

Angle on a landscape

Poet **Deryn Rees-Jones** selected landscape poems by women to accompany paintings and drawings by **Zoe Benbow**. Rees-Jones shares thoughts on space, place and memory explored in their collaborative exhibition

Prompted by a late discovery of the Lake District in my mid-twenties, I have been trying to write poems about landscape for the past twenty years. A debris of abandoned green and mountainside lurks on discarded laptops and papers stored in my basement. Four or five years ago I surprised myself by returning to Wordsworth, a poet who for years I could hardly bear to read. I also began rereading Edward Thomas, brought back to him by Edna Longley's brilliant Bloodaxe edition of the *Collected Poems*, with its extensive notes and glosses on each poem. Both writers were becoming increasingly important to me so being asked to collaborate with the artist Zoe Benbow, whose semi-abstract pictures and drawings will form the basis of a show at the Poetry Café, London, in spring 2013, felt like a timely gift to my own writing processes.

Shifting impressions

Benbow's drawings, many made *in situ*, are the product of her inhabitation of, and engagement with, the landscape – the weather, the shifting light and contours of which she becomes a part while drawing. The move towards abstraction is also for Benbow a movement between conscious and unconscious worlds. She has described her method as being “as much a meditation on a geology of association and memory as of actual place”.

Choosing eight poems that were representative of a range of women's poetry and worked in dialogue with each other, and the pictures, was no small task. No landscape exists out of context; like anything else, landscape is subject to the effects of time, culture, power, ownership and ecology, as well as its poetical, historical and gendered constructions. I was curious from the start about whether women wrote differently about landscape, something which has been feminised for so long. I had a whirr of questions – still buzzing and bothering me – about whether women *move around* landscape in poems in the same way as their male counterparts, and how hospitable that landscape is to them. I could have chosen to make a direct connection between the poems and the specific landscapes Benbow was depicting (the Devon coastline, the Forest of Dean, or the Céide fields in Northern Mayo) but this seemed reductive. Instead, I took my prompt from Benbow's thoughts on space, place and memory.

A slant perspective

The obvious starting place was Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), whose slant gaze at the world in her poems is always unexpected and transformative. Her poem, ‘The Angle of the Landscape’, is about the act of looking and perspective, shifts of time. It also seemed



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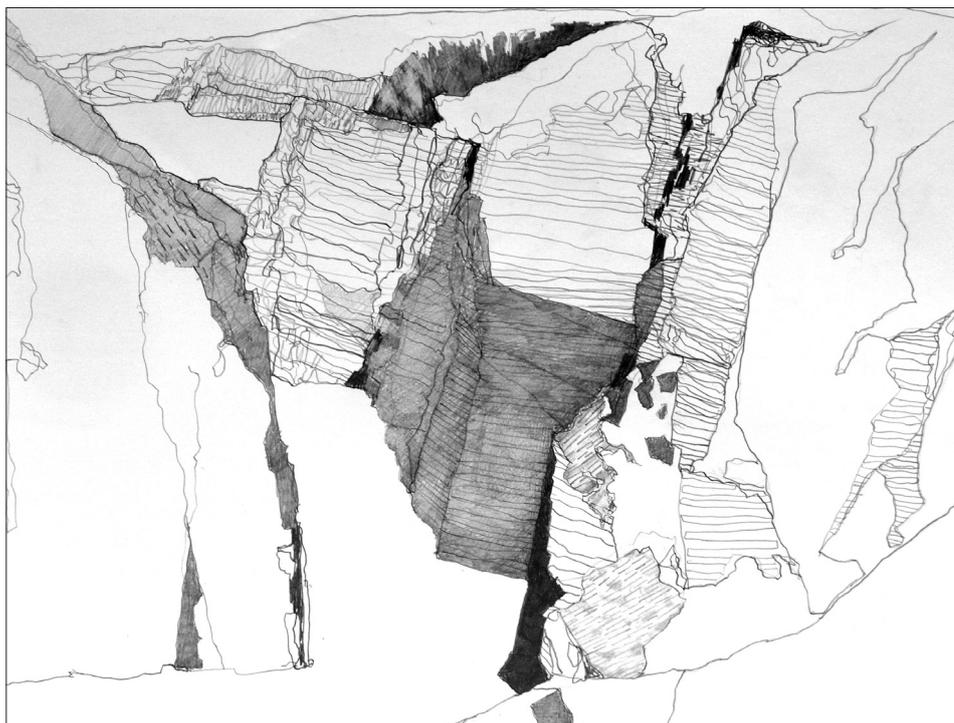
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important to put women's writing about landscape in a loose historical context. Charlotte Smith (1828-1917) deserves to be read much more widely. Although best known for her long poem 'Beachy Head', I selected instead one of her many sonnets, which draws a portrait of coast and harbour in sound and shadow. In her explorations of perspective, Jo Shapcott has been greatly influenced by the negotiation of geography found in the work of Elizabeth Bishop. Many of the poems in Shapcott's *Of Mutability* are themselves a response to the work of the artist Helen Chadwick. Chadwick's picture, 'Viral Landscape', magnifies cells taken from Chadwick's own body, and, in her poetic response, Shapcott plays with the movement between the microcosmic and the macrocosmic.

Sarah Corbett's wonderful evocation of an English walk summons up and takes a stroll with Wordsworth's 'An Evening Walk', but in describing the landscape of Yorkshire where Corbett lives, cannot fail to be conscious of Sylvia Plath's 'Hardcastle Crag', a poem in which the landscape turns into an underworld, and is inhospitable and deathly, a deathliness Corbett cheerfully resists. Alice Oswald offers an 'ideogram' for the colour green, which, with its repetitions and disjunctures, gestures very much towards the kind of abstraction we see in Benbow's pictures. Chase Twichell directly interrogates the connection between herself and "the purple mountain". As with all the poems in the exhibition, the relation between the self's own "disorderly geometry" and landscape is questioned, seen as "interactive" and reflected on.

My own poem, 'Cell', considers the relationship between the cell as the basic building block of life, and the cell as a place in which you can be imprisoned. The word "cell" comes from the Latin word *cella* meaning "small room". The second half of the poem works as a verbal echo and restructuring of the first, so room and landscape collapse one inside each other. It's a love poem – and Wordsworth pops his head in, too.

Where We Begin to Look. Landscape & Poetry, a collaboration between Zoe Benbow and Deryn Rees-Jones, presented by the Poetry Society and Small World Theatre, Cardigan, Wales, is at the Poetry Café, London, 14 Jan-1 Mar 2013. www.poetrysociety.org.uk



Mayo drawing 2012 by Zoe Benbow