians have believed, for 60,000 years, that they are part of the land, that it owns them, not the other (Anglo) way around.

In *26 views of the starburst world*, his recent re-imagining of early Sydney through the eyes and burgeoning indigenous sensitivities of William Dawes, the colony’s first astronomer, author Ross Gibson observes:

To be in country most beneficially, you have to be absorbed by it, you have to redistribute yourself in it, you have to flow with its dynamics.^{***}

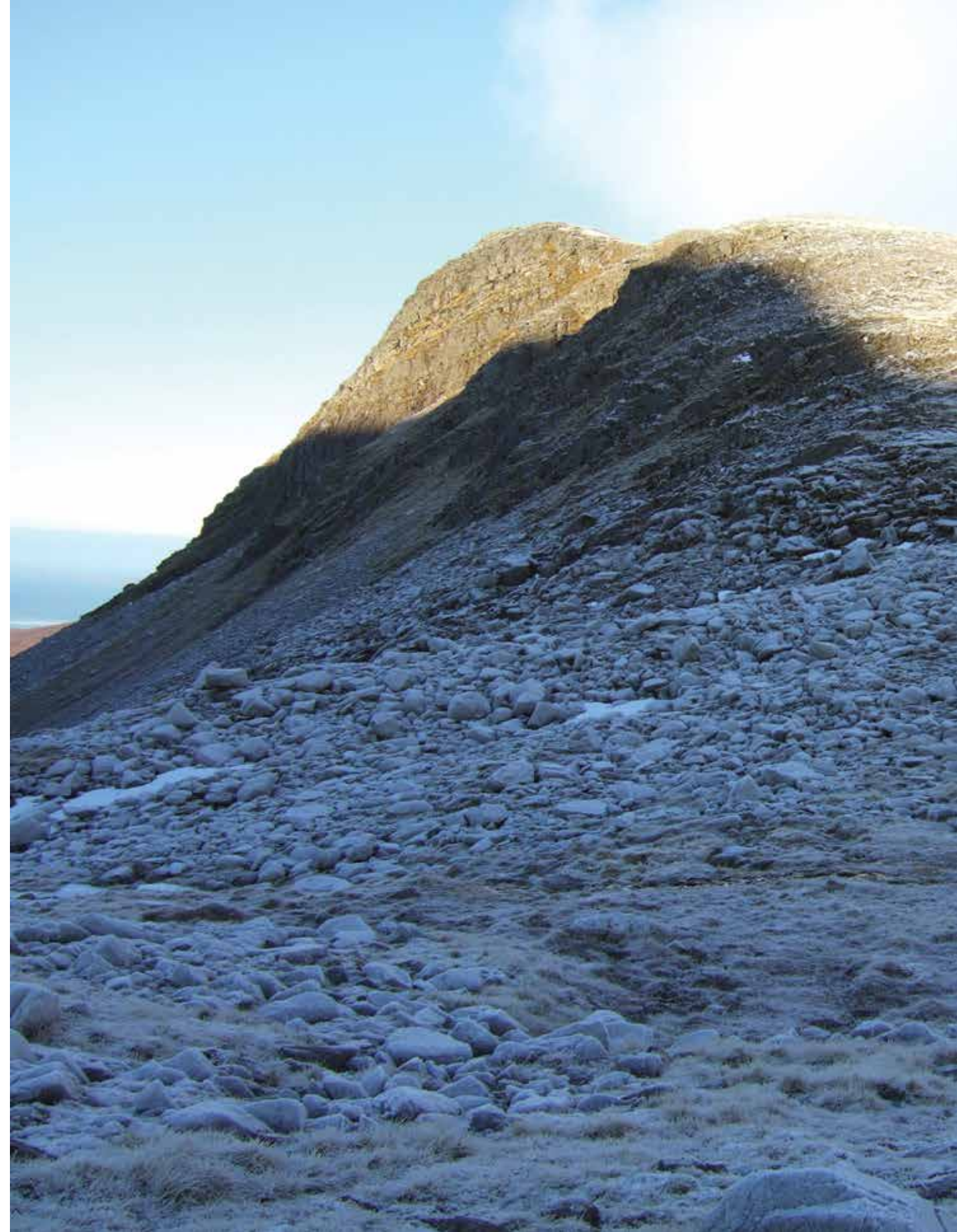
Amidst that flow, those dynamics, those earthly and celestial heavens, a mere 180 degrees to the north, walks Lesley Punton, an artist in touch with mountains, whom I have come to know through walking, and email, and to respect. One day I hope to see Lesley’s work with my own eyes. And to spend a night alone upon a Scottish mountain; witness, like her, to the fleeting ‘maximum black’ of a summer solstice.[†] My rucksack, I assure you, will be free of all technological devices.

^{*} Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (London: Canongate Books, 2011), pp 80-81.

^{**} Shepherd, p. 81.

