<u>Andrea Gregson: Seeing Through the Ground</u>

What does a sculptor do? They make things (ok, they make sculptures) from other things: from raw materials such as stone, clay, wood, steel, even pollen to 'found' objects like toys, crockery, scaffolding. Sculptors deal with physical, material, spatial *stuff*, transforming one thing into another.

The practice of sculpture is at its core an intuitive engagement with materials, an ancient instinct to mould and shape, to play with and make use of the physical stuff that is the world around us, until something is created, learned or made visible. Sculpture is the world around us, reconfigured. Gregson has been exploring the world through sculpture for the last twenty years; she describes making as a means of discovery, of knowledge production.

She draws on traditional techniques and processes such as casting, carving and frottage (rubbings) as ways of accumulating knowledge – knowledge pertaining to the nature of materials and the way they behave; knowledge about mass, volume, and spatial perception; knowledge in the form of skills and non-verbal thought; knowledge that feeds an intricate, evolving understanding of her environment.

Gregson's practice revolves around materials: their changing states, their relationship to place, their histories and her relationship to them. Living in London, her practice has often led her mudlarking along the shores of the tidal Thames to bring strange debris back to her studio for investigation and eventual incorporation into works such as *Restless Terrain* (2016): a long, meandering bronze slab in which you might expect to find fossils, cast from geotextiles used to shore up the river embankment and balanced on pier-like stilts, an archaeological specimen laid out for examination. Many of the materials that have gone into her sculptures have been abandoned, defunct or are simply no longer needed – from the tough paper sacks that powders like plaster and gypsum are sold in, to webbed fruit bags and wooden cable reels. They accumulate around her studio alongside scavenging spoils from the river and elsewhere, until they find their way into a work. Discarded materials bring a history with them and that history is often human; this has led Gregson to explore sites, like the Thames embankment and Grizedale, where an industrial past has left its mark.

Grizedale's remote location and picturesque natural environment belie the impact of human activity in this landscape. Famed for its natural beauty, the Lake District is seen today as the antidote to urban, industrial society and yet its abundant natural resources have been exploited by industry for over four hundred years; charcoal burning and iron smelting has been going on here since prehistoric times. A boom in mining and processing industries in the sixteenth century saw a rich array of minerals being extracted from the fells: copper, zinc, lead, arsenic, diatomite, barytes, haematite (iron ore), tungsten, graphite, fluorite and coal. Slate, granite, limestone and sandstone were also quarried extensively for construction both locally and in many major cities, while corn mills, fulling

mills and sawmills as well as tanneries and breweries, pencil-making, iron and gunpowder manufacturing were built close to rivers and gills to make use of the abundant natural water supply; there was massive deforestation of large swathes of the Lake District to meet demand for charcoal in the smelters and blast furnaces, timber for construction and turned wooden bobbins for the spinning and weaving industries of Lancashire, all of which made their mark on the landscape, and left a lasting legacy not only in terms of industrial archaeology but also in the geology and ecology of the region, from the adits and spoil heaps that reshaped the fell sides and the valleys that never recovered their forests, to the polluting minerals that continue to leach from old workings into the rivers and lakes.

Over the last six months, Gregson has been exploring the area around Grizedale, picking over the material evidence of this industrial past, and making work both in situ and back at her studio as a result of these visits.

One of these new pieces, *Carbon Delta* (2019), is a ductile iron cast of a boulder in Hob Gill, a water source close to an ancient iron-smelting site in Grizedale Forest. To do this, Gregson carried her double-boiler up to the gill and made a wax cast of the rock in the river, where the cold spring water would have instantly chilled the molten wax as it covered the soft contours worn by the water into the surface of the rock. In drawing our attention to this relationship between water and stone, she invokes not only the elemental energy that powered the mills and forges downstream, but also the glacial and geological processes that shaped the landscape of the Lake District over millennia.

As with previous cast metal sculptures, however, Gregson is interested in the fact that there are multiple sculptural forces acting on this work: the long, slow action of water working on the rock surface, and her own, self-conscious intervention in this process. She has thus carved into the cast, creating an imaginary landscape of steps and cliff edges that blend into the existing topography of the boulder. As a result, the work now occupies an ambiguous state, between micro- and macro-scales, human and geological temporalities.

Gregson is equally deliberate in her selection of materials, and *Carbon Delta* is no exception. In choosing ductile iron, a metal alloy rich in graphite, and casting it using traditional sand-casting processes, she binds the work to the history and geology of this site: the rich mineral seams that were worked for centuries, and the techniques developed to process the extracted ores.

