

ARTIST STATEMENT

The Visual Language of Ancient Scotland

As a contemporary artist I have long explored the process of mark-making in my work. I have also concerned myself with the study and use of visual cues that comprise the comprehensive visual language commonly utilized in the making of art objects through time. In my travels around Scotland and up into Orkney I noticed the visually arresting use of stone in the construction of walls, architectural structures, dwellings for the living and cairns or burial chambers for the dead, as well as the exquisitely dry stacked stone that has somehow remained water-tight, intact and level through the ages. Stone was utilized to demarcate the landscape, emphasize seasonal and celestial events, create sacred spaces, designate areas for ritual, and signify other places of importance. Some of the stones were elaborately carved to depict battles, reflect objects or wildlife common to a given set of people in their time while others had been incised with images, patterns, messages or symbols that were understood visually as information in the time of prehistory. I realized that there were parallels between the way in which these ancient people from the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age and Pictish periods (of what is now known as Scotland) incised stone and the way in which I incised my metal plates in the process of making marks that would become my intaglio prints.

The more I noticed the treatment of these stones and their inherent spatial relationships to the surrounding landscape, the more I realized that a kind of visual language was at work among the ancient people of prehistory who quarried, carved, dressed and decorated these stones seemingly as part of a larger process through time. The connection that these prehistoric peoples shared with their surrounding landscape and cyclical seasonal shifts seemed to me to be interrelated with the process of constructing and reconstructing with stone as well as the surface treatment or decoration of the stones. It appeared that, like me, these ancient peoples also had a relationship with each other in a larger cultural context through time as they overlapped, progressed and still engaged in rituals that revealed their connection to a kind of continuum. They were obviously contributing to their shared visual culture by engaging in a kind of communal visual dialog that was part of this larger continuum. Because my ancestry is Scottish, I may well be a descendant of these ancient, indigenous people of northern Scotland. For this reason, I wanted to extend this artistic, visual dialog despite any cultural break that may have occurred in the larger continuum.

My research, scholarship, creation of art and subsequent exhibitions strive to make an impact on our contemporary cultural consciousness by contributing to this 21st century visual dialogue. It is this ongoing visual dialogue that defines who it is we are as a complex and varied people in this world and how our shared history -- and ancient past -- relate contextually through the creation of art. This seems to be a pattern shared by the ancient people of Scotland who worked individually and communally to shape, define and impact their collective culture. Though I am not an historian, anthropologist or an archaeologist, I am a visual artist exploring mark-making, visual images, symbols, shapes, lines and patterns so this emphasis on ancient landscape, culture and process in the creation of images and structures intrigues me personally, professionally and artistically. I hope to honor the significance of mark-making in both, the ancient world and my present, by creating contemporary works that engage in this ongoing visual dialogue and share the same emphasis on process, spatial relationships, landscape, patterning, symbol and line that visually connect us all as a culture through time.

James B. Thompson