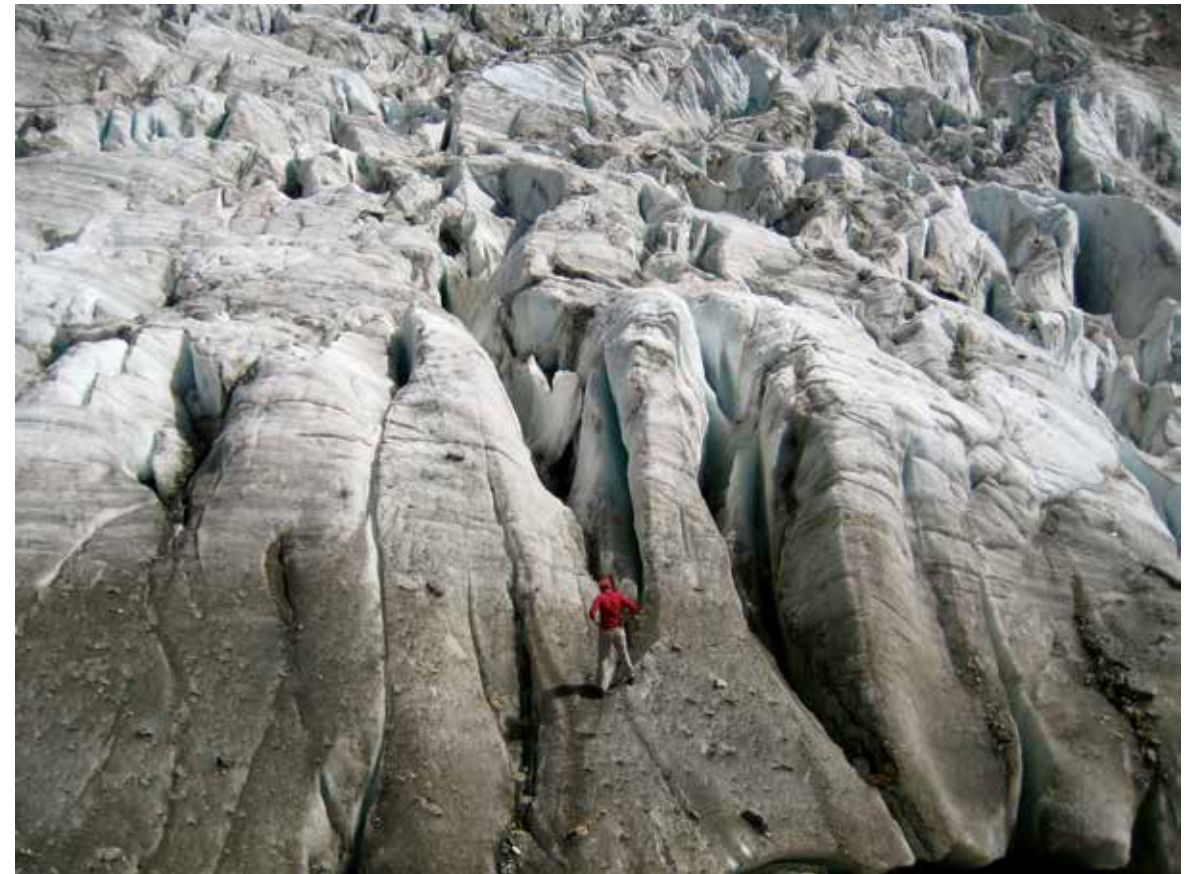
^{***} Ross Gibson, *26 views of the starburst world: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2012), p. 141.

[†] In her text *North* (2012) Lesley Punton writes: ‘On June 24th 2008 at 12.05am, I made a walk up Ben Hope, Scotland’s most northerly mountain over 3000ft, with the aim of finding... a place on this island where the sun didn’t set. Of course it turned out that the sun did indeed set... but [it] only just dipped below the horizon. “Maximum black” was at around 1am.’



Works

**La Jonction - the meeting place of the Glacier des Bossons
and the Glacier de Tacconnaz, Mt Blanc**
with Jim Hamlyn
lightjet print
2007/12
22 x 15 cm



Revisiting An Caisteal 27.11.05
lightjet print
2012
14 x 10.5 cm



Revisiting An Caisteal 04.03.06
lightjet print
2012
14 x 10.5 cm



Revisiting An Caisteal 03.04.07
lightjet print
2012
14 x 10.5 cm



Revisiting An Caisteal 24.03.08
lightjet print
2012
14 x 10.5 cm



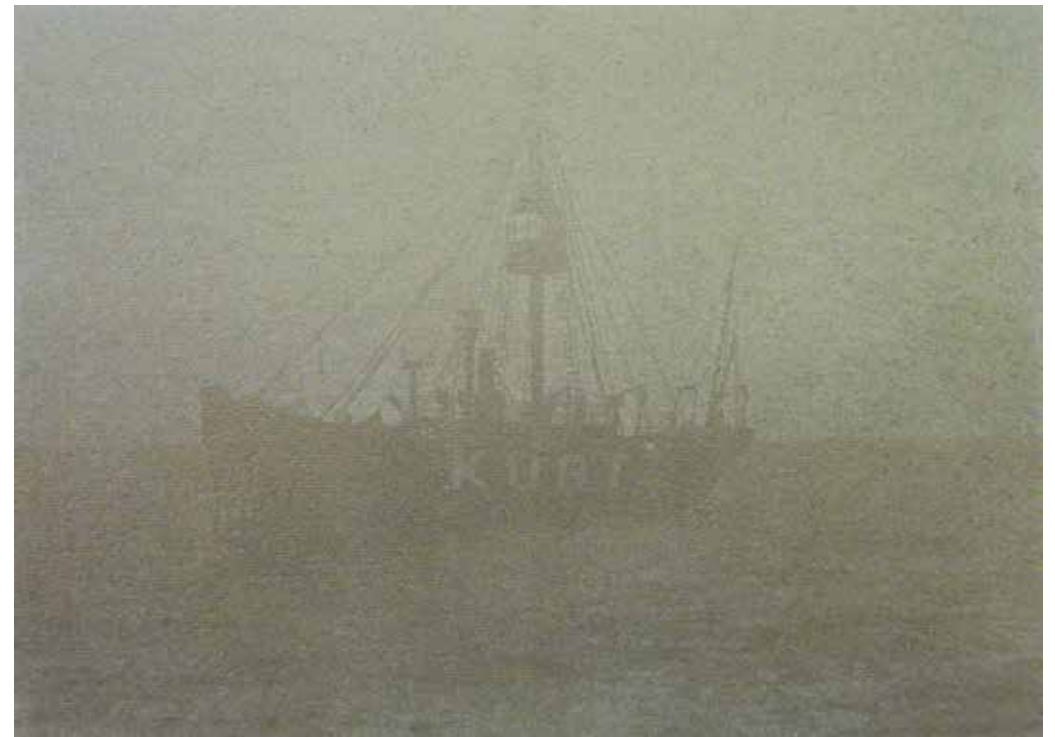
Revisiting An Caisteal 13.11.11
lightjet print
2012
14 x 10.5 cm



