

Earth's Canvas: Exploring Creativity in Geology

17 – 18 September 2024

In a bold departure from the usual Society technical conferences, a proposal was initiated and accepted in 2023 to run this very different conference on exploring geology in creativity to be called “Earth’s Canvas”. The Geological Society of London had run more limited workshops on poetry in 2010 and 2019, but nothing of this scale and ambition. Convenors were recruited to prepare for sessions in “Art, Sculpture and Illustration”, “Poetry and Literature” and “Music, Sound and Song”. Unlike our technical disciplines, that tend to be rather siloed, we discovered that artists tend to work across and beyond these themes as the resulting programme illustrates. [FINAL Earth's Canvas: Exploring Geology in Creativity \(geolsoc.org.uk\)](https://geolsoc.org.uk).

On the first day, following a welcome by the chair of the convenors, Lucy Williams, the first session on Art Sculpture and Illustration was chaired by Emma Theresa Jude ([Home | Emma Theresa Jude](#)). Ruth Siddall ([RUTH SIDDALL geologist & pigment scientist — WILD PIGMENT PROJECT](#)) captured the sense of anticipation at the start of her talk “Waited 30 years for such a conference!” and then went on to describe “The Mineralogy of Artists’ Pigments”, art is literally ground out from geology. Julie Brook’s ([Julie Brook](#)) dramatic fired cairns in the Hebridean sea in her “Out of the Ground, a Thread of Air” used sound and vision to bring us into her very dramatic world. Calum Wallis’ ([calumwallisart.com](#)) “One Billion Years’ Notice: engaging with deep time when time is tight” revealed a labour of love, sketching then etching realism from rock to paper, and then eroding his work by dousing in sea water - perhaps challenging the audience to think about the futility of imagining deep time. Glenn Morris ([Glenn Morris - Sculptures in stone, wood, bronze & mixed media](#)) was full of excitement in his piece “Art Meets Science - a marriage made in heaven?” where his sculptures of various fossil challenged perceptions. John Kelly’s ([Antarctica - John Kelly Artist](#)) “Two Islands: a study of time” brought home the solitude in which artists will work and the poetic language of geology – in the backdrop of Antarctica. The audience was very engaged and excited by these artistic presentations.

The Poetry session was chaired by Patrick Corbett [HomePage \(geopoetrick.co.uk\)](#) and he introduced the keynote, Alyson Hallett ([Alyson Hallett](#)). In her piece “Listening to Bodies on Earth” she made an impassioned plea that rocks/stones have agency and perhaps should all be returned to their place of discovery. Patrick Corbett showed definitions, links and examples of “Geopoetry, Geopoetics and Geoscience”. John Bolland’s ([John Bolland - Poet - Scottish Poetry Library](#)) “Twilt” drew on the dark history of the River Deveron in NE Scotland. We then experience a Poetry Slam with a series of short poems read by several poets: “The Joys of Correlation; My heart’s in the Highlands” (Stuart Harker); “Wise Words for The Earth” (Helen Natrass, [Wise Words for the Earth: Geopoetry | Sustainability \(canterbury.ac.uk\)](#) also reading works of various Canterbury poets); “Or Land The Sea - a coastal photo-poem” (Michael McKimm ([Welcome to the website of the writer Michael McKimm](#)) and Julie Cuthbert ([Julie Cuthbert | Colchester Art Society](#)) collaboration); “Elegy to a Glacier” (Sila

Pla-Pueyo) ([Sila Pla Pueyo | Universidad de Granada \(ugr.es\)](#)); “Celanite ...” (Jonathan Wonham); “Time, Tangle and Twiggery” (Neil Hodgson); “A History of Sol” (Ilan Kelman [Dr Ilan Kelman | UCL Department of Risk and Disaster Reduction - UCL – University College London](#)); “Long Field Loop” (Rebecca Sharp [Home | Rebecca Sharp \(rebeccaioysharp.com\)](#)). The session ended with a performance piece “Void Fraction - archiving conjecture” by Julie Upmeyer and Mari Rose Pritchard (<https://www.julieupmeyer.com>) which continued into the Upper Library during the afternoon and evening sessions.

