

# Land Matters



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A site specific sculpture project based at  
Ilam Park, Staffordshire, England. 2012



Ian Randall

With thanks to Paul Mortimer, Zoe Stevens and Helen Tuck from The National Trust,  
and Ian Randall, professional land artist.

Photography Richard Richards, Zoe Stevens and the artists of 'Land Matters'.

Catalogue design by Jeremy James & Denis O'Connor

‘Land Matters’ is a project concerned with the area of ‘site-specific sculpture within the landscape’ and looks at developing art work beyond its studio base, into a more public and engaging environment.

The project was undertaken by the BA (Hons) Fine Art Programme, University of Derby in partnership with The National Trust at Ilam Park, South Peak Estate, Staffordshire in April, 2012. This catalogue documents the series of sculpture works made on site, how these works were realised and how the residency functions.

It is a unique, discipline based residential research project, based upon the wish to enhance the University of Derby’s undergraduate Fine Art students learning experience. Students have an opportunity to work with two academic member’s of staff and a professional land artist to participate on a collaborative level with The National Trust towards the realization of ‘site specific sculptures’ in the Staffordshire landscape. Academically the project provides a professional platform for both the student and academic staff to work alongside one another.

Working with undergraduates at Ilam came about through a fundamental belief in the possibilities of creating sculptures within and from materials found in this rural landscape. This has been achieved through negotiation with our generous partners The National Trust. The residency has a long legacy; it was established in 2001 and has over the last 11 years involved groups of between fifteen and twenty students in producing site-specific sculpture works in response to the engaging landscape of Ilam.

‘Land Matters’ extends what has been achieved from these past residences. It sets out to create a specific learning experience for the student by enabling them to gain a more comprehensive knowledge of the Derbyshire / Staffordshire Landscape through working more closely with specialist staff from the National Trust, in the areas of research that students have not engaged with before such as ‘Sustainability’, ‘Ecology’, ‘Heritage’ and ‘Conservation’.

The aims of the residency were to;

- *provide students with a first hand experience of working with a professional organization and its specialist staff.*
- *enable each person to produce a site-specific piece of artwork from materials, which derive from and/or enhance the natural environment.*
- *provide the possibility for a realization of a piece of artwork within the context of the Staffordshire landscape, which is underpinned by an understanding, and interpretation of that landscape.*
- *provide the opportunity to make work for a public site and engage with the audience who use that site.*
- *allow work beyond the context of the confines of the studio and to consider other sites where original artwork may be presented.*
- *learn to work with a range of processes and materials which are both sustainable and environmentally sympathetic to the landscape.*
- *extend the role of the student artist, in preparation to working within the professional category of 'Public Art' which is concurrent to Contemporary Fine Art Practice.*
- *further develop a working partnership with The National Trust staff in terms of understanding the environment the students were working in from an historical, ecological and conservational perspective.*
- *provide the experience of working beyond the studio / gallery in a public environment which engaged the student to work in a more public role.*

*“Reflecting upon my time at Ilam, the project took me far outside of my comfort zone. The demands of the work prompted me to improvise and invent, developing a patience, dedication and discipline for my practice.”*

**Louise Bembridge** (2nd year Fine Art undergraduate.)

The project through shared planning with The National Trust required all participants to undertake a number of site visits and prepare a proposal which was to be agreed by The National Trust before an individual could work on site. At this stage, ideas, materials as well as methods of construction were rigorously tested out through formal discussion with academic staff to ensure that the students' proposal was critically sound and most importantly could be practically achieved.

*“From the wet and stormy weather of the week came a process that was rewarding in itself and the end results were ones in which we all accomplished something to be proud of.”*

**Aly Jackson** (2nd year Fine Art undergraduate.)

A programme of practical demonstrations and talks enhanced and supported the student proposals, these were provided by National Trust staff, the invited Artist and academic staff. This was vital in terms of providing the student with the appropriate preparation and confidence to work in such a physically demanding environment. Typical of one of these sessions, was a day 'coppicing' hazel in the Manifold Valley. Hazel was one of one of the many materials students worked with at Ilam. A versatile material it has an historic use in rural communities and crafts; a sustainable material it has great potential for the land artist. A range of other materials were also sourced such as clay, stone, a variety of foliage and other types of wood. Students were encouraged to inventively forage for materials within the Ilam Landscape without creating any damage to the environment. One of the key principles of the project was to only use materials from the immediate environment. No power tools were to be used. This important idea was driven by the belief that these 'parameters' contrary to being limitations actually promote inventive and creative solutions.

So where do you start or how do you start? You have to be inventive, you have to physically handle materials, you need to be able to create 3D forms, but most importantly you need to create a focus for your response in terms of how to edit and devise an appropriate way to

work with this overwhelming, lively, confusing and beautiful place. Planning is the key and this is where the proposals supported and tested out students' ideas for making work within the site. Primarily however students had to develop an 'onsite', 'hands on' approach. The making of land art of this sort requires the artist to understand what a material will and will not do; when will a hazel rod bend without breaking, how can uneven stones be successfully stacked, how rapidly does gathered moss change colour? The answers to questions such as these can only be found through practically doing and experimenting.

*“This week long residency working with the National Trust at Ilam was a fantastic experience for me, through working directly with natural materials the residency has now shown me potentially really exciting ways of working for my final years studio practice.”*

**Sam Bracken.** (2nd year Fine Art undergraduate.)

The landscape of Ilam is complex, it is multi layered, it has been managed by human intervention for centuries, towards the creation of an 'ideal' / 'accessible' place, yet when you travel away from its footpaths and walkways you find a place that is relatively wild and within that place lies a sort of stimulating and exciting chaos. The challenge for each artist was to explore, interpret, acknowledge, and understand what we as individual artists find interesting within it. There is a delicate balance where a sculpture is required to be made, but that its environment must not be imposed upon insensitively or crudely.