Graphite was actually discovered in Borrowdale, a valley ten miles or so north of Grizedale; the geology here yields a purer form of graphite than is found anywhere else. In the sixteenth century, this isolated Lakeland valley became the centre of a mining operation on an industrial scale; miners from Germany were brought up to work the lucrative mines at the invitation of Elizabeth I, who had armed sentries guard the mine entrances around the clock.[1] Apart from its many

[1] Borrowdale graphite fetched a price of £3920 per tonne in 1804 (£390,000 today)

uses in gunpowder, pencils and industrial lubricants, graphite also features in the production of iron and steel; it was traditionally used as a separating layer between a sand mould and iron castings, while ductile iron, Gregson's chosen material, is a graphite-rich and less brittle form of cast iron.

Known locally as 'wad' amongst the Cumbrian shepherds who used it to mark their flocks, graphite remains fundamental to the practice of mark-making, or drawing. The new, large scale drawings and frottages (rubbings) of the surfaces of milling stools, walls and workbenches at Stott Park Bobbin Mill have been made with locally sourced graphite, another reminder of the iron and copper smelting industries and charcoal-fired blast furnaces of the eighteenth century.

The process of making a frottage is a simple, sensual activity that relies primarily on touch. The hand must intuit the texture of the surface beneath the paper, and vary the pressure used to apply the graphite in response, thus producing an intimate map of the object underneath. Again, the resulting image retains a level of ambiguity; some information (such as colour) is, like the white spaces that indicate a void beneath the paper, elusive. These are drawings that speak the language of sculpture; they don't describe light and shade but they do tell us about the physical qualities of objects such as the softly contoured oak panels, sculpted by mill employees leaning in to their work in the same spot, day after day. The translated textures of slate walls and polished wood conjure vast landscapes and even human faces, but Gregson tempers their fantastical and even monumental aspects by displaying these works as they were made, propped up and held by coppiced poles.

At a recent Rusland Horizons open day, Gregson invited visitors to join her in the making of XXX, a large-scale frottage of a slate wall at Stott Park Bobbin Mill. Such collaborative production processes recall the collective work of past miners and mill workers and sense of continuity embedded in indigenous crafts such as walling.

In terms of artistic heritage, this gesture also broaches questions around creative agency or authorship that hark back to the emergence of modern industrial society in the early twentieth century, and the response of artists: embracing mechanical fabrication/reproduction methods, chance and natural processes, problematizing the notion of the 'artistic genius' and seeking to bring art and life closer together, and promoting an ethos of 'truth to materials' that both borrowed from traditional artisan cultures and encouraged the exploration of new materials as part of a radical expansion of the artist's lexicon.

A member of the post-postmodern generation, Gregson is instinctively self-conscious about her sculptural practice. But she has become particularly interested in the relationship between humanity and nature, in the ways we can affect natural processes, and especially in terms of her sculptural practice, in equivalences between natural geological processes, timescales, and the rapid and radical transformations that occur in the casting process. Her experiments in this vein recall a series of works entitled 'Essere Fiume' (Being the River) by the Italian artist Giuseppe Penone, in which he chose a rock from a river bed and

then went to the source of the river to extract the same type of stone, which he then carved, mimicking the work done by nature as closely as he could in order to draw parallels between artistic and natural processes. Gregson, by contrast, tends to relinquish control over the final outcome, embracing parallels between natural and industrial processes, and making this a critical determinant of form. In light of this, her works often retain evidence of the process of making, as in a work such as *Flagrant Matter* (2016), which incorporates the form of plastic folds into which she poured the plaster to create a mould, and the skeletal 'sprue' through which the bronze was poured, inverted to form its legs.

Both *Flagrant Matter* and *Torsion* are part of a recent body of work, *Sculptures from the Anthropocene* (2016), in which Gregson reiterated her interest in the relationship between humanity and our environment. The Anthropocene refers to the current geological time period, an epoch recently named and distinguished by changes in Earth's geology and ecosystems arising as a result of human activity. It is an age where, as Gavin Grindon put it, 'humanity itself has become a collective geophysical force of nature.'[2] Today, more trees grow in farms than in the wild, more rocks are moved by bulldozers and mining than any natural processes, and the burning of oil, gas and coal is contributing to climate change. We have realised, rather late, that industrial capitalism is irreversibly altering the biosphere, and nature, in responding and adapting to these conditions, is now a product of culture. Natural history is human history.

Gregson's exhibition at Grizedale reflects a deepening interest in the interweaving of human activity and natural forces, and explores some of the (inherently sculptural) processes that have defined man's relationship to nature in this landscape over the last 400 years. It also offers ways of thinking about that relationship; her work *Spectre* (2019), for instance, immortalises bracket fungi in porcelain. Multiple casts were produced by slip-casting and press-moulding, techniques widely used for the mass production of ceramic objects, from plates to sanitaryware. In the gallery, these bracket fungi – which grow like parasites on trees weakened by infection or stress, and feed on their host, usually resulting in its demise – presents a disquieting metaphor for us to take away.

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[2] Gavin Grindon, https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/disobedient-objects/art-and-activism-in-the-age-of-the-anthropocene