Fog I
graphite on paper
2009
22.5 x 18 cm



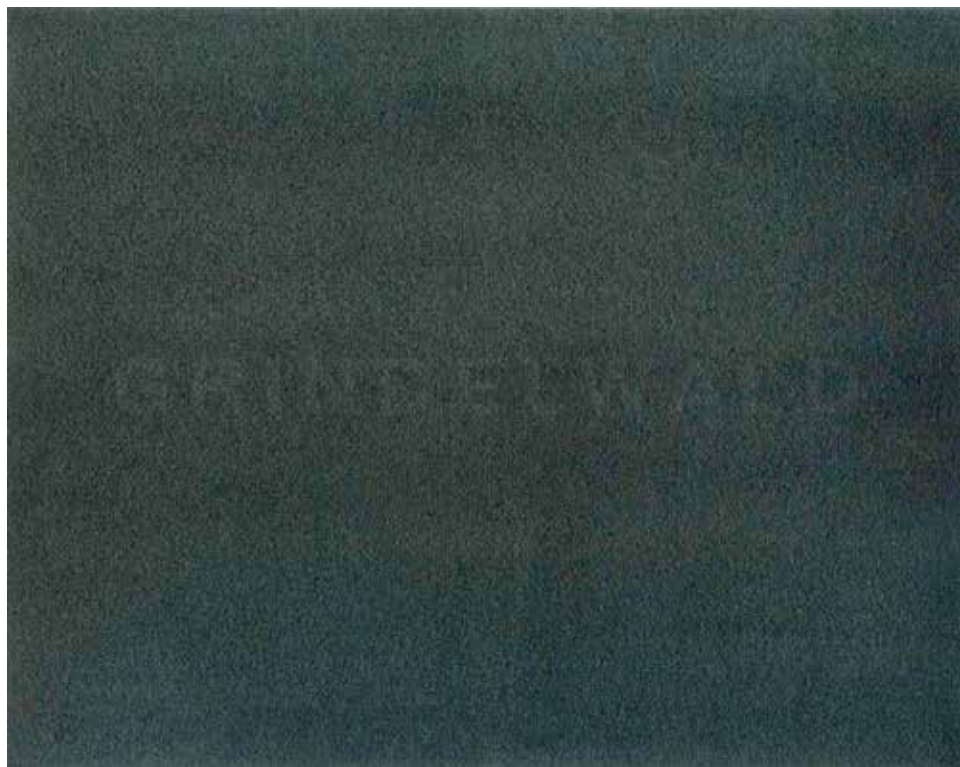
Kurtz II
graphite on paper
2009/10
11.3 x 8.2 cm



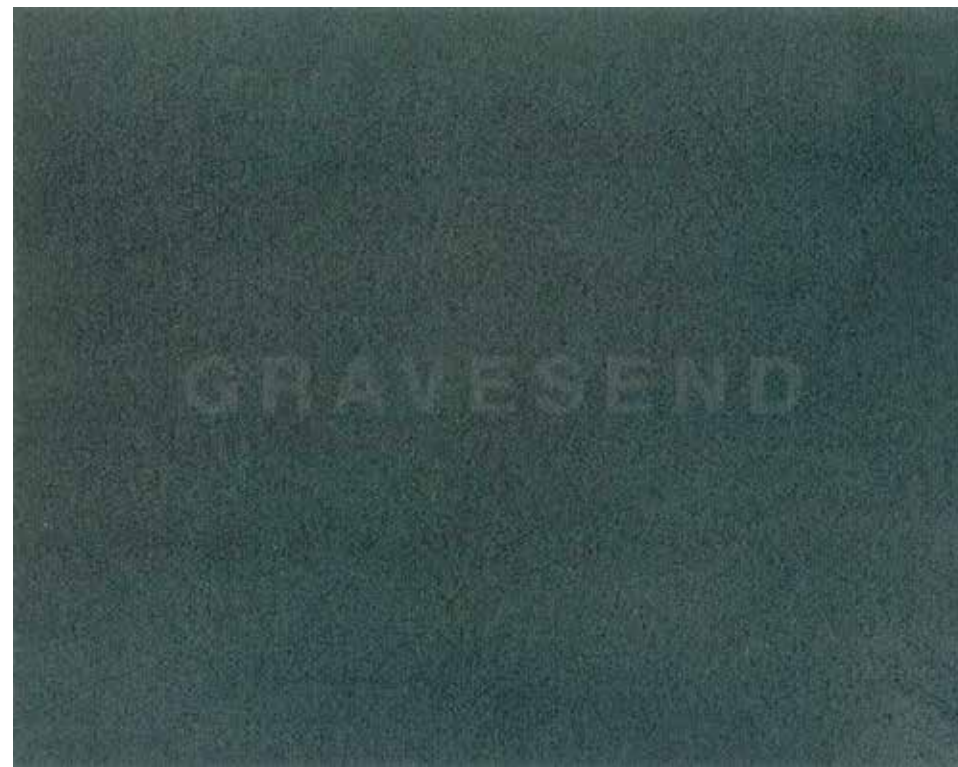
Castorp (The Magic Mountain) - from the lightship series
lithographic postcard from digitally altered found photograph
shown on an oak & steel shelf
2010
14.2 x 10.5 cm



Origin - Grindelwald
graphite on paper
2010
12.65 x 10.1 cm



Origin - Gravesend
graphite on paper
2010
12.65 x 10.1 cm



Marlow (Heart of Darkness) - from the lightship series
lithographic postcard from digitally altered found photograph
shown on an oak & steel shelf
2009
14.2 x 10.5 cm