During the eight days in April 2012, seventeen artworks were created all of them very different in their form, material and content, they each show sensitivity in their production and a respect for the space they occupy. They are made in a way that the viewer 'finds' the work rather than the work imposing itself, they have become part of the landscape.

This way of working was firmly underpinned by the contribution and professional work ethic of the Artist Ian Randall, who led by example. He also providing very valuable critical and practical support to each student as well as running practical demonstrations, talks and critiques.

The residency is also a huge practical undertaking, it goes on 24/7. On-site accommodation is provided by the National Trust and the day-to-day welfare of the student group is overseen by academic staff, from catering to evening seminars and discussions.

The residency period has been a powerful experience for everyone involved, it was an intensive 8 days immersed in the landscape. It was demanding and extremely hard work due to some atrocious weather, it rained 4 days out of seven. On the afternoon of the third day it was fully expected that some of the group would stop working and retreat to our quarters because of the severity of the weather. It is a real testament to the whole group that none did, but instead continued to work. They rose to the challenge of making the residency work as individuals and as a group. Team working, problem solving and self motivation were all skills that developed during the residency, as well as heightened awareness of themselves as individuals and others when faced with the same challenges. Each one is to be applauded for working outdoors in extremely wet, cold and muddy conditions but through which they have all contributed to a very successful project.

The physical activity of making something with ones hands can be a deceptively simple act. It can be, frustrating, enlivening, confusing, spiritual and ultimately, one would hope a deeply satisfying occupation. This is the lot of the artist after all. The seventeen artists who took part in 'Land Matters' at Ilam Hall in 2012, in the course of making their sculptures went through some if not all of these emotions. Experiences such as these, that truly test the resolve, inventiveness and commitment are essential for students on the verge of their professional careers as artists.

Project leaders to '*Land Matters*'

*Denis O'Connor*

*Jeremy James. University of Derby. 2012*





*Tree Vortex* - Richard Barwick. Coppiced hazel wood.







*Ladle* - Louise Bembridge. Coppiced hazel and fallen wood.





*Stacks* - Andy Bennett. Coppiced hazel and fallen wood.





*Manifold Ripple* - Sam Bracken. Coppiced hazel.











*Breakthrough!* - Anneliese Farnell. Locally dug clay and moss.





*Scale* - Janet Fleming. Coppiced hazel.





*Pyramid* - James Hall. Fallen wood.











*Beechfall* - Aly Jackson. Locally dug clay and beechnuts.





*Shoal* - Jeremy James. Coppiced hazel.





*Tower* - Nathan Munn. Stone, slate & felled timber.





*Line & Ladder* - Denis O'Connor. Fallen wood.







SK 131507 - Alison Paine. Locally dug clay & found brick.









*Circle* - Sarah Perry. Ivy





*Structure* - Charlotte Poole. Coppiced hazel and fallen wood.







Source - Ian Randall. Locally dug clay, coppiced hazel and rhododendron leaves.





*Tree-Line* - Michael Stokes. Stone.





*Insight* - Kirsty Woodward. Locally dug clay, ivy and fallen wood.







**T**he April 2012 residential project for Fine Art students marked the 12th occasion this collaboration between the National Trust and the University of Derby had played a part in this degree. As the host organisation it has given me a great insight into the creative process and influence that the course has on these students.

The week has evolved over the years to be more defined in terms of what constraints the students have to work within – with respect to locations and materials especially. Working with the University staff we act as a client might – briefing the students with respect to our needs and expectations as an organisation.

The quality of work produced in 2012 was some of the highest I have seen over the years – work that was both highly creative, often beautiful, and that could be read both in response to the environment and in sympathy with it. This success lies in part with the staff leadership and the creative influence of artist Ian Randall who worked alongside the students.

Over the years I have had the pleasure of meeting many Fine Art graduates from Derby who have said how important the week at Ilam is to how their work developed, and I have no doubt that this will be true for many of the students who were here in 2012.

*Paul Mortimer, National Trust*





It is a real pleasure to have University of Derby artists working at Ilam Park each year and seeing the landscape inspiring them and being interpreted in so many ways.

The National Trust hope visitors to their properties will have unexpected and memorable experiences which will encourage them to return in the future. 'Land Matters' certainly did this and more.

The response from some visitors is surprise initially, then they stop and think about how the outdoor environment has influenced the artist's thoughts and reasons behind the sculpture. I have had many people stop to ask me about the sculptures, they were a real talking point and seemed to put smiles on faces, which is just the kind of response we like to see from visitors. The work was of interest to all ages. Children from the village primary school enjoyed walking through the park and looking at the sculptures. This has inspired them to create their own artwork outdoors and think about swapping poster paint and paper for natural materials and tools

The use of natural materials found within the park and hazel sustainably coppiced by the students from the neighbouring Manifold Valley, helps create a response from the artists that is in tune with the landscape here.

The weather has impacted on several outdoor events in Ilam Park in 2012, but the week the students created their sculptures in the park was without a doubt one of the wettest weeks of the year. This makes their hard work and commitment even more commendable.

We look forward to having more University of Derby artists at Ilam Park in the future.

*Zoe Stevens, National Trust Visitor Experience Officer*





Denis O'Connor

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