

*drift*



*drift*

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**Naill a'r Llall**

Ym mreuddwyd llesg y draethell leidiog
ai'r un yw afon pan ymuna â'r môr?

*In the mud flat's frail and listless dreams*
*is the river the same as it joins the sea?*

*Steffan Gwynn*

# Adrift: Thoughts on Place and the River Usk

*"Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there."*

- Lucy Lippard

*"The ideas of 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place."*

- Yi-Fu Tuan

Place as a concept is an intriguing thing, and one that is often dismissed as a matter purely of common sense: we all know what place is – we all know how it is defined. However, when given proper consideration, a sense of place (as well as how to concretely describe it) can be a peculiar thing. The Collins English Dictionary holds seventeen definitions of place, comprising twenty-five sub-sections, all endeavouring to convey some sense of the word, with most overlapping and paraphrasing each other, trying to capture and separate the nuances of each difference usage.

Places, individually considered, can vary drastically in size. Their boundaries can overlap, fluctuate, or even completely disintegrate depending on who you might ask to define them. Certain places may only exist at specific times of day, in certain seasons, or only to particular people - even the same place can be held and defined differently in the eyes of multiple individuals. Places can exist as a landscape: the dirt under our feet, barely changing with thousands of years; places can exist as town and cities, constantly being knocked down and reconstructed; places can exist as stories, in fiction, or can be something that no longer exists in the world, and is preserved instead only in memory; places can be things that change with times and tides, that disappear and re-materialise.

The River Usk in the entirety of its sixty-three mile long course could be considered as a single place, whilst simultaneously as many. It serves also as delineation between places, where, at its source in the Brecon Beacons and in its upper-course, it is the defining boundary between Carmarthenshire and Powys. The river makes its way through rural villages and small towns, the eponymous town of Usk, before coming through the historic Roman fortress town of Caerleon, and the City of Newport. It flows then out through the Newport Wetlands to the mouth, at Uskmouth in the Severn Estuary.

Each of these locations will have similarities, not least the river flowing through them. The towns and cities on the banks of the Usk fall into a place-culture specific to those of riverside dwellings in Wales, the river serving as a local unifier, as well as with riverside towns the world over. Simultaneously, the idiosyncrasies of the Usk and its towns and places serve to distinguish it from other rivers, both nationally and globally in an historic and physical sense. With its vast tidal range as well as its expansive depth and breadth, it has brought important trade into Newport via major shipping routes. It features in folk tales telling of King Arthur and it is traversed by the longest-spanning functional transporter bridge in the world, all of these factors contributing to and defining 'place-ness'.

In an increasingly globalised and homogenous world a fascinating lack of individuality can be seen, with houses, shops, and public spaces all holding uniformity. Yet, because of these similarities, where there are discrepancies from the norm these divergences will be made notable by their difference alone. From homogenisation there is a necessity to break away from things that seem to be virtually identical, and seek out places that speak of individuality.

In Tim Cresswell's *Place: A Short Introduction*, it is said that places are created by people – through 'seemingly mundane activities [repeated] on a daily basis'. Cultural practices will serve to make a differentiation between a space – something transient and perhaps unquantifiable - and its transformation into a place – something that is actively delineated and consciously observed. Although the differences between space and place are nebulous, there is a sense that human activity, use and acknowledgement solidify 'space' into something less abstract – into something of significance, into something that affects people.

In this collective exhibition and publication, the artworks serve to invent, reinforce or solidify places within the locality through their actions and deliberations. The artists explore the nuances of place and space, offered physically and conceptually by the River Usk and by its surrounding land, people, and stories; their works serve to give voice to concerns about local heritage and politics, loss, preservation of place, and the landscape.

Rebekah Prentice


Wales Coast



Natasha Lowe-Sellers

## Hiraeth y Môr-forwyn

'Hiraeth' is a Welsh word that is said to be untranslatable. It speaks of a yearning need, a longing for home, and for Wales. In its literal sense it can mean a long passing of time, but the word 'hiraeth' speaks more of a feeling in one's heart and could never be used in an unemotional way.