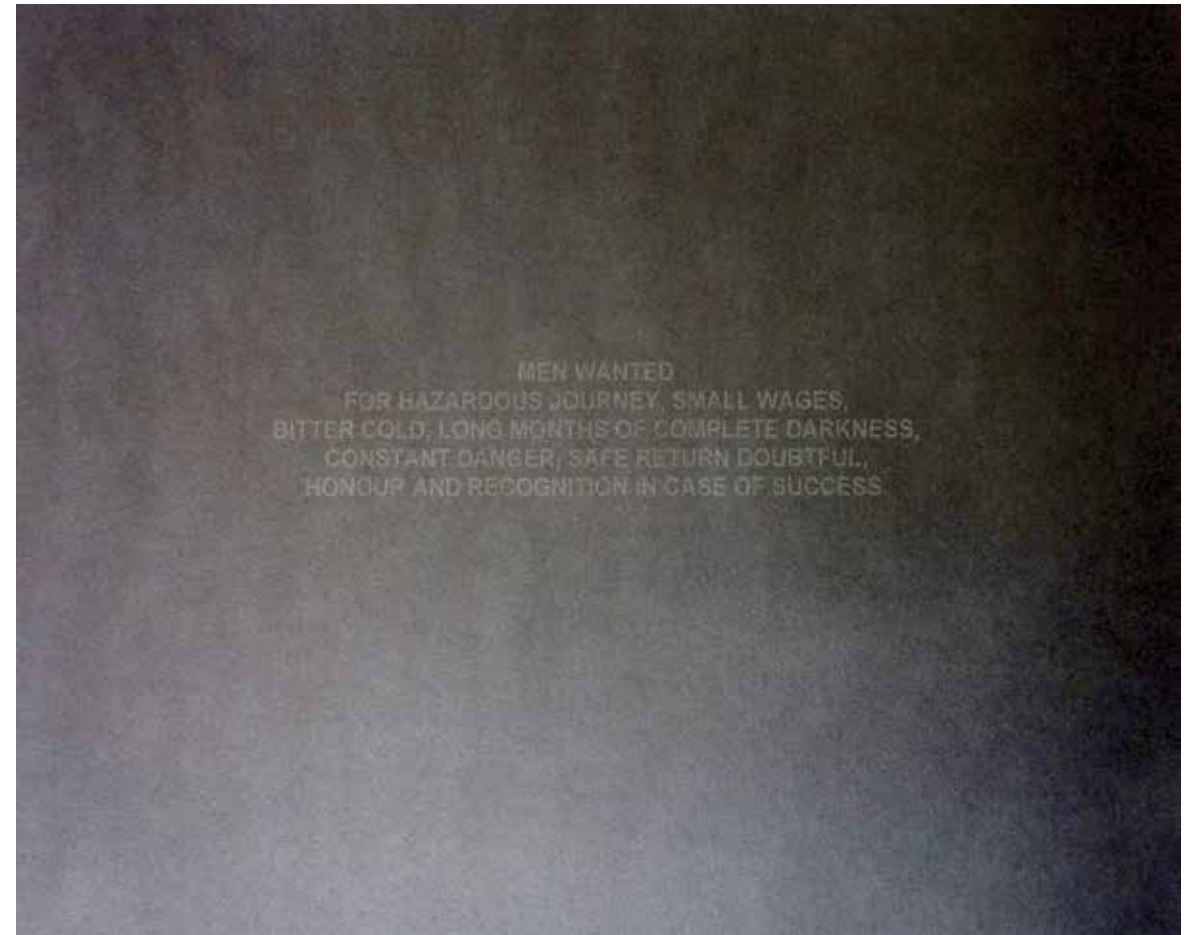
Kurtz (Heart of Darkness) - from the lightship series
lithographic postcard from digitally altered found photograph
shown on an oak & steel shelf
2009
14.2 x 10.5 cm



Flurry
silverpoint and gesso on paper
2008
16.9 x 13.6 cm



Call
graphite on paper
2012
81 x 61 cm



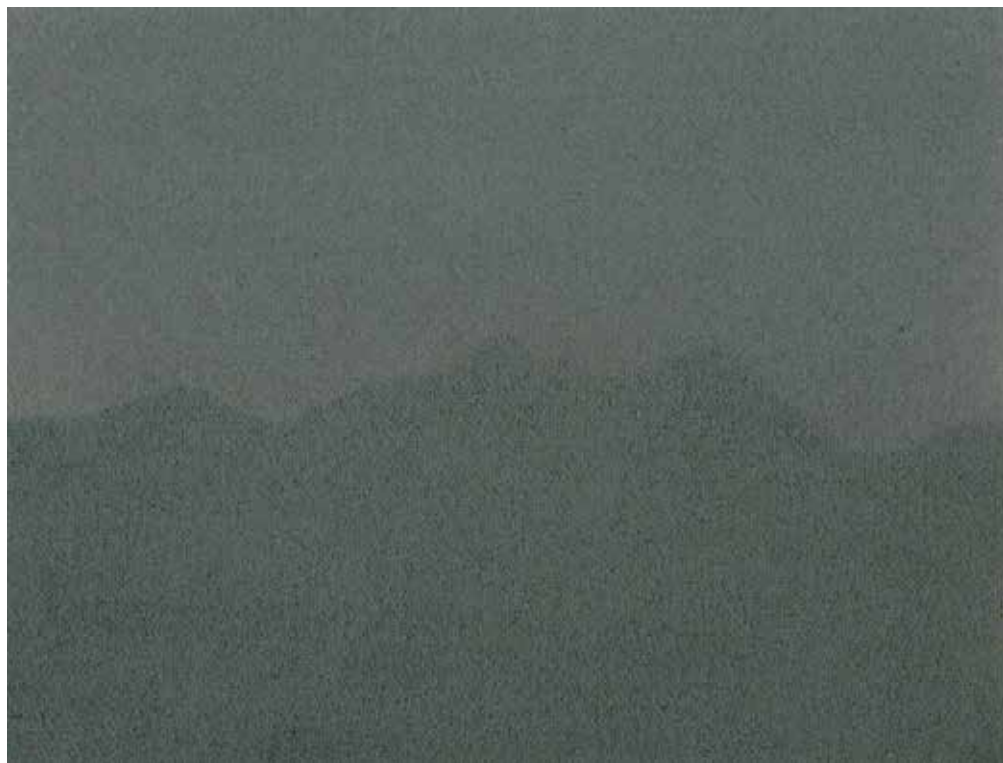
Duration I
silverpoint and gesso on board
2010-12
24 x 18 cm



