

CELFALEA

An exhibition of landscape and sculpture working drawings,
maquettes and installation

by

Richard Gant

at

The Royal Cambrian Academy
Conwy, N. Wales

Foreword by Prof. Brian Falconbridge PPRSS

I first met Richard Gant by chance, now almost exactly 20 years ago, on the other side of the world in downtown Seoul in South Korea. We found ourselves standing next to each other at the back of the hall at a reception to launch a British Council Higher Education Fair. While listening to the usual speeches, and each armed with a glass of wine, we struck up a conversation. It very quickly became apparent to me that over 5000 miles was the long way round to meet a fellow Norfolk-man but there it was. Within minutes we discovered we had much in common beyond similar provenance including initial fine art education (at Canterbury but different years), a life of teaching and management in H.E. and, of course, sculpture as sculptors. Indeed, I should now add to that brief list a pertinent shared commitment to draughtsmanship as a parallel activity to making sculpture.

Back in 2017 I wrote a few lines to mark Gant's return to Norfolk as presented in his solo exhibition "Counterpart" at Black Barn. Now five years on, his current practice, embracing the rock formations and coastal landscapes of western tilting Wales is in complementary contrast to his earlier responses to the liminalities of the low-lying terrain and broad skies of his eastern facing native Norfolk.

Part geologist manqué, Gant celebrates the co-existence of the natural and the man-made found in his subject arena. The physicality of the drawings, in their scale and in the materials depicted, evoke the mysterious poetry of *liminal time*, be it either dawn or dusk, or even as experienced in the more literal and actual *mists of time*. As such, the atmospheric monochrome scenes, called to order by regimented shafts of 'light', become responses perhaps a little more *Caspar David Friedrich* than *J.M.W. Turner*, that retain a surreal playfulness of imagery and association, laced with a confident nod to social history witnessed eloquently in Gant's declared homage to the former mainstay of the Wash and mariner's friend, the lightship "Roaring Middle."

Introduction

Celfalea is an eclectic retrospective exhibition that celebrates my research. It profiles drawings and maquettes that have been key developments as an artist and academic. They embody, express and manifest knowledge and learning from landscape and contextual partnerships. The presentation is an allegory of work holding memories and emotive experiences. The story starts with a childhood setting, a nostalgic past of discovery and artistic adventure.

Exploring the natural elements particularly in Norfolk fields and woodland and latterly the Welsh coastal landscape has enabled me to be exposed to a primal boundless creative exploration of self and natural elements. From an early age my experiential engagement ensured a growing understanding of nature and its inherent empirical transferability. The early discovery of self-expression through drawing was a key pathway as a Fine Art practitioner. The roller coaster white-knuckle ride of challenges, discovery and elation generated constant research and creativity.

Discovering drawing gave opportunities to bridge and harness perceptions and interpretations. Landscape research extended this embodiment with memories and symbolic links. Gestural marks, texture, tonality and colour expanded my visual language and taxonomies. I acquired a widening discourse and appreciation, a partnership and internal conversation between conscious and metaphysical thought.

Drawing became an act of self-actualisation and information gathering, offering mark making languages for interpretation. This personalised vocabulary generated an eclectic employment of many processes, materials and crafts for sculptural resolution.

Dr Richard Gant BA (Hons) Fine Art, MA Fine Art (Sculpture), MSc Management, PhD Fine Art (Philosophy), RCA, MRSS.



Biography

Born in Gaywood, Kings Lynn in 1951 I have lived in N. Wales since 1983 and have been an international artist and professional academic since 1976. Most of my academic life has been spent in Liverpool where I was Head of Fine Art at Liverpool John Moores University until 2009.

I would describe myself as a sculptor/drawer and contextual researcher with major group exhibitions in venues that include Kettles Yard Gallery, Cambridge (1977), Louvre Paris (1978), The Yorkshire Sculpture Park (1983) and Tate Liverpool (1998). I have co-exhibited in group exhibitions with major artists including David Hockney (1977), Claes Oldenburg (1977), Andy Goldsworthy (1982) and Andy Warhol (1977) and exhibited in international galleries in Europe, S.E. Asia and China (2000-date). Contextual research plays an increasing role in associated work which reciprocally references Fine Art, Management Science, and Drawing themes. Papers have been internationally peer reviewed and published by Common Ground Publishing, Australia.