This untranslatable feeling lies in the background of both the making and meaning of these images. The central, mermaid like, protagonist seems uncertain about the time and place she is in as the work attempts to capture the intangible feeling that we have towards the sea; a feeling that sits somewhere between loss and longing.





# Shed Light

On the evening of 29th of October 1772, Mrs Williams was returning to the village of Caerleon from the town. When on Caerleon Bridge, a sudden surge of the current forced away four piers and a considerable part of the bridge. Swept along the river on part of the structure, she was carried through St. Julian's to the Newport Bridge and eventually out towards the sea. A sailor on a barge finally rescued her as she neared the mouth of the River Usk. Despite being heavily pregnant, Mrs Williams sustained such minor injuries that she was able to return home to Caerleon after a few hours repose.

Through digital manipulation, these images reference paintings of the sublime landscape in an attempt to highlight how stories like these serve to change the way that we respond to specific spaces.







## Winter After Forty-Four Summers
## Gwyrlodau

This is a book about a farm. It is a book about childhood, and it is also a book about death.

Trying to encapsulate the essence of things that are rapidly disappearing, as well as things that have already gone, *Winter After Forty-Four Summers* is a combination of images, text, and family photographs. Presented in the form of a book, the work examines place, and how people make connections with landscape, be it a connection with a vast area or a deep knowledge of somewhere exceptionally familiar.

Created over a few short months in a period of rapid change, *Winter After Forty-Four Summers* is a tool for mourning both person and place. It serves as an object for consideration, and perhaps even meditation, whilst navigating uncertainty and loss.









## Change is Inevitable

Life has its good and bad times, its just depends on how you deal with them. People change as life goes on but that is what makes them who they are? This is what is happening to Newport, the shops get closed down and reopened as something else. Buildings get knocked down and transformed into something new, is this about progress?

I am using the changing weather as a metaphor for these ups and downs. A big black cloud could represent the bad. Is there a silver lining? As the weather changes, so does the flow of the river; these things are interconnected (bad weather meaning the river will be unsteady and un-controlling while clear sky means the river will be steady and calm). My work is trying to uncover the different perceptions of good and bad.





## Catching the Lighthouse

A lighthouse is of great significance and is a vital navigation aid for ships. The East Usk Lighthouse, still fully functional, is one of a pair, each located on either side of the River Usk at the Severn Estuary. The West Usk lighthouse is currently run as a hotel since its decommissioning as an operational lighthouse in 1922.

This work plays upon the basic juxtaposing principles of a lighthouse and a camera: lighthouses giving out light to ships, and cameras letting in light to produce an image. Experimenting with pinhole photography to try a capture a successful image of the lighthouse, low-tech cameras were constructed from shoeboxes, leaving them overnight tied to posts, fences and bushes, vulnerable to the surrounding elements.

These interesting sculptural objects were then documented with the latest iPhone camera and through the subsequent attempts to enlarge the images it became clear that the inability to capture a meaningful image of the lighthouse is apparent within this new technology, as well as through traditional yet unpredictable pinhole techniques.