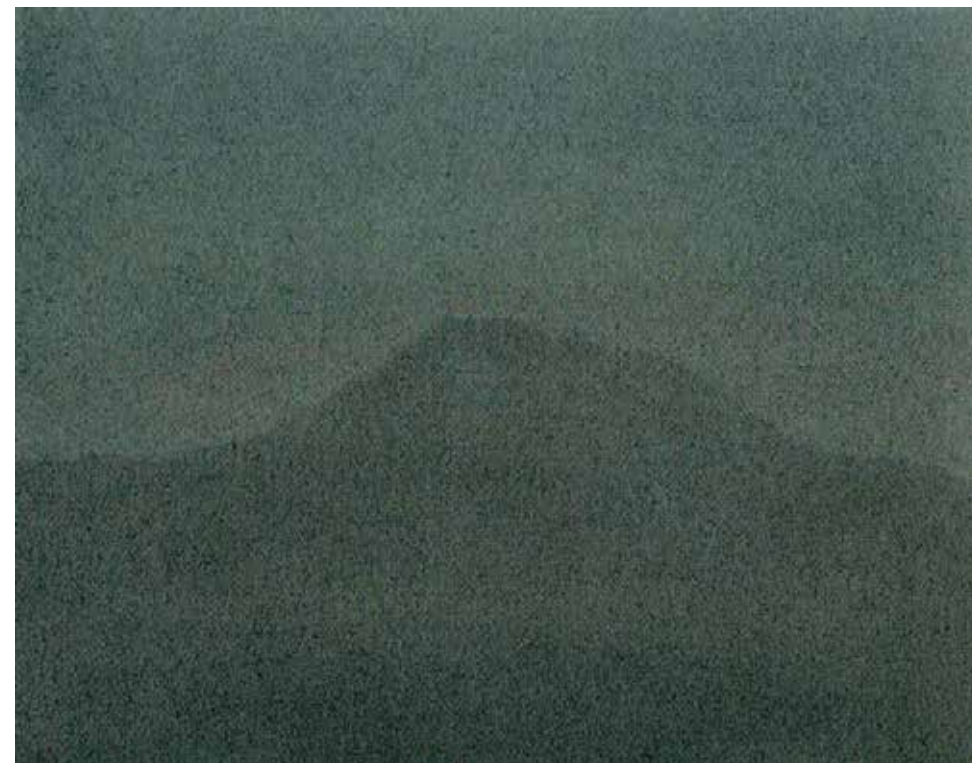
Duration II
oil and gesso on board
2010-12
24 x 18 cm



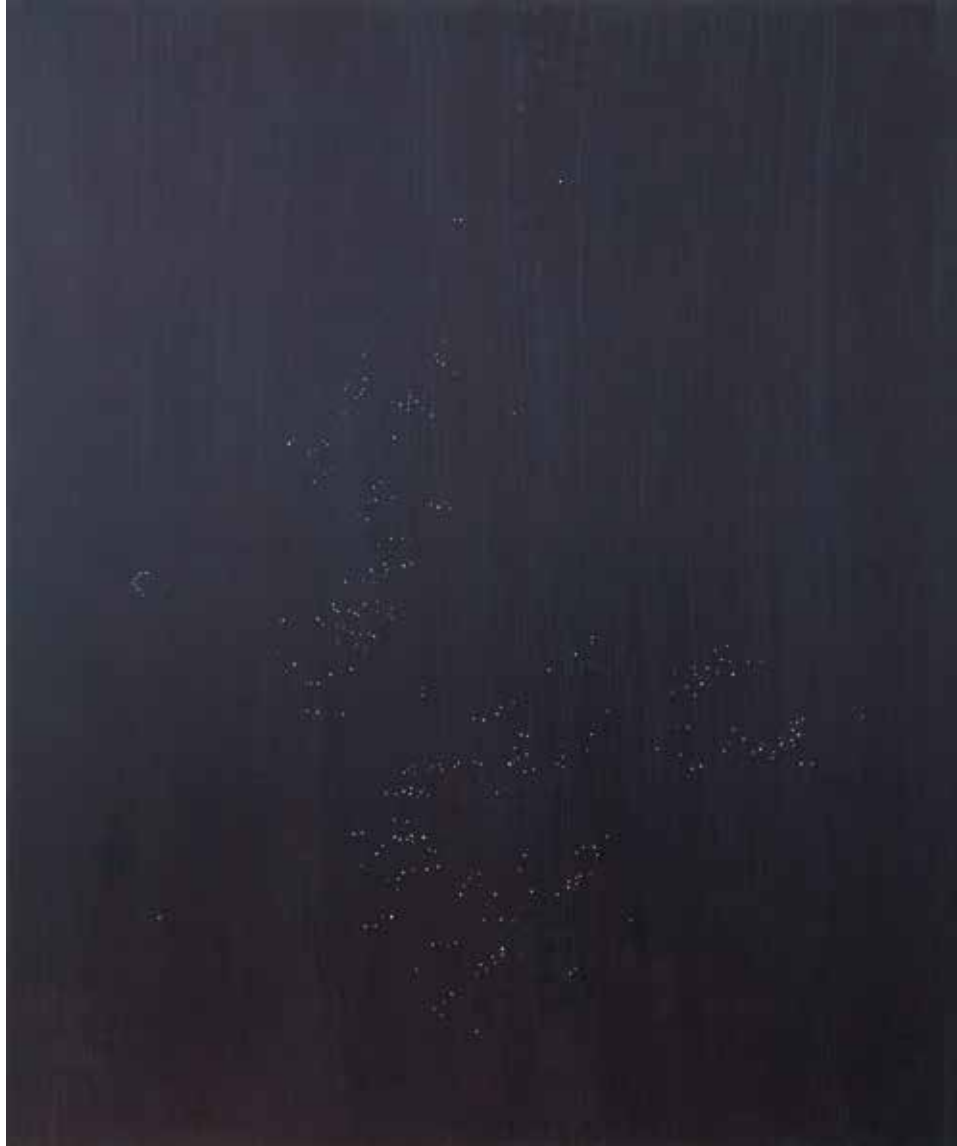
Dark Mountain - Ben Cruachan
graphite on paper
2010
13.2 x 10 cm