Living in N. Wales and Norfolk has acted as counterparts to fully realise contrasting landscapes and their inherent qualities.

Working Chronology

Throughout my life the theme of Landscape has been critical to all my work. Research contexts and exhibition engagements have led to an enriched awareness and subsequent influence in how I perceive and develop my ideas.

Formative periods of research (1970-72) were influenced by personal concepts of architectural utopias incorporating topological structures. Influenced by Buckminster Fuller and progressive thinking at the Architectural Association, sketchbook content displayed structures that could be socially manoeuvred to enable new functions. This short flurry into utopias and ideology became a more important element in later Ph.D. research.

Returning to my roots of the West Norfolk Fens I was inspired by its primal qualities, characterised by its voluminous skies, seasonal field changes and flat horizons. I developed an enchanted spiritual and cultural regard to this youthful reclaimed landscape. Drawings manifest my relationship. Large gestural graphite fen-scapes including *Ploughed field near Sutterton (1973)* informed environmental sculptural installations, these were sited at West Norfolk locations including *Mirror Piece, Roydon Common (1974)* and *Homage to Submerged Forest, offshore at Old Hunstanton (1974)*.

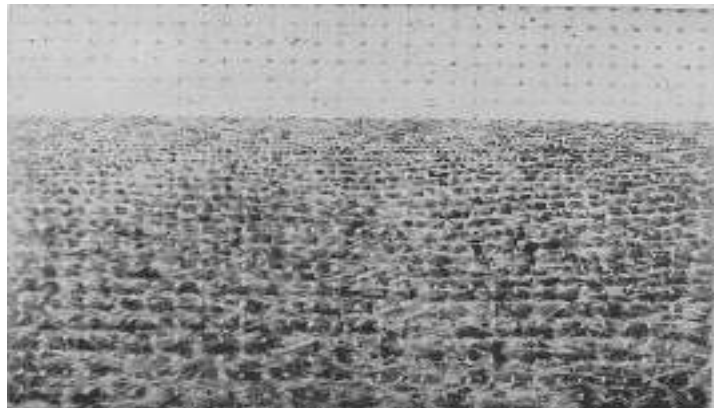
The exploratory use of inflatables created transitory lightweight structures. Inspired by environmental artists such as Maurice Agis, I created subterranean applications including breathing inflatable landscapes that incorporated expanding grass infused mesh (*Blow Up*, review Lancashire Evening Post 1977). Concepts were presented to The Duke of Bedford and the Anglian Water Authority (1973) for variable landscape architecture in parks and coastal reclamation respectively.



Ploughed Field near Sutterton (1973)



Turkey Feather Piece, Matlock (1973)



Grid Fenscape (1973)



Ploughed Field Ritual (1974)



Homage to Submerged Forest (1974)



Mirror Piece, Roydon Common (1974)

Working Chronology *(continued)*

Gradually more traditional, romantic yet critical notions prevailed that debated the term *natural*. Environmental installations became the vehicle for juxtaposing natural and man-made installations in specific contexts. These explored perceptions and challenged norms, ranging from a highly ritualised white *Turkey Feather piece* (Matlock 1973) to a filmed *Heliograph Piece* over a two mile area in Dovedale (1975). Manipulating shafts of light other mirror pieces were positioned in forest contexts, whilst marine settings housed large floating articulating mirror rafts (*Floating Mirror Piece* 1974). My work was reviewed in 1976 by Merete Bates of the Guardian she quoted;

“Gant’s method does not depend on tonal or colour observation but on a desire to express what to him are the more basic, common and essential elements of landscape...in other works a poetic association is implied between the white downy feathers and cirrus clouds.”