Jasmine Bell







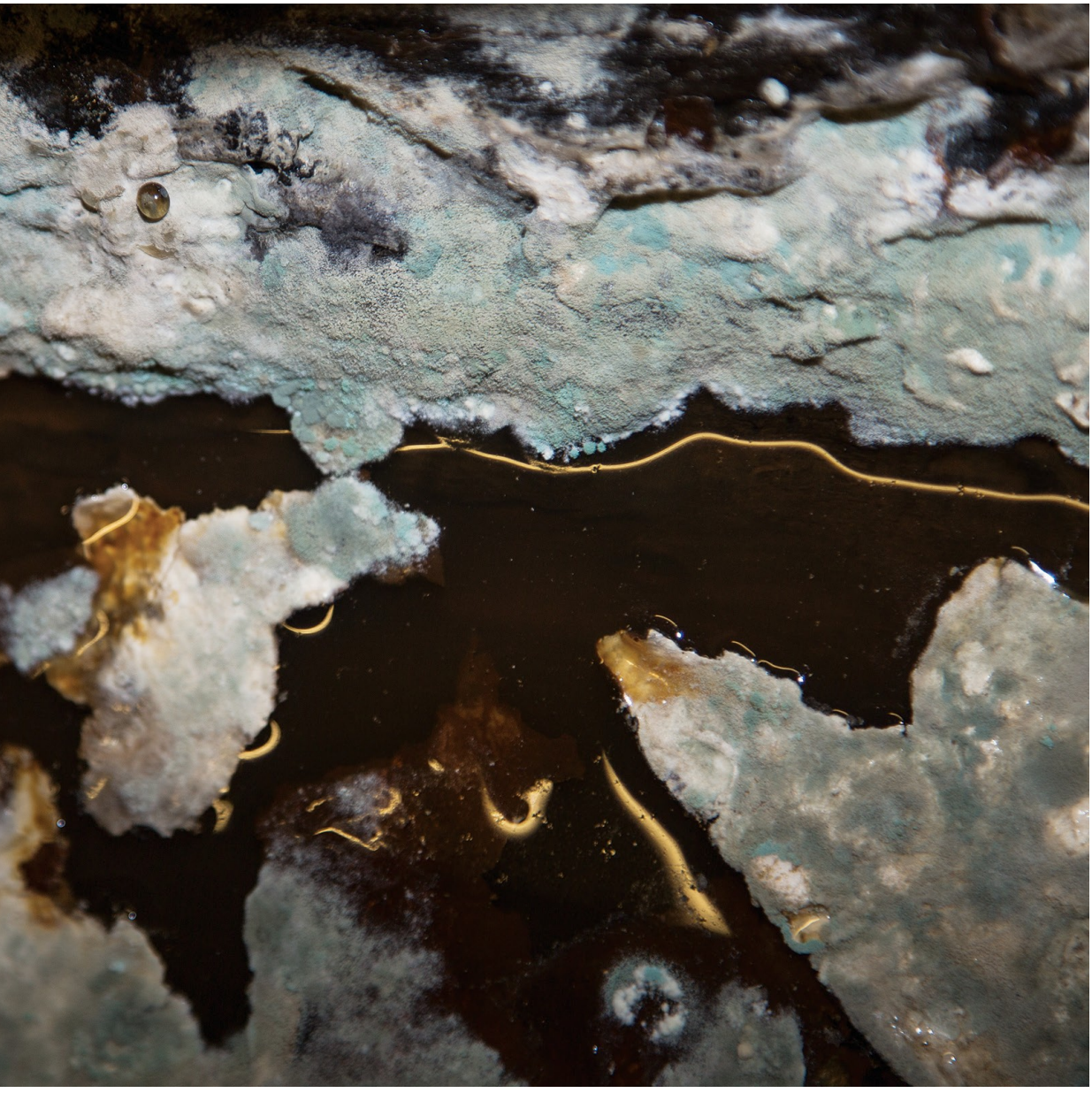








Emma Daly



## Marks in Place

During the construction of the Newport Riverfront Theatre and Arts Centre in 2002, the remains of a fifteenth century merchant ship were found in the banks of the River Usk. Despite being damaged from both the construction work and its lengthy burial, its timbers are remarkably well preserved by the clay and mud of the river. The ship was carefully recovered, timber by timber, cleaned and recorded before conservation began - a process that is still underway today. This involves its enormous timbers being soaked in a solution to preserve them, along with the careful cataloguing of artefacts, loose timbers and other small exhibits. Despite its incredible historical significance and public interest, this valuable piece of heritage remains hidden away. Surely it deserves a purpose built museum so that it can be first reassembled and then displayed?

These images of this restoration project do not immediately identify their subject, some of them resemble landscapes much larger than the tiny area seen, or evoke ideas of large-scale waterways. They are deliberately ambiguous and uncertain, just like the future of the ship.

# The River Itself

The River Usk is not a picture postcard river. The unique tidal nature of the water leaves it lacking in traditionally picturesque qualities and it is instead awash with mud. Frequently left underappreciated and forgotten, the river today is crammed under bridges, enclosed by towns and outshone by celebrated landmarks: regarded as an eyesore; polluted, spoiled and muddied.

