

Anne Vibeke Mou

Hearing from Artists

Anne Vibeke Mou investigates histories and ancient landscapes through drawing and sculpture, using botanical and geological elements. Anne lives and works in Newcastle upon Tyne. She is in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator in May 2020.

HW: What is the relationship between sea, land and mythology in your practice?

AVM: Essentially, my narratives, meanings and ideas emerge through the transformation process of raw materials into glass. It's about the fluidity of place and being. Since 2018 I have composed bespoke glass recipes and used processes considered obsolete to transform botanical and fossilised elements into objects that weave together abandoned histories and ancient landscapes in contemporary contexts.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the northern coast of Scotland was the location for extensive harvesting and burning of kelp for the industrial production of glass. Women and men tended fires fuelled by heather and hay, transforming the abundant forests of the sea into a prized material. In the past two years I have been travelling to remote coastal areas, such as Stronsay and Papa Stronsay in Orkney, to record the remnants of this industry.

Folklore of the Northern regions, in particular the myths related to the shape shifting Selkie, the seal folk, who move seductively between sea and land, inspired me to work with fossilised material of Tetrapodomorphs and Roemer's Gap Tetrapods recently excavated in the Scottish Borders. These fossils are the remains of creatures which resided



Anne Vibeke Mou. Photo credit John Kippin

both in water and on land. This discovery unveiled the mysteries of how creatures living in water became inhabitants of the land in evolutionary terms. I explore life from the littoral zone, that is, the space between land and sea, and marry the mythologies of place with a resonant scientific narrative of our own beginnings.

HW: What processes do you use to transform natural matter, including fossils and biological material, into glass?

AVM: Glass is essentially made from silica and flux (which lowers the melting temperature of sand); sand and salt with the addition of modifying agents. Commercially produced glass, with its flawless, ready-made transparency, makes us forget that it is, in fact, rooted in a particular place and time. There is a strange kind of amnesia which happens in this transformation. Equally hard to fathom is that a single grain of sand could have existed in many forms over millennia and been a mountain several times over.

I approach glass composition as a conceptual artform through paying a different kind of attention to each element, using recipes and batch formulation as the driving force for ideas and narrative. I look for a confluence of storylines and often begin by researching specific sites alongside Medieval and pre-industrial recipes, which I refer to and modify to my needs. I then gather botanical and geological materials from the sea and land to use as ingredients in my glass making and



Papa Stronsay, Orkney, 2018. Anne Vibeke Mou. Photo credit Jon Bewley

often work with Palaeontologists, Palaeobotanists and museum collections to obtain specific fossil material (surplus from excavations).

In practical terms my making process involves harvesting, drying, burning, leaching the ashes and boiling the liquid of seaweed and plants as well as grinding rocks and fossils by hand. It's bloody hard work. My work develops through small, bespoke melts, inviting and embracing the unique characteristics that emerge from chance encounters from specific sites and revived processes.

In a recent project in Caithness, Scotland, I presented work in two related parts. *Lake Orcadie (Gyroptychium agassizi)*, 2019, is a diamond point engraving on a window with the backdrop of a field of grazing sheep. The pattern is based on a Devonian fossil fish which can be found in nearby Achanarras Quarry in Caithness. It is a lobe finned fish and early ancestor of those who later evolved limbs and crawled ashore. The work is an ethereal fragment of a time when the land was under water.

Alongside this I made *An Unearthly Garden* 2019, on site, which comprises a series of glass objects produced with kelp ash from harvesting, drying, burning and processing kelp, heather and hay gathered locally. Silica is a key component of glass, and for this I used ground up fragments

of Tetrapodomorph fossils. Tetrapodomorphs could be said to be the evolutionary equivalent of, and certainly reference, the Selkie myth. The sculptures took the form of small orbs and botanical fragments.

HW: In 2019 you presented *a story of its own telling* 2018/19 in MIMA's exhibition *Fragile Earth: seeds, weeds, plastic crust*. How did you develop this installation of glass and drawings through your residency with the Corning Museum of Glass in New York?