Living in Manchester during my Post-Graduate period (1975-76) led to greater industrial influences. Despite initially using natural materials and processes installations evolved contextually to large external gallery and park pieces (Tatton Park Sculpture 1978). During this period I experienced my first introduction to Public Art by being the National Competition winner for *The Burnley Sculpture* (1976). My work maintained a focus on referencing ancient ritual and ethereal links as described in the Tatton exhibition foreword by William Packer,

“The history of sculpture is the history of sacred idol and fetish, altar, temple, tomb and memorial that together provide the locus for ritualistic practice in trying to unravel the mysteries of life and mortality, and the consequent attempt to achieve a sympathetic immortality through representation.”

The period 1980-90 saw a greater international profusion of sculpture in natural environments. I was invited to such contexts to exhibit site specific works for *Sculpture Symposium*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (1983), *Sculpture in a Garden*, Bluecoat Gallery (1986), *Sculpture North West (Hermaphrodites)* at The Liverpool Festival Site (1984) and Aston University (1983). Such venues led to garden design influences. The famous topiary gardens at Chatsworth influenced my collage and montage drawing, which led to gallery sculptures including a *Topiary Piece* at Liverpool Academy (1981).

A sabbatical MSc staff research period in the Human Sciences (1984-86) led to new research perspectives including the parallels and reciprocity of Art and Human Science theory. This academic research period led me to playing stronger curatorial, professional and management roles in Higher Education, my expanding Management Science research being directly applied to the Fine Art degree curriculum. My subsequent Fine Art BA (Hons) Placement Methodology was recognised as a national role model by HMI Pitts in 1989. This formative period of scholarly activity set the foundations for a 2 year PhD research sabbatical that commenced in 1994 as the fully sponsored BHP Fine Art Fellow at the Point of Ayr Gas Terminal, Talacre, N. Wales.



Heliograph Film Still (1974)

Dovedale, Derbyshire



Forest Piece (1976)

Grosvenor Gallery



Floating Mirror piece (1973)

Nottingham University



Fenscape (1973)

Graphite on Paper



Condensation Piece (1976)

Grosvenor Gallery, Manchester



Smell Piece (1977)

Kettles Yard Gallery



Working Drawing Deck Chair Sculpture (1976)

Graphite, Crayon on paper



Homage to Swallows (2000)

Aspabruk Pulp Mill, Sweden



Topiary Series (1981)

Liverpool Academy



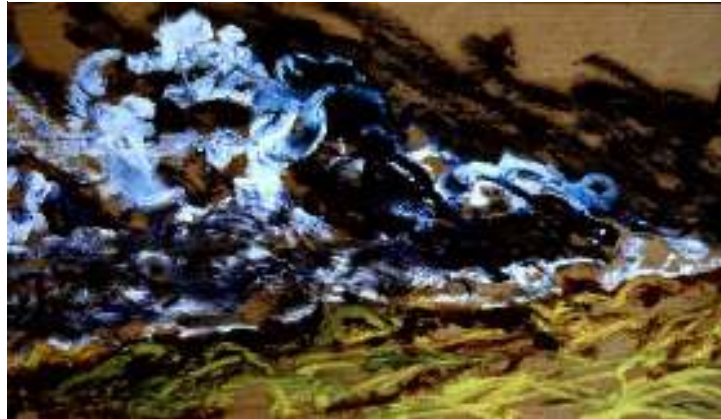
Hermaphrodites (1984)

Sculpture North West, Liverpool Garden Site



Seven Sisters 3 (2006)