However, Newport and its neighbouring towns were built because of the river: the waterway supporting life by sustaining provisions and travel for centuries. The River Usk is important both historically and economically and like the town of Newport, all is not as it seems; there is much more to the river than its reputation suggests.

*The River Itself* aims to bestow a restored appreciation to the Usk and for its significance and value to be realised. By entirely removing any evidence of landscape, of history and of human life that surrounds the river, the water appears like a magnificent landmass: it demands a change of perspective.



Rachel Lucas







Conor Elliott



## Breath

The sea, the earth, breathing in, breathing out.

This location is the west bank of the mouth of the river Usk. Here you can view Newport's traditional docks and steel works alongside the modern wind turbines. It's an odd mix of old and new industries that lie side by side.

The tide has a huge effect on the estuary, the river, and the people who live here. It overshadows everything; it's too vast to ignore. The constant turn and flow can be a metaphor for life in the city, sweeping out, drawing in; always bringing new opportunities.

Yet the stilled, reflected moonlight transforms something so fluid into something much more solid, a suggestion of brushed steel? A mirroring of the industry that Newport was renowned for? Tide and change is inevitable.

# Tides of Change: On the Riverbanks of Newport

If you stand for a while on one of Newport's many bridges, you will see the flotsum and jetsam of modern day life being carried out to sea by the river below. Stay a while longer and you will see what is then washed back in again.

To write about a river is to write about change. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact point of transition; it helps if you can observe the direction of its tide. The Usk, the river and focal point in many of these bodies of work, has its humble beginnings nestled deep up in Wales' Black Mountain. It's waters travel some 63 miles to reach the sea, some days looking brown and squalid, others quite serene depending on the hard light of day. We should always remember a river reaches both it's highest and lowest point each day.

Historically, the tidal reaches of the Usk have made the river attractive to colonies and trade for much of the last millennium, mostly because the river's deep and wide mouth has enabled major shipping vessels to travel significant distances up stream. The river itself used to service docks and landings for Paddle Steamers that fed right up into the heart of Newport's city centre – a history completely hidden from the redeveloped streets we walk today. To Newport, the river has brought people, tourists, wealth and tradable goods to the town and it is still used as a viable source of commerce and tourism.

However, as with anything in our history that has survived to modern living memory, obvious footprints become erased over time. Attitudes towards such remnants become complacent, indifferent, and even superficial - often until something is thrown back at us, making it take on new meaning for us once again.

In July 2002, the city's world famous medieval ship was discovered in the muddy bed of the River Usk, where it laid buried for 550 years, during building work for the city's newly commissioned Riverfront Theatre & Arts Centre. Constructed in around 1450, the vessel is the most complete surviving example of a medieval merchant ship from the 15th century and is of international historical importance. The Newport Ship is just one example of the long-standing status of cultural heritage in the city. One where people literally had to dig to discover what lay beneath the surface.

This of course is not Newport's sole cultural inheritance. It was the home to John Frost and the bloody climax of the Chartist Uprising in 1836. The famous escapologist Harry Houdini performed a number of times in the city, famously escaping from a Newport Police cell in 1905, and jumping from the city's Town bridge in manacles in 1913. It was the birth place of Tom Toya Lewis, Newport's very own faulted-hero of the Dock Disaster of 1909 and the city where Kurt Cobain allegedly proposed to Courtney Love whilst Hole were on tour at The Legendary TJ's in 1991. It is also home to the art works of mosaicist Kenneth Budd whose work adorns many walkways around the city, birthplace to Hollywood actor Michael Sheen and the home of the Newport Art College on Clarence Place, which hosted such notable names as Joe Strummer from The Clash, Keith Arnatt and Magnum photographer David Hurn. This is by no means a comprehensive list of the city's accomplishments, but it is clear that with a little bit of physical and metaphorical digging, there are many more interesting stories to be found about the city and the lives of people who live along the water's edge.