After a lunch break the first session of Music, Sound and Song was chaired by Steve Garrett ([Steve Garrett \(stevegarrettguitar.com\)](#)). He introduced Michael Begg ([Steve Garrett \(stevegarrettguitar.com\)](#)) whose “A Score in Ice: composing the flow of time in Antarctica” captured sound images and pictures from Antarctica. The lyrics for Olivia Rafferty’s ([music – olivia rafferty](#)) single “Cascade” illustrated well her “Rock Music: songwriting Inspired by geology”. Rob MacKay’s ([CONTEMPORARY | Lithophones.com](#)) lithophones were the subject of “Strata Sequence: from musical rocks to palaeo soundscapes” featured strongly in a talk about Ruskin’s Rocks. Matilda Brown’s ([Matilda Brown \(matildabrownmusic.co.uk\)](#)) “The Ground Beneath My Feet: walking, geology, music composition” put landscape at the heart of her work. Steve Garrett returned to Antarctica – such a place of wonderment and inspiration – in his “The Song of the Ice: making music from Earth history, ice quakes and climate signals” – integration of science and music composition. Andrea Granitzio’s “Rooms to Explore - time and space perception inside caves” certainly challenged us – he drew attention to the fact that waves and mountains both show movement – but on different time scales. We were fortunate some of the music discussed in the session was later played live in the Earth’s Canvas Evening Concert.

The last session of the first day, entitled Funding and Partnership Opportunities was chaired by Peter Dolan. Jonathon Larwood ([The Curry Fund | Geologists' Association \(geologistsassociation.org.uk\)](#)) gave a “Summary of Geologists’ Association funded projects” which attracted a lot of feedback as very few funders are active in this space or were present in the meeting. Rodney Harris ([EARTHART](#)) described Bristol University’s “EarthArt Fellowship and Gallery” but noted that, whilst proving very effective, the programme struggled to find continued funding. Arts funding in general is proving increasingly difficult to find for many of the artists presenting in this meeting.

A series of workshops were held over the two days to allow delegates hands-on experience with a variety of artistic mediums including carving on Purbeck Portland Limestone: “Stone Cutting / Burngate Stone” (Jude Pollock & Amanda Randall ([Stone Carving Courses at the Burngate Purbeck Stone Centre \(burngatestonecentre.co.uk\)](#)) in which the participants produced a collective piece for the Geological Society; “Literature and Collage” (Sarah Acton [writer, socially engaged arts, community plays Sarah Acton | Black Ven](#)); “Bring your own stone (and pencil)” (John Hegley [John Hegley's Word Wild Web Site](#)). There was also a display of “Geological field notebooks, delving into the GSL archive” (Caroline Lam)

A magical Evening Concert was compered by Steve Garrett. This evening of words and music was opened by poet Alyson Hallett who with help from GSL's Keith Myers bought Burns from Scotland to London. We then were brought to the English Channel and chalk downs by Victoria Field ([Victoria Field - Professional Writing Academy \(profwritingacademy.com\)](http://VictoriaField-ProfessionalWritingAcademy.com)) for "Step by Step, Grain by Grain - A Walk Across Chalk and Flint" accompanied by Eduard Heyning on the clarinet. Poet John Hegley read several geological-themed poems inspired by reading about, sampling and talking to the rocks and geologists. Andrea Granitzio put the audience into the dark with an atmospheric soundscape for his work "Rooms to Explore - time and space perception inside caves".

After a break Olivia Rafferty played a set of songs "Rock Music: Songs Inspired by Geology" where natural processes were given human expression. John Bolland's poems reminded us of the frailty of the climate due to our actions. Finally, to close the session, Matilda Brown took us to the top of a mountain with her melodic walking piece "Mirrorghlas". An evening of music and poetry at the Geological Society, amongst the volumes in the Upper Library, proved a great hit.