Oil Bar on Paper



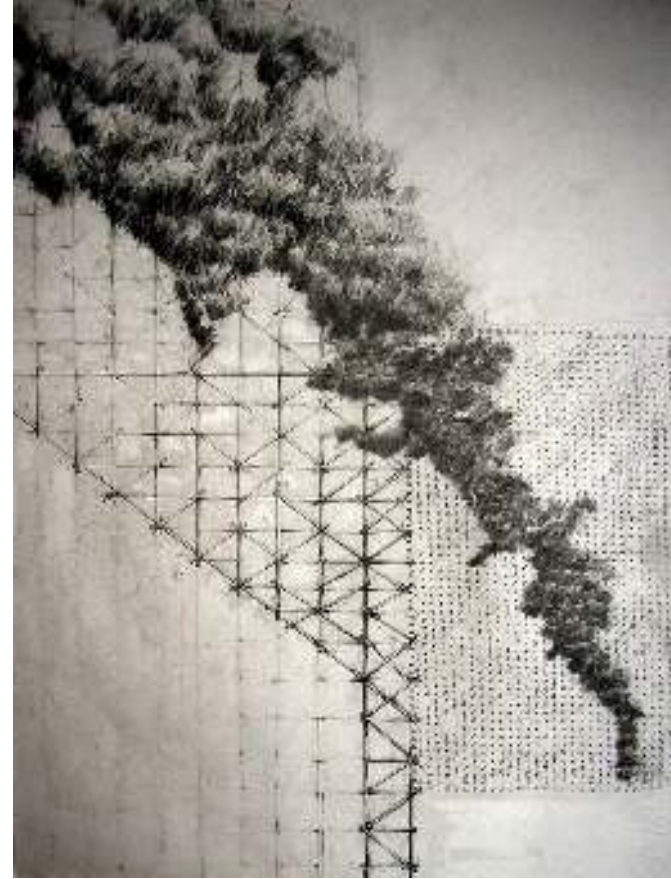
Denbigh Moors (1999)

Oil Bar on Paper



Bron y gader (2000)

Oil Bar on Paper



Steam Plume Series 1 of 5 (2008)

Graphite on Paper



Talacre Beach (1998)

Oil Bar on Paper

Working Chronology *(continued)*

Based at the BHP Gas Terminal during its construction phase I employed my eclectic skills and knowledge into the 2 year art placement impact study. Entitled *The Talascope Project* it engaged seventy Art and Design students to generate their work from this developing industrial and natural landscape.

The Art and Science based thesis included art making, scientific evaluation, community and industrial engagement. Drawing was key to my research programme, the context re-engaged the industrial and natural landscape theme. Integral to the 1000 Terminal workforce team my ideas developed into presenting a concept for a public sculpture entitled *The Big Squeeze* (1994). The piece symbolised the community engagement in the making of the Gas Terminal site. Derived from my sea wave studies and later modified, the stainless steel and ceramic piece was to be a major celebration of teamwork. Significantly the sculpture housed 1000 hand-made squeezed briquettes from the workforce. The sculpture was installed in 1996.

I was later invited to lead a large installation project with ten art students in a large Swedish Pulp Mill (*Homage to Swallows*, Bruket and Kunsten 1999). Using only pulp paper, installations were housed or juxtaposed to redundant machinery in the factory. During this period I was commissioned by Tate Liverpool to produce a large model from the very small artwork by Taro Chiezo's, *Super Lambanana*. The plaster model was later exhibited in Tate Liverpool, (*Art Trans-Pennine* 1998). The sculpture was referenced for the later full size version that became popular as an important symbol of Liverpool's successful Capital of Culture year (2008).

The extensive range of work produced led to one key medium change, the use of colour in my drawing practice as seen in *Denbigh Moors* (1999). Simultaneously the PhD created international text publications on the quantifiable impact of Art to Industry (2002). Further papers were published including *Art Business and the Community forming principles from a case study* (2004), *Learning in Organisations, Fine Art Practice and Industry, positive motivations, lateral learning, a model for future implementation?* (2005) and *The Talascope Project* (2004) at UCLA Los Angeles. In turn PhD research outcomes led to further design influences in the Fine Art BA (Hons) curriculum. International engagements led to founding many reciprocal staff research exhibitions notably with Shanghai University (*Simpatico* 2002).

Contextual research themes progressed to re-evaluate the role of Drawing and how new taxonomies were being realised by changing influences from analogue to digital practice. Text publications discussed these issues and formed new models that built upon my earlier interest in strong methodology and ideology including *Charting Drawing through Transdisciplinary Subjects*, RMIT, Australia (2010) and *Navigating the Sketchbook*, Drawing Symposium, Lincoln (2010).



Big Squeeze Sculpture (1996),

BHP Gas Terminal Visitors Centre



View to Hilbre Island (1995)

Graphite on Paper



Mk 1 Big Squeeze Sculpture Maquette (1995)

BHP Gas Terminal

Current Work

Inspired by landscape and the statuesque qualities of cliff-scapes, English chalk headlands and Welsh volcanic subterranean marine outcrops, coastal maritime themes gradually became an integral part of my current portfolio of work. The inclusion of colour and interests as an amateur geologist influenced art practice. Limited studio space however led to the making of inspiring maquettes as a process of realising potential full scale pieces.