Dark Mountain - Stob Coire Easain
graphite on paper
2010
12.8 x 10 cm



Map
with Jim Hamlyn
oil and gesso on board
2011
50 x 60 cm



White out receding - Carn Dearg
lightjet print from scanned analogue negative 2012
16.2 x 10.6 cm



Crusoe (Robinson Crusoe) - from the lightship series
lithographic postcard from digitally altered found photograph
shown on an oak & steel shelf
2010
14.2 x 10.5 cm



Friday (Robinson Crusoe) - from the lightship series
lithographic postcard from digitally altered found photograph
shown on an oak & steel shelf
2010
14.2 x 10.5 cm



Inverse star map
oil on canvas
2002
61 x 61 cm



Schiehallion - south image
pinhole photograph recording the hours of
darkness on the mountain's summit on the
shortest night, with Jim Hamlyn
silver gelatin print
2009-12
12.2 x 10.2 cm



Notebook

Lesley Punton

Three types of twilight

Whilst the poles experience great extremes of light and darkness for extended periods of time, those who overwinter there in locations such as the Amundsen-Scott Polar Station are probably more aware than most of three different classifications of twilight. For periods before the sun finally rises (which is around the 23rd of September at the Amundsen-Scott Station) the darkness is lessened by prolonged periods of these twilights. Just before sunrise, the brightest of the three is Civil Twilight.

Civil Twilight occurs when the sun's centre is between 0 and 6 degrees below the horizon, further classified as either Civil Dawn and Civil Dusk depending upon whether the sun is setting or rising. It tends to encompass the limits where objects can still be clearly distinguished without extra illumination. The brightest stars are now visible.

One phase darker is Nautical Twilight when the sun is 6-12 degrees below the horizon. Navigation at sea by the brightest of stars and the viewable presence of a horizon is possible during the period of Nautical Twilight. At its end (or beginning, in the morning) large objects may be discerned, but without detail.

When the sun's centre lies 12-18 degrees below the horizon, we are in the period of Astronomical Twilight. It is named thus because, under clear conditions certain sky objects, such as nebulae and galaxies, are still not properly visible. To the casual observer however, Astronomical Twilight often appears as night proper, and this is obviously more marked in towns and cities where light pollution affects the level of ambient light in the sky, where such features may never be visible anyway. Other factors, such as the presence of a full moon, may also make discerning Astronomical Twilight difficult.

The duration of twilight is affected by our latitude, and at the poles, twilight can last for weeks. It's no surprise, therefore, that an awareness of these intermediate points of clarity and obscurity is far greater for the inhabitants of those areas. Of course, the vast majority

of us experience twilight as a daily occurrence. It's a time of day I've always liked. I feel fortunate to live in a Northern region where our twilights are prolonged. The twenty-minute change from day to night (or vice versa) at the equator seems, to me, too abrupt for the sensualities of fading or growing light to be savoured.

I enjoy, in particular, the way in which our surroundings, away from the artificial lights of towns and cities, take on a kind of granularity, the way the light seems to hover in front of and on top of things as the light begins to fade at dusk. Greens intensify for a short time, and a certain pleasure can be had from not reverting to other forms of illumination, taking the capabilities of twilight to its limit.

When Jim (Hamlyn) and I climbed Ben Hope, Scotland's most northerly Munro (mountain over 3000ft), close to the summer solstice a few years ago in the hope of experiencing a Scottish midnight sun by virtue of the combination of latitude and altitude, the sun did, in fact, dip down below the horizon. Setting off at 12.05am from our tent just after the sun set, for the couple of hours it took us to climb the hill, we had no need for extra illumination, being fairly sure of the terrain as I had climbed it once before in torrential rain and within thick cloud. For the entirety of the walk and for a chilly hour sat at the summit cairn waiting for the sun to rise above the horizon, we passed through elongated phases of what I now know were the periods of Civil and Nautical Twilight. We can't have entered Astronomical Twilight as I was always able to discern at least some detail in my surroundings. Jim found a scrap of paper in his pocket, a receipt, which became a marker and measure of his capacity to see in this twilight since he was able, at all times, to read the characters on that tiny slip of paper. In a way, there is a place and time in the UK where *nightfall* never really comes.

We waited on the summit for a long while, but with a low band of cloud on the horizon, a visible sunrise seemed never to come. Growing increasingly cold, we decided to head back down the leeward side of the hill (leeward, sun-wise) watching as colour slowly penetrated the ground below. That sense of the granularity that I describe which veils objects infused the surface of the boulder field near the top and in our shelter for the

night – the summit cairn. Once Civil Dawn was nearing its end, the colour of the short, wind-stunted grasses was at its most intense and varied. In fact, in the full light of day, a more bland descriptiveness takes over and objects are perhaps too easily seen, and the lyricism of the indistinct is lost.