Compared to neighbouring cities like Cardiff and Bristol, it is easy to be critical of Newport. It's certainly doesn't appear to be as vibrant or cosmopolitan, nestled as it is between the two cultural capitals of Wales and the South West. Many people are put off by the patina of discount stores and empty shops left by high street brands relocating their stores on the outskirts of town. But, as it turns out, they have left in their wake a multitude of viable vacant spaces which artists and community groups are beginning to move into. Slowly but surely, people rather than retailers are moving back into the city centre, and what they're bringing back into the city, or making more visible at least, is it's soul.

I graduated from BA Photographic Art at Newport in 2011 and was one of the few in my year who stayed in the city. In the time since then spent living, working and engaging with artists and residents in this community, it is clear there is an energy that still thrives in this old city. We are on the cusp of change. Through working with the Community Arts Development team at The Riverfront, I became involved with The Project Space in 2014, an artist led initiative that has assumed the roll of a creative community space in the heart of Newport's Commercial Street. Developed to occupy vacant retail units and fill them with exhibitions, workshops and events, the function of these spaces are two fold; they encourage artists of all ages to come in, in this case students of University of South Wales, access space, exhibit their work and develop a skill set specific to their practice, whilst simultaneously bringing art to the high street and directly engaging with the community. We've had incredible success with this project so far, and are now hoping to develop it into a longer-term resource. It has been a pleasure to work with this group of students and to see their work develop as they have researched and responded to the river, the community and the history that surrounds it – I hope they continue to do so for many more years to come. Equally, what excites me is to see what happens next.

Let us return to the Newport Ship. After it's discovery, construction work on The Riverfront was suspended whilst a team of experts and volunteers painstakingly excavated, dismantled and recovered the Ship piece by piece. Utterly unique, the investment of time, money and effort put into it's preservation has ensured that the Ship will be preserved for future generations to discover and explore. Imagine what else is out there under the surface. Imagine what else there is to celebrate about Newport. Imagine what else will come in on the tide.

Kate Mercer

Amy Harris







## Painting by Numbers

The landscape of South Wales is often one that is overlooked due to its apparent perpetual greyness. However, in this work a different point of view is offered. *Painting by Numbers (1/25th at 30-40mph)* is a series of photographs that attempt to embody painting and movement through photography. The camera is acting as both paintbrush and canvas, taking and making the image.

Driving along one of the closest roads to the River Usk to capture a moment and feeling in the bright and rushing colours; a journey to make art? These colours, shapes and spaces can fill a frame allowing them to be noticed, although never assuming that the landscape itself can be contained.









## The Innocent Siren

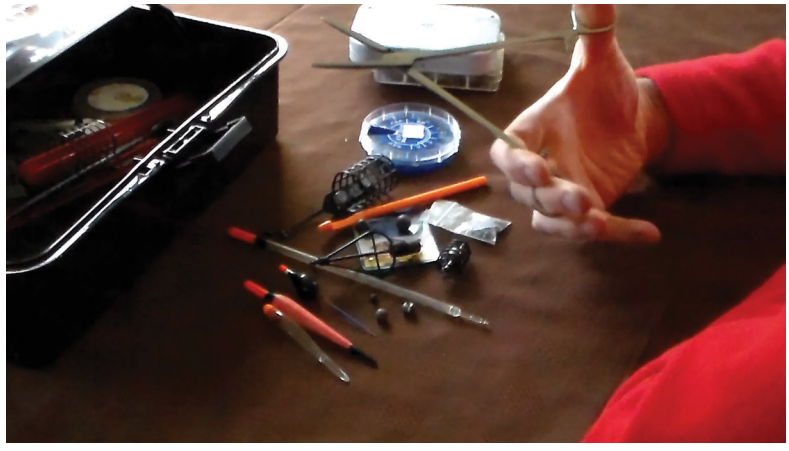
Single Channel Video 03:45 min

In Greek mythology, the Siren is presented as a promiscuous deviant. As sailors cross her path on their voyage, she draws them in with her intoxicating song and sentences them to a cruel death.