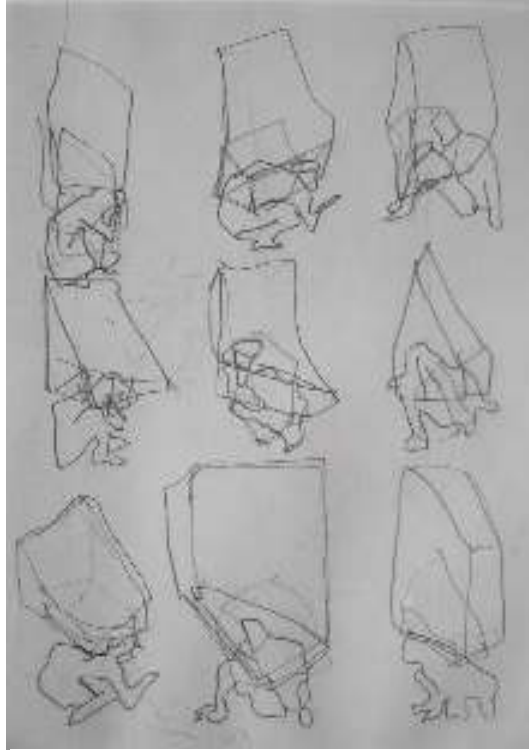
I re-explored the Hunstanton Cliffs which have always been an inspiration since childhood. Exploring the cliff structure its colourful strata, textures and beach visitors has led to a series of recent drawings and sculptural concepts and models. Early pieces shown in Antwerp in *Liverpool 11*, Vision Gallery (2001) were later presented in London (*18@108*, RBS, 2008).

Thematic developments led to the referencing of scaffolding as structural supports. These were visually applied to drawings of factory steam plumes as observed at Deeside, N. Wales. Later these structures were translated as boulder cradles in the Hunstanton Pier maquette. The full series of *Plume Drawings* were presented in the group exhibition *who am I to disappear* at Wrexham Art Centre (2008).

The *Pier Concept* (2016) provides my sculptural interaction between cliff, strata and sea. It aims to narrate the events of geological time and key sea level changes in the North Sea. The concept takes heed of glaciations and former land mass changes including the Dogger Bank. Symbolised by suspension and spatial sequencing of cradled boulders in the piece, I aimed to harness the elements in playing an integral role with the structures, exposing the action of the sea and wind to form derived associated forms and sounds, so reminiscent of those nostalgically linked to the former Hunstanton Pier.

The *Barbary Drawing Series* (2017) engage many of my socio-geological interests, generating potential figurative structural installations in and around the Hunstanton carstone pavements and cliff scree. A place of exploration, I am inspired by the interplay of visitors to the beach and cliffs, who seemingly nestle amidst rocks and explore the maze of scree and boulders.

Most recently new conceptual approaches have been manifested, that of survey, map projection and the ethereal to form an allegory of time and space. Initially explored through *Pillow Lava* (2022) that interprets the geological phenomena of the volcanic outcrop at Newborough, Anglesey ideas evolved into journeys between two geographical points engaging autobiographical experiences. Seen in *A Line from Ringstead Downs to Roaring Middle* (2022) and *A Line from Ty-y-groes to Pont Cae Gors* (2022), banner like structures rooted in the landscape engage with the horizon line to form a topography of land and sea. Secondly the theme of allegory in *Scree 1* and *Scree 2* (2022) portray illusory geological and man-made forms that illustrate time through scree heaps and levitation. The depiction of natural cliff erosion is also a metaphor for current political world conflicts and the destruction of human habitation.