Day two started a reflection from Lucy Williams on the previous day: "Phenomenal!" before starting with a second Literature session opening with Paul Prudence's ([Paul Prudence \(transphormetic.com\)](http://transphormetic.com)) "Figured Stones" touching on poetry, metaphor and illusion in geology – much appreciated by the ancient Chinese dynasties! Nicholas House delved into the myths and legends "Writing in Stone: Geology as a story" derived from observing geological phenomena – such as the local (pre-geology) explanations for the growth and death of Hawaii's volcanoes. Antonio Raschi pursued this line further in "Geothermal Environments as an Inspiration for Dante's Inferno" – translating and setting in context what was understood. in a way that was politically acceptable, at the time. Brian Whalley ([Professor W. Brian Whalley | Geography and Planning | The University of Sheffield](http://ProfessorW.BrianWhalley|GeographyandPlanning|TheUniversityofSheffield)) ended the session "Glaciers: geological entities in literature, painting, photography" illustrating how art can engage people in fascinating science. A comment in the discussion suggested that many of us were engaged in getting "rocks into poems" whilst others were getting "stories into rocks".

In our second session for Art, Sculpture and Illustration, Rob Airey in "Searching for Special Forms - Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust" ([Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust](http://WilhelminaBarns-GrahamTrust)) showed how the important artist's work was influenced by and evolved by confrontation with firstly ice in the Alps, then Devonian flagstones in Orkney and finally by basaltic lava fields of Lanzarote. Closer to home – under streets of London – Gail Dickerson's ([Gail Dickerson – Artist](http://GailDickerson-Artist)) work "Exposure Temporary / I Live Here" drew her material exhibits from building sites and geotechnical work underpinning the modern city's continuing construction. The material use of local rocks in paints was also the theme of Trudie Wilson's ([Trudie Wilson](http://TrudieWilson)) "The Colour of a Landscape - Isle of Wight". Her love of geology there was infectious. Rhona Lee's ([Rona Lee - Artist](http://RonaLee-Artist)) use of collage and film to bring alive historical collections "Lithic Entanglements - an account of creatively mining two Museum Geological Collections" was a powerful reminder of the "dirt" that begat many significant museum mineral exhibits. Scientist Duncan Macllroy (Dr) used digital sculpturing software to take "A Sculptural

Approach: understanding the iconic early animal fossil *Charnia masoni* showing that historical 2-D reconstructions didn't, and couldn't perhaps, fit the observations of a flattened 3-D reality.

A session on Creative Partnerships tried to bring out the challenges of larger scale projects. "Archival Aggregates: artistic responses to the Sedgwick Museum" (Heavy Water Collective [Heavy Water](#) – Victoria Lucas, Maud Haya Baviera and Joanna Whittle) conducted a tour of their displayed artwork which drew attention to the intrinsic value of collections in times of environmental crisis – particularly focussing on exploitation and extraction of coal, oil and copper and from the Arctic. Lida Lopes Cardozo Kindersley ([The Cardozo Kindersley Workshop](#)) with Steve Garrett provided the journey they took to compile a book "A Suitable Stone: how geology has shaped the British stones used for letter cutting and fine carving". Tom Lonsdale was able to recount the challenges in locating and creating Simon Armitage's "Stanza Stones" ([The Stanza Stones Walk](#)) in the Yorkshire countryside. Finally, Glenda Rome ([Glenda Rome Film and Photography – Filmmaker and vision](#)) gave a short introduction to an excerpt from a soon-to-be-released film "Expressing the Earth" delving into the meaning and relevance of geopoetics.

The last session featured a panel discussion "Making Complex Projects Happen" with Angela Palmer ([Angela Palmer, artist | London \(angelaspalmer.com\)](#)), Tom Lonsdale and Alyson Hallett facilitated by Neil Frewin (Geological Society Council Member). The panel stimulated a vigorous discussion with the audience about funding, deadlines and impact – shortage, challenges and measurement, respectively.