AVM: I became interested in the very direct connection, which existed in Northern Europe in the late Middle Ages, between landscape and object production; sand being collected from riverbeds and potash produced from burning wood and ferns in the forests where the glasshouses were sited. I researched a late Medieval glass known as 'Waldglas' and this led me to investigations into the geopolitics of potash production on the American frontier where early settlers engaged in massive deforestation to acquire farmland, funded in part by British glass.

In 2018 I undertook an artist residency in The Studio at Corning Museum of Glass in Upstate New York, which also houses the fantastic Rakow Research Library. It became my first venture into composing my own glass. I knew early on that



An Unearthly Garden (Kelp, Heather, Hay) 2019
detail. Photo credit: John McKenzie

I was going to make potash from local trees, but I had yet to find the site for my silica component. While researching the intricate network of rivers and quarries in the area, I came across the recently excavated Gilboa Fossil Forest in the Catskills, part of the earliest forest on Earth.

I worked with material scientists from the museum as well as the Palaeobotanists involved in the excavation of the site to combine fossilised material from the Gilboa Fossil Forest with potash I processed myself. From this I produced a 'Waldglas' sculpture mapping the earliest forest on earth.

The resulting work, *a story of its own telling*, consists of glass beakers and an engraved rondel. It is an installation in which each element carries within it 385 million year old tree fossils and potash extracted from recently felled trees (the 'black salts' once produced by early settlers) combining to become transmogrifying elements in a contemporary glass batch. The rondel engraving acts as a cartographic score for the arrangement of the beakers and each vessel, unique in shape and size, is placed to mark the position of trees as they stood in the earliest forest. A memorial of sorts.

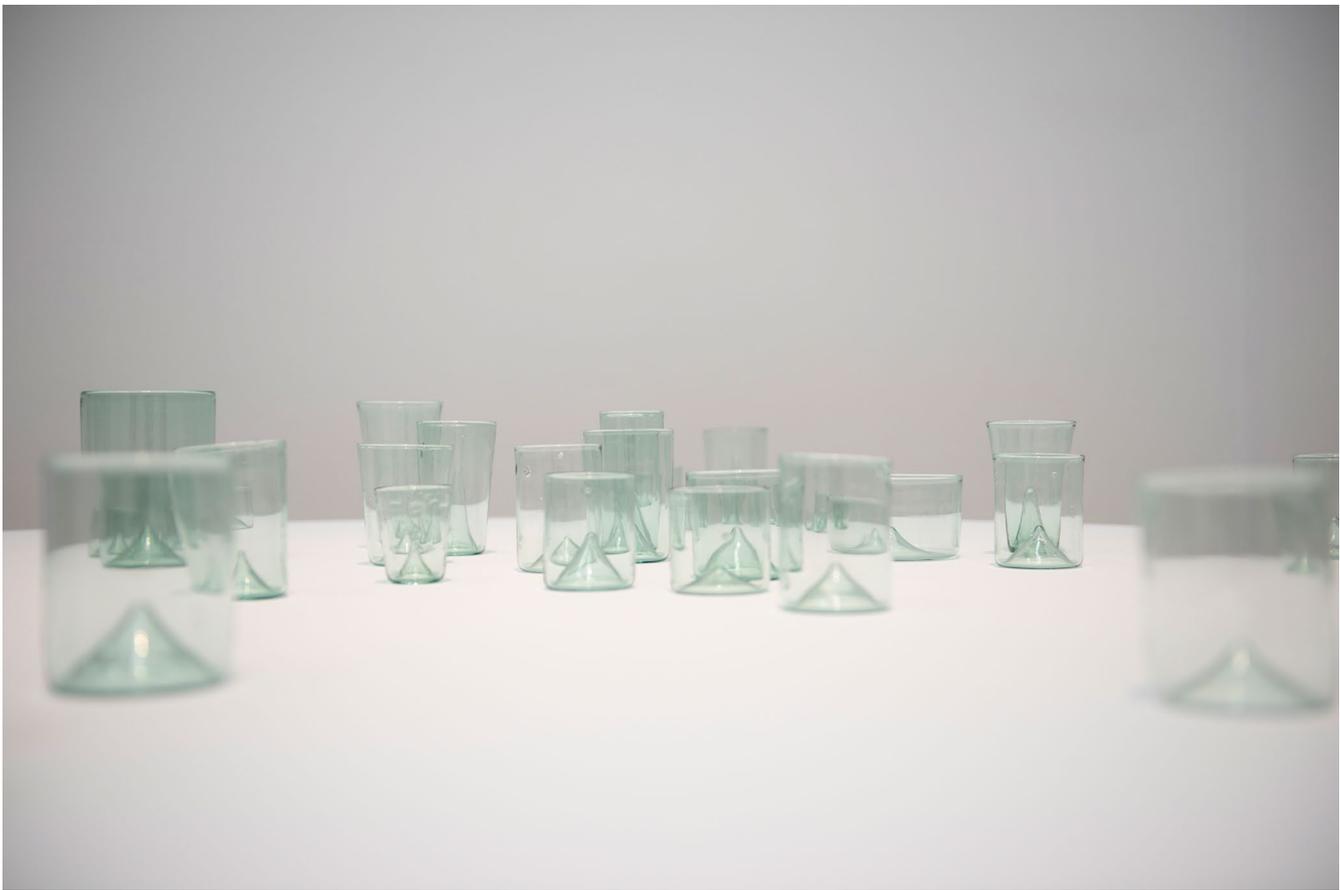
The mossy plant *Lycopodium Lucidulum* is the last living relative of trees from the earliest forest and