Barbary Series 1 (2017)

Graphite on Paper



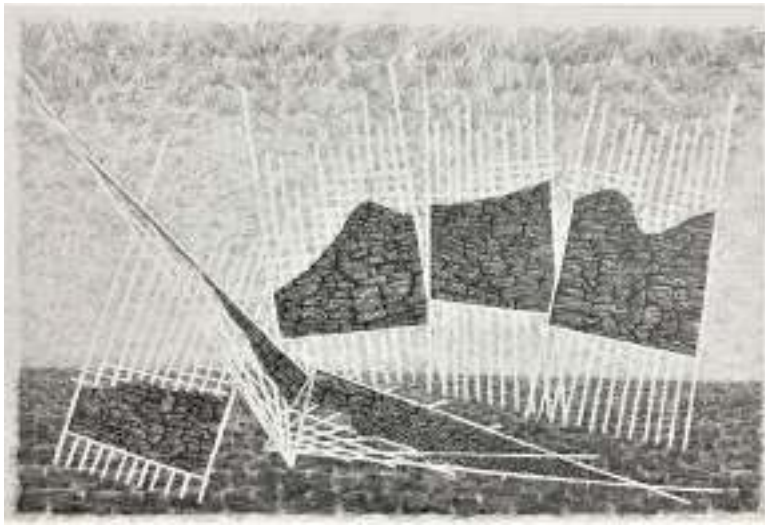
Maquette Sea View of Hunstanton Pier Sculpture looking towards the cliffs (2017)



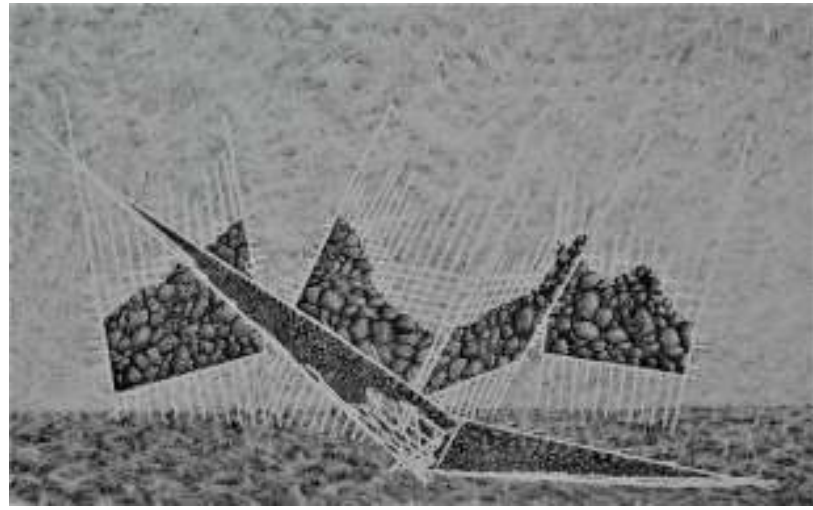
Early maquette derived from Hunstanton cliff research (2006)



Maquette Sea View above the quadrupeds

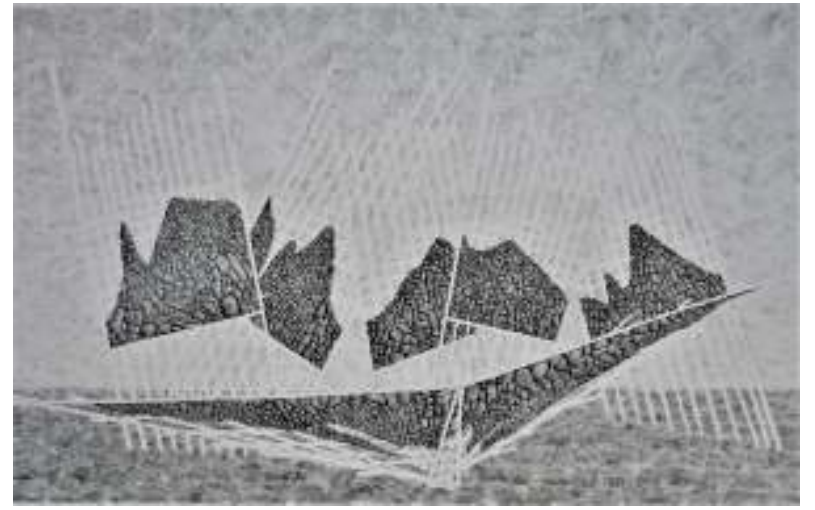


A Line from Ringstead Downs to Roaring Middle (2002)



