

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 any container you have. Is it dark? Follow the darkness of the well down. Choices not fears. Walk this way my lovelies. Then scoop and lift the words up high. See, at the moment when running away from, became running towards; at the very instant you felt the precipice and desired the exit, the well and its contents become your lifebelt.

Lift up the words of women, for reference, for inspiration, for critique. It is a true avalanche. A high rise of hopes; the wakened night! These words are rhizomes, creeping up and through the once crack'd earth of essays, paintings, spoken word, education and action, where once only he thought- he said-he had a point-he had a purpose. These words of women are cloning brains as the shoots put out into fertile ground. Where once we stared with saddened eyes at the calloused mountain, we now realise (we are), were always, the dull blue base.

Where do we go from here? Was history only made by princes and emperors whilst the queen hid in her palace? Are we only to find the words of men on the stone tapes hidden in bottom drawers? We must, we know, experience the night cave when evolution inexplicably, turns retrograde. So here it is. Be curious. Find comfort in the flux. The well will be lit with lightning girl, when you need it. Map, in your mind's eye, the unique formations that surround it. In the faces of other times, the well may exist in a distant landscape with ghost trees. Yet if you listen, these lung trees breathe and the grass sings. When you are far from home, let these words swirl around you like Descartes' whirlpools or catch them, as they tumble from Pandora's box.

~

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 Mull, 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 – how we lived! One quote that Ainsley shared before my trip, gives me the permission to write at one remove: 'Write about winter in the summer.' [*Write Til You Drop*, Annie Dillard, May 28, 1987, The New York Times]. A sea mist, soft and low, obscures the left horizon rendering dark land masses as mysterious hulks. On the right horizon, the sea views are clear. Far off Foula, fan of the thirteen month Julian calendar, flickers like an apparition in the sunny haze.

The Well of Loneliness

Where once
People drank,
Now feelings run deep.

Fiction and reality! Still populated, Foula was the island that Powell (1905-1990) and Pressburger (1902-1988) utilised and fictionalise as Ultima Thule, St Kilda, the furthest outreach off the west coast of Scotland, in their 1937 film *The Edge of the World*. The final inhabitants had evacuated St Kilda seven years earlier than this filmic account of their flight.

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.

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 butterflies, as romantically remote (as a number of her male contemporaries had), Gilbertson shows the reality of life on these islands in order to educate those living down South. Anyone geographically located below Shetland are referred to in this way, including Orkney and mainland Scotland. Gilbertson with her camera, travelled widely across Shetland over the year of filming. She ventured up to the furthest north point, Muckle Flugga, to capture the change-over of the lighthouse crew, coined as *'the loneliest men in Britain'*. 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

about a ploughing combination of crofters and animals that she did not already have on film. In order to record eggs hatching and fledglings take first flight, she camped alone for several weeks on the uninhabited Isle of Stenness. In her film, crofters work the land alongside sequences of other life on the island, such as fashionable flappers strolling down Lerwick main street and sea-planes landing in the bay. This is how they lived. Land and technology! Two tides breaking simultaneously.

Here on the tombola, it is certainly disconcerting to be presented with opposing weather systems and to hear the waves break stereophonically. It feels like I am on a science fiction set with two worlds side by side. Yet this double phenomenon is like the physical manifestation of the anchor in Ainsley's work- the metaphor. She describes it as the *'this-ness in that'*. 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 looping script, sometimes electronic, often circled with fluorescent pen or bearing her thoughts in the margins, indicating these are words she often re-visits.



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'*, [P.11, *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 Scudéry, 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 Myriam Díaz-Diocaretz 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)