still grows in Upstate New York today. During my time there I sought out remnant areas of virgin forest where I collected fallen leaves and made a series of botanical drawings with potash extracted from oak trees, ferns and fossil dust from the Gilboa Fossil Forest.

HW: What ideas are you currently pursuing?

AVM: I am working on several small batch melts for glass sculpture. *The Creeping and The Wise* contains kelp and seaweed, trees and forest plants, Romer's gap Tetrapods and bone ash of Homo Sapiens. The glass combines the beginnings of life as it emerged from the water with our own human species and its precarious life in the present. The forms have yet to be finished, but in their current state appear to hover somewhere between plant stem and bone.

I also recently composed a glass of Scottish kelp ash and rocks from Drumossie Moor, exploring connections between the battle of Culloden with the Highland Clearances and current debates on land management. The objects emerged from my love of the talismanic 'Amen Glasses' of Jacobite resistance. I have been interested in Amen Glasses for a while because they employ so beautifully the subtle, intimate and secretive nature of diamond point engraving to create highly politicised objects. The relationship between the Scottish



a story of its own telling 2018/19 detail in Fragile Earth: seeds, weeds, plastic crust, MIMA. Photo credit Hynes Photography

kelp industry and highland clearances, following the outcome of a failed Jacobite uprising at Culloden, arguably ties the raw material of glass making to historically charged debates.

My intention for the artwork is not to create nostalgia or a contemporary ‘call to arms’ – but rather to make objects which embody the complexities of landscape and belonging that we very much continue to struggle with in the present. I admit the idea partially evolved from my own intense frustrations and feelings of alienation in England during the Brexit debate and perhaps the work will become my personal declaration of love to a Scotland which started to feel like home.

At this time I have been thinking a lot about self-reliance and developing ways of working that are environmentally low impact and do not require elaborate technical facilities. I am setting up a workshop at home, with an eye on portability, so I can continue my work with bespoke glass recipes on a modest scale and on site.

This summer I am planning to widen my use of botanical extractions and start to establish a kind of ‘botany of glass’, which I imagine as a sculptural sequence of glasses produced with myriad algae and plants from sea, shore and land. I continue to

make engravings and I’m teaching myself a new skill of carving amber. Its geological and cultural history has strong ties to Denmark, the country in which I was born and it has become a fragrant, revelatory pleasure.

Currently I am based in a historic area of Newcastle upon Tyne, which one might determine the ground zero of the industrial revolution, and this has got me thinking about a glass recipe which encompasses this momentous cultural step and its consequences. I have been talking to a local geologist and botanist about regional histories and deposits, and with travel being limited for the time being, it’s a story which may soon start to take shape.