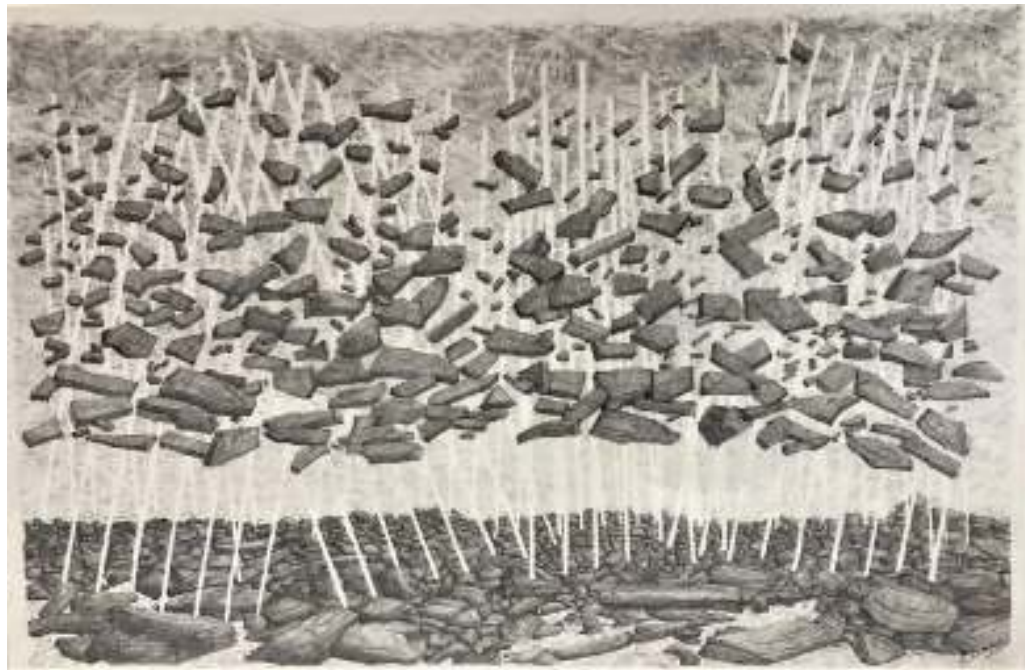
Pillow Lava, Newborough, Anglesey

(2022)



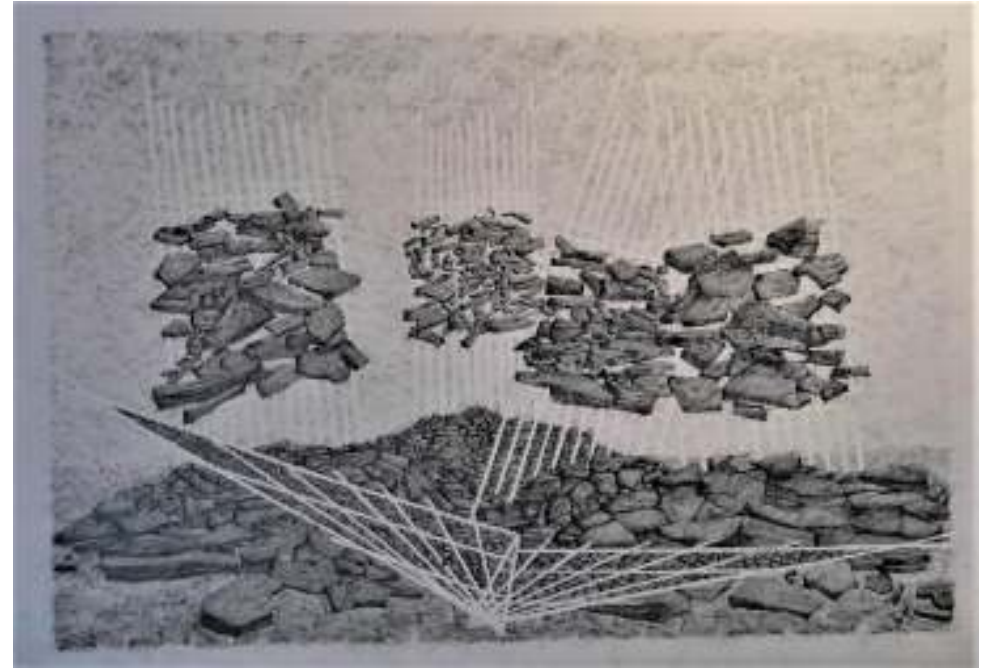
A Line from Ty-n-groes to Pont Cae Gors,