Burning Mountain

On Mount Wingen, in New South Wales, Australia, there's an underground coal seam that has been burning for around 6000 years and which currently reaches the surface almost at the very summit of the hill, a fortunate occurrence it seems. Long thought to be a volcano, it's only relatively recently that its existence as the oldest naturally burning coal seam on earth has been confirmed.

The term mountain is, to my Munro climbing eyes, a bit of a misnomer as the summit can be reached by a well constructed pathway in about an hour. As you approach the summit field, you reach a raised deck designed to keep you off the friable, brittle earth. There's no smoke dramatically billowing from the seam - only a gentle warmth in the air. There's a strangely pleasant and mild smell of sulphur that reminds me of the jar-filled glass cabinets of the chemistry lab of my school days, and an awareness that the ground resembles the burnt-out embers of a coal fire. Bird song, exotic to my Northern European ears, resounds all around.

Once you ignore the warnings and leave the safety of the deck, the true nature of the hill begins to reveal itself. The smell of sulphur stays the same and you become quite acclimatised to it, but you gradually notice more that the ground is not quite the same as anywhere else you've ever been. Cracks and chasms open up where the seam has riven open the ground during the burning head's passage years earlier. The sharp, brittle, almost hollow nature of the ground is confirmed as your feet crunch upon the pale burnt-out embers as you pass slowly over them. Then you begin to really sense heat, more than just



mere warmth. A heat haze rises from patches of the ground, sometimes only very faintly. There are kangaroo droppings where the ground is pleasantly warm, the animals clearly using the hilltop to find solace during the night. And finally, as you've wandered the summit field, you edge over to one side to discover the burning head of the seam and are met by a fierce heat. Not so hot that you can't stand upon it, but hot enough that you wonder whether the soles of your shoes will melt a little, and that radiates an intense heat towards your face that quickly becomes oppressive. I film the experience with my camera, and the heat at this climax causes my lens to flare in bursts. I look down at my footprints and think of Armstrong's and Aldrin's on the lunar surface, the texture seeming so oddly similar.

Bivouac on the summit of Schiehallion

As a summer solstice walk, Jim & I decided to climb Schiehallion with a view to bivouacking on the summit, making a long exposure pinhole photograph on 5x4 film recording the 5 hour duration of the night. We set off and got to the top around 10pm just as the light was beginning to fade, but still having plenty of time to set up "camp" on the only sheltered area of the boulder field, and figure out where to make the images. In the end, we opted to have one camera point roughly towards north, and another in a southerly direction. A strong cold wind was blowing, so the cameras were supported by little piles of stones - camera cairns!

We'd rather assumed we'd have the summit to ourselves, but clearly others had also thought of walking on the solstice too, so at 1am were awoken by two walkers passing close by along the ridge. They found a spot maybe 50m away from us, but in the cold wind, and without sleeping bags, left before dawn.

Schiehallion's isolated position and regular shape led it to be selected by Charles Mason for a ground-breaking experiment to estimate the mass of the earth in 1774. The deflection of a pendulum by the mass of the mountain provided an estimate of the mean

density of the Earth, from which its mass and a value for Newton's Gravitational constant G could be deduced. Mason turned down a commission to carry out the work and it was instead coordinated by Astronomer Royal, Nevil Maskelyne. He was assisted in the task by mathematician Charles Hutton, who thereby devised a graphical system to represent large volumes of surveyed heights, later known as contour lines, now universally used in mapping.

Ours was another act of measurement, but in this instance, of light and duration.

Dark cloud constellations : the Emu and the Coalsack Nebula

Camping in a forest of eucalyptus in New South Wales near Gilgandra, I looked up through a clearing to find the most wonderful night sky with stars of exceptional clarity and brightness. I made a low-tech image, a 60 second exposure where I left the camera on the ground, which shows the varied colours of the stars. What it doesn't convey however, is the dark area in the Milky Way. Initially surprised by how clear the Milky Way was in this Southern night sky, I suddenly noticed that there was a significant amount of darkness within it which I've subsequently learned is called the Coalsack Nebula, which forms part of the Emu - an aboriginal constellation consisting of darkness rather than light.

