

ARTIST STATEMENT

The Forgotten Biographies of Tools

I have been thinking a great deal about the biographies of objects and what becomes of them over time. It would seem that both, the absence and presence of those objects belonging to a particular people in a specific place during a given period of time make a profound impression on our cultural perceptions. Conceptually, this body of work explores the people of rural Highland Scotland in the period of the 19th and early 20th centuries and the tools they once made for a specific purpose, utilized daily to sustain themselves and their way of life (to produce crops, maintain a household, transmit information, rear animals or bring in a catch from the sea) and with which they left their mark upon their immediate landscape, community and culture. As a generation of Highland people and their established way of life disappears, increasingly, museum curators specializing in rural culture are having difficulty identifying the names of the tools once used, how they were utilized, what purpose they served, who used them, how they were made, and what these objects meant to their owners. The cultural examination and creative contextualization of these tools helps us in understanding an important dimension of the very people occupying and having a significant impact on this particular region over time.

Tools have their own biographies. If one examines them closely, these biographies can be read as a kind of visual language containing clues about the tools themselves and who might have used them in a given place at one time. Tools conform to our touch just as our bodies adapt to the shape of the tool and are shaped or rendered misshapen by them. Through repeated use, some tools create calluses or blisters on our hands, strengthen muscles or break our backs thus leaving their marks upon us. But, through repeated use, tools also develop a distinctive patina that is informed by the oils from our hands, sweat from our bodies and wear marks from our hob nailed boots. These are all marks of human agency, intention and purpose. Tools speak to an intimacy with materials in both, their manufacture and their employment. They reveal process in their make-up and in their direct use. So, we leave our mark upon tools, they leave their mark on us and the symbiotic relationship developed while engaging with our tools in service to our ongoing sustainable practices, methods of production and daily labors leaves its mark on the environment thus creating a human footprint that over time informs our culture and the heritage of our people.

In our present age, agriculture, forestry, farming and fishing are practiced on an industrial scale with machinery and implements that dwarf the products of the landscape and the creatures inhabiting it to satisfy the needs and desires of a booming global population. Paradoxically, this level of efficiency might very well come at the price of our shared humanity as our intimate connections with and respect for the land, sea and creatures all around us are either severed or put at risk through this lack of ongoing engagement, practice and actual physical process of working the land and sea. Though the use of mechanized industrial sized tools, implements and machinery today renders most of us free from actual toil -- and its resulting byproduct of apparent wounds or physical scars -- I still wonder if the human spirit is somehow left damaged and our psyches impaired through this divorce from nature as the scale of these practices removes us further from direct interaction with the landscape and each other in our surrounding communities.

This series of mixed-media paintings, intaglio prints and kiln-formed glass pieces considers the forgotten biographies of tools. In order to create these pieces of art, I employed contemporary processes, tools, equipment, methods, technologies and materials to honor the forgotten biographies of the traditional tools represented in this series of works as well as of the people who once employed them in the creation, ritual maintenance and sustainment of their distinctive rural communities. In this way, each individual piece of art embodies a biography of its own containing inherent clues about its formal make-up of which viewers can be mindful. The resulting visual images serve as a reminder of the impact tools once had -- and art still has -- in the shaping of our environment, lives, culture and heritage.

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