(2022)



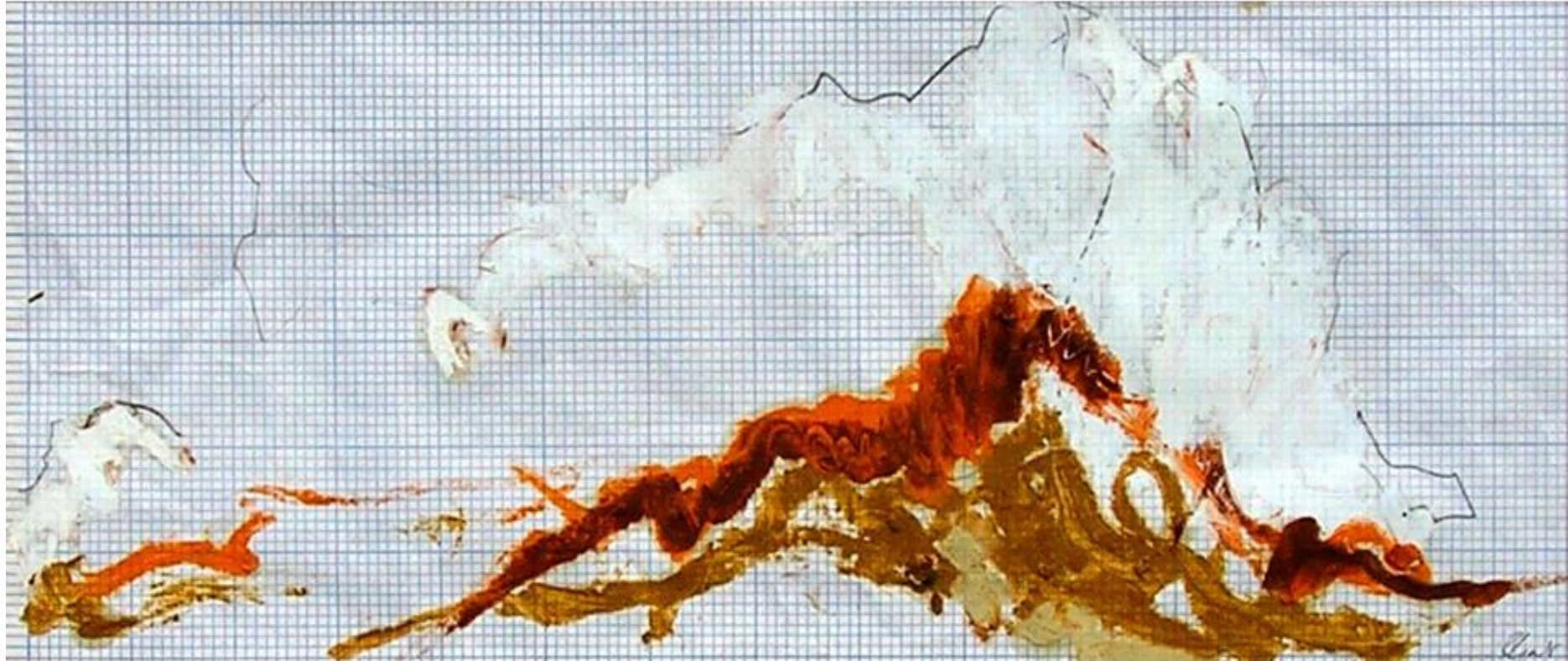
Scree 1

(2022)



Scree 2

(2022)



Hunstanton Cliff Strata (2004)

Oil Bar on Graph Paper



A special thanks to Lloyds Spar Quarries for sponsoring the aggregate for the *Fields* Installation in the exhibition