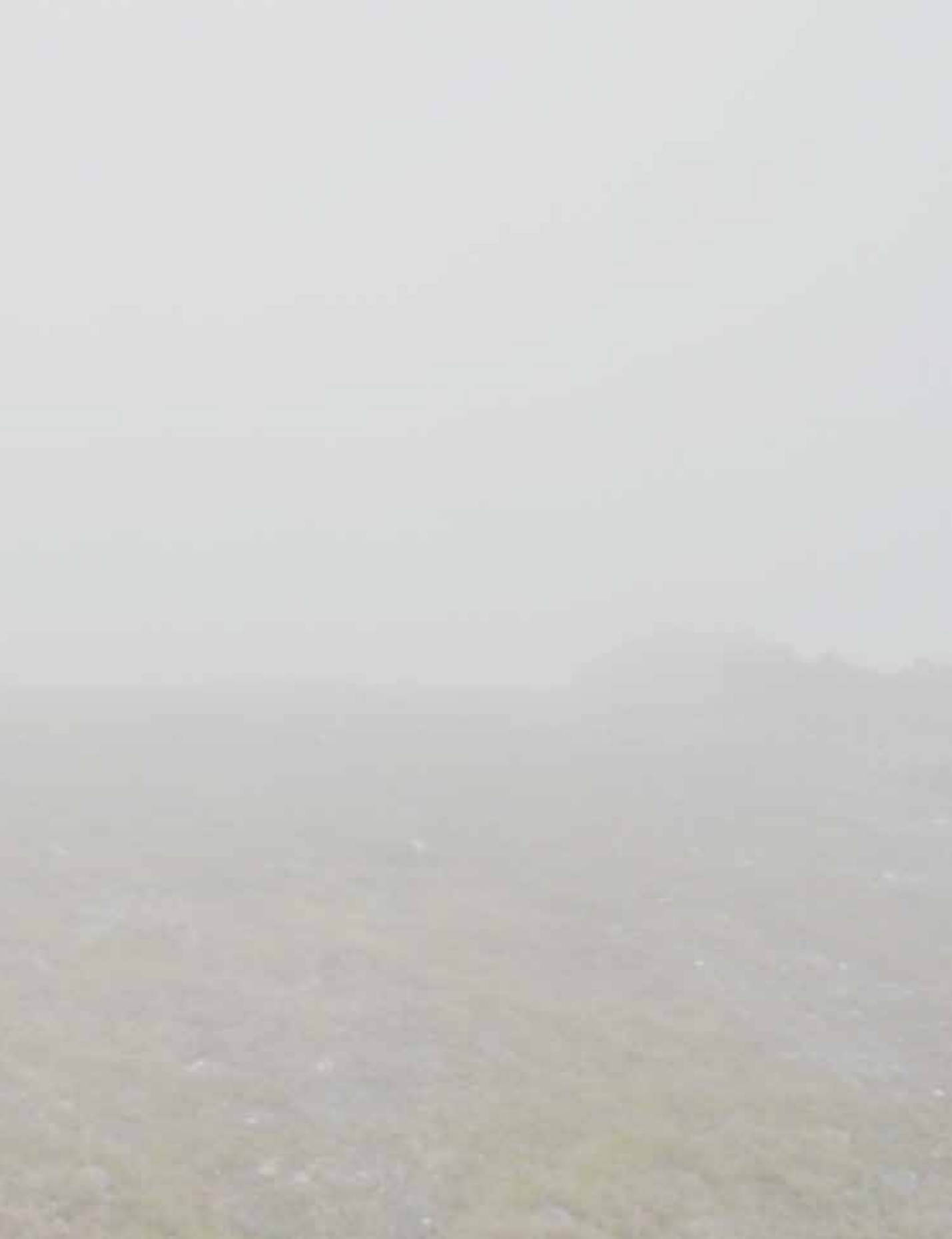
Like the Great Rift, visible also from the Northern Hemisphere, the Emu is an area of darkness that makes it evident that the night sky is never really totally dark. However, these dark areas are not voids, or absences - the dark patches are star-forming regions in our galaxy; proto-stars (newly forming stars) generated from molecular dust that doesn't allow light in the visible spectrum to shine through. However, with the advancements of telescopes that register different spectra (e.g. x-rays or infrared) we now know that there is activity in these dark areas. It's perhaps not unsurprising that Australian aboriginal culture should have long since recognised this fullness in darkness.

Revisiting An Caisteal

Having a small child, my hill-walking opportunities are fewer than they used to be and, having not climbed a Munro for quite some time, I headed up An Caisteal to make another summit photograph. Many of the feelings I've often experienced climbing mountains consequently came flooding back. The greatest sense was of freedom, and a relief to be away from cities, noise, distractions, and to be entirely at one with the effort of ascending the boggy, tussocky grass on the lower slopes which admittedly are always a bit of a trudge on this hill. The smell of the damp earth was strangely comforting. Slowly and carefully pacing myself, finding a rhythm in my step, walking becomes effortless. Thoughts hone into the here and now. I enjoy the silence. In fact, I need the silence. Work pressures dissipate. The land opens out to show something more enduring, more stoic.

Familiarity is a fine thing sometimes, and without the hindrance of a map (well, of the need to actually use it anyway), close knowledge of the mountain's geography enabled me to persevere through the early trudge to reach the wonderful long ridge of Twistin' Hill, the best part of the mountain. This takes you, eventually, to the rocky boulders and "castle" that gives a little scramble before the final cairn is reached soon after.

I've climbed this hill in beautiful winter conditions many times. It's not a difficult hill and is climbed usually in around 5 hours, up and down. Determined to make the most of a free day and to make a new photograph regardless of the weather, I found myself however, climbing in 80mph gusts of wind and with the summit engulfed in cloud. These were by far the most difficult conditions I'd experienced on this hill. Had I not had the desire to make an image from the top, I'd have been tempted to return once I reached the point where the wind on the narrows of the exposed summit ridge forced me to crawl on hands and knees to be sure I wasn't blown off in a sudden and unpredictable gust. Miraculously, the rock of the scrambling portions provided some shelter and allowed the "trickier" moves to be made in relative safety. The summit image was rushed. I was barely able to take my camera out and hold it still for long enough to make a sharp image. The damp of the cloud surrounding me meant visibility was reduced to only around ten



metres and the vista towards Loch Katrine completely absent. Point, click, escape... Nevertheless, despite the difficult conditions, the pleasure of being out in wide open space, of reaching the top with relative ease despite concerns about how hill-fit I might otherwise be, even of managing despite such difficult, and let's face it, unpleasant conditions, I was still so happy to be out on the hill, to be somewhere that I felt I belonged. It seems a cliché, but I felt that I was home, and that I was doing something so intrinsically core and central to my being that this return to An Caisteal nourished me in ways few other things are capable of. The photograph was a disappointment, though somehow I don't really mind.

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Dedicated to Jim and Angus.

Lesley Punton - mountains without end

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Frontispiece: 'Floe' (detail), silverpoint on gesso, 2008

Pages 6 and 7: midsummer bivouac on the summit of Ben Hope at 2am, June 2008

Page 13: Loch a' Choire Ghrànda, Dec 2008

Page 17: L Punton climbing Les Grands Montets, Argentière, August 2007

Page 25: Meall nan Ceapraichean, Dec 2008

Page 58: Pinhole camera placed at the summit of Schiehallion recording the duration of the shortest night, June 2009

Page 62: 'Revisiting An Caisteal - 13.11.11' (detail), lightjet print, 2012

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