Over the two days the Council Room became a Film Room showcasing a selection of films that embrace and reflect on our landscape and how geology has impacted on their creative processes: "The Lost Art of the Land" (Pheobe Sleath [Phoebe Sleath - Sketching from sea to summit](#)); "Seafloor Futures" (Rona Lee <https://www.ronalee.org/>); TBC (Mae Lubetkin [Mae Lubetkin | Nautilus Live](#)); "Natural England animation(s)" (Jonathan Larwood [#103 The Geologists' Association \(Trailer\) \(youtube.com\)](#)); "Tyne Estuary mud" (Michelle Allen [Michele Allen \(michele-allen.co.uk\)](#)); "Lyell" (Brian Cox [People of Science with Brian Cox - Richard Fortey on Charles Lyell \(youtube.com\)](#)); "The Library" (Ilana Halperin [Ilana Halperin – The Drouth](#)); "Expressing the Earth" (Glenda Rome); "In-Gangin" (John Bolland); "Synthetic Diamonds" (Alina Haydar); "*Velella velella*" (Rebecca Sharp [Velella velella \(artsci.co.uk\)](#)); "Void Fraction - archiving conjecture" (Julie Upmeyer & Mari Rose Pritchard); "Jurassic Coast" (Forkbeard Fantasy <https://youtu.be/KOzyYobeYNg>).

Also on display throughout the meeting were artworks: TBC (Alisa Katherine); TBC (Amanda Wallwork [Amanda Wallwork -](#)); "Lithofacies" (Andrew Abraham [ArtisticRockTextures](#)); "Test/100/25k" (Anna Wetherell [A Sense of Movement in Woven Tapestry - Anna Wetherell - Fairfield Mill](#)); TBC (Caroline Hough [Welcome : Caroline Clough \(carolinecloughpaintings.co.uk\)](#)); "Test Strata" (Erika Cann [ERIKA CANN - Home](#)); "I live here" (Gail Dickerson); "Evolution of a Species" (George Carman); "Balance" (Joe Shevelan [Home -](#)

[Forged At Home](#)); “Bhumisparsha” (Laura Eddey); “New Weald” (Lizzie Hill [Lizzie Hill Artist](#)); “Gullfoss” (Marina Yakimova); “Textured Terrain” (Milica Veselinovic-Williams); TBC (Neil Hodgson); TBC (Pheobe Sleath); “Through the Looking Glass - Rocks under the Microscope” (Robert Seidel [Behind the scenes of the Sedgwick Museum’s Petrology Collection, with Robert Seidel – earth-blog.esc.cam.ac.uk WordPress](#)); “Ammonite” (William Senior); “Inception O. Series: Nature Energy Technology” (Yasmin Crawford [Home - Yas Crawford Photography](#)). Apologies to any artists whose web pages that we have missed.

Funding for this event came from Burngate Purbeck Stone Centre, Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, Seismic Searcher, Silverwood Wealth Management and the Geologists’ Association with a few, much appreciated anonymous donations. The team of Geological Society staff – led by Emelia Spofforth-Jones and supported by Elisha McCowan and colleagues – were very accommodating with all the artists’ requests. I think it’s fair to say, in conclusion, that rarely has such a high density of geologically themed artwork been read, played, seen, heard and felt in such a convivial environment. Well done to the Geological Society for convening this meeting and here’s looking forward to the next one! Initial feedback across social media was all very positive. It was noted that this was the first dedicated Geological Society arts meeting in 150 years of existence, hopefully we won’t have to wait another 150 years!

Encouraging Social Media feedback included the following:

'such a nourishing event ... It was an honour to present in such esteemed company'

'...an amazing conference and evening concert ...it was an honour to be part of such a varied and excellent programme '

'I feel privileged to have been there... taken and immersed by everyone’s work and ideas... so inspiring and I can’t wait to do more. ... I have learnt so much ... that heartfelt intimate gig - a quiet respectful space inside the heart of the busy, exciting city'

'Very well organised and with amazing contributions both from scientific and musical sides. I felt at home. It is not very common to be part of such interdisciplinary eventswith poets, musicians, composers and earth scientists!'

Patrick Corbett
Edinburgh, September 2024.