*The Innocent Siren* offers an alternative reading of this intriguing and complicated character by placing her in a position where she herself is lured towards the viewer. In doing so, she is removed from her apparent dominant position and is, instead, invited to reveal her more innocent side.







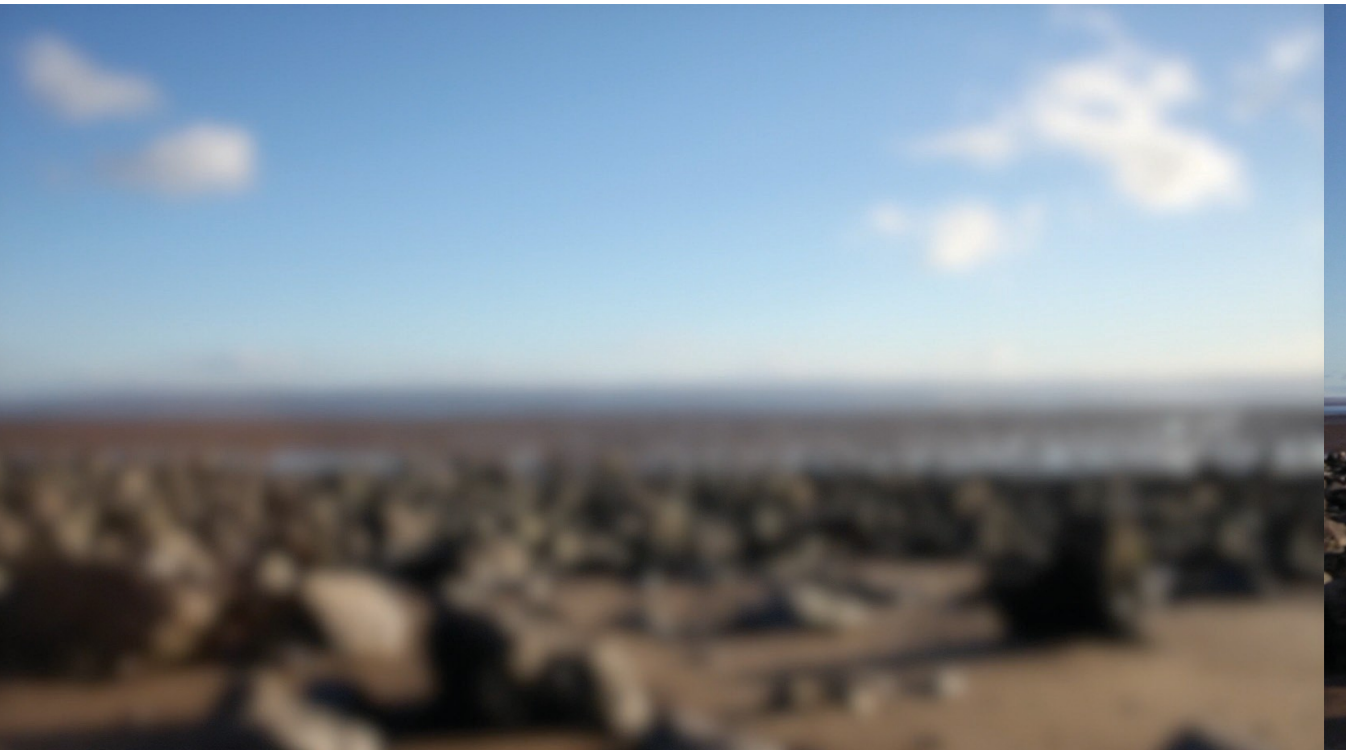
# USK

Single Channel Video 08:13 min

In the past two years 6.1 million people have gone fishing, the vast majority of which were men.In the 1970s only 150 women were recorded to have taken part in the sport. However, more recently fishing has become more acceptable for women and there are even special fishing clubs. I have always enjoyed being a woman in a predominately male sport and more importantly I have always enjoyed spending time with my dad.

Usk focuses on the time we spend together and how passionately he speaks about the different equipment, techniques and memories that he has. I have documented him meticulously describing this obsession.

This work suggests that perhaps a love of fishing is not necessarily about fishing at all, instead it is a pastime that can bridge generational and gender divides and can function as an, apparently necessary, escape from everyday life.





## The Need To Escape

Single Channel Video 80:00 min

*The Need to Escape* is about trying to find a place to escape to and to be able to forget about the thoughts that are mostly in the mind.

West Usk is a place where I can go to and sit and think about my thoughts. After a while I find myself focusing out onto the river, as it seems that everything has stood still and the time has stopped. At this point my thoughts slowly start to empty from my mind.

The blur effect throughout the video shows how long it takes for the thoughts to be cleared from my mind and how long it takes to focus on the landscape.







## Transition

"Newport has often been a town headed by small people in big suits, and 'oversight' is the saddest epitaph I can think of. The people of Newport are worthy of more, and better, attention". - Gary Raymond, Senior Editor, *Wales Arts Review*

Over the last 5 years I have experienced many changes. I had to adapt quickly to new places, cultures and languages. The mix of fresh and salt water in the mouth of the River Usk symbolises this for me: where two cultures merged, where the river becomes sea.

*Transition* is a metaphoric representation of Newport City and the River Usk. These aesthetically pleasing images of the estuary were deliberately destroyed by immersing the film in a mixture of salt and fresh water, river mud and seaweed. This conscious process suggests the economic deterioration that Newport and the river have suffered in the last few years.

These images offer a glimmer of hope: their aesthetic is contradictory. The partial destruction of each transparency does not, as we might expect, diminish their appeal, instead, each image has become unique and different from the original landscape. It exposes the potential for positive change.

Sometimes we have to destroy things to make them better.


Macarena Costan











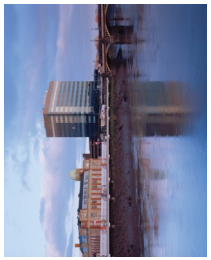



# Along the Usk

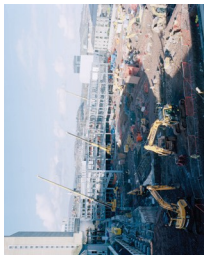
*Along the Usk* is a visual exploration of Newport's landscape, concentrating on in-between (of seemingly no interest) spaces. These photographs could be described broadly as a recording of the workings of contemporary society.

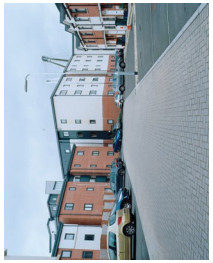
My research showed that, like many cities in Europe and America, Newport is undergoing economical changes. Smaller businesses are closing under the pressure of corporations that often provide services faster and cheaper. The corporations use more "efficient" ways of producing and distributing their goods, contributing to the already high levels of unemployment.

The process of making these images consisted of long walks, mostly in the city centre. A film camera was placed on a tripod with a small aperture; this lengthy process allowed me to be more sensitive to the underlying structures within the space and to the possible readings of the images. Setting off with no preconceived route, the aim was to produce formally attractive photographs and to show different textures of normality, avoiding the clichéd images seen in my research.
























TICKET COLLECTION













## Sequences of Liquid Mortality

Top left: *Awakening*. Single Channel Video 02:48 min
Bottom left: *Baptism*. Single Channel Video 03:00 min
Top right: *Confession*. Single Channel Video 00:55 min

Drown (Verb)

To die through submersion and
inhalation of water

Immerse yourself.
Flowing around you.
Fear. Panic. Anxiety.
Ying and yang.
Sustainer of life.
Bringer of death.
Reaching out.
Always slipping. Gasping.
The pain resides in your chest.
When all is still, you will float again.

**'Mae yna bethau i'w cael mewn pren'**

Mae yna bethau i'w cael mewn pren
sy'n fwy na'r graen ei hun,

yn llond o atgofion hen deithiau'r
siasis llyfn, llaith, yn llonydd
ar ei fordaith tawel yn nwrn y glannau –

yr hwylio cwsg, y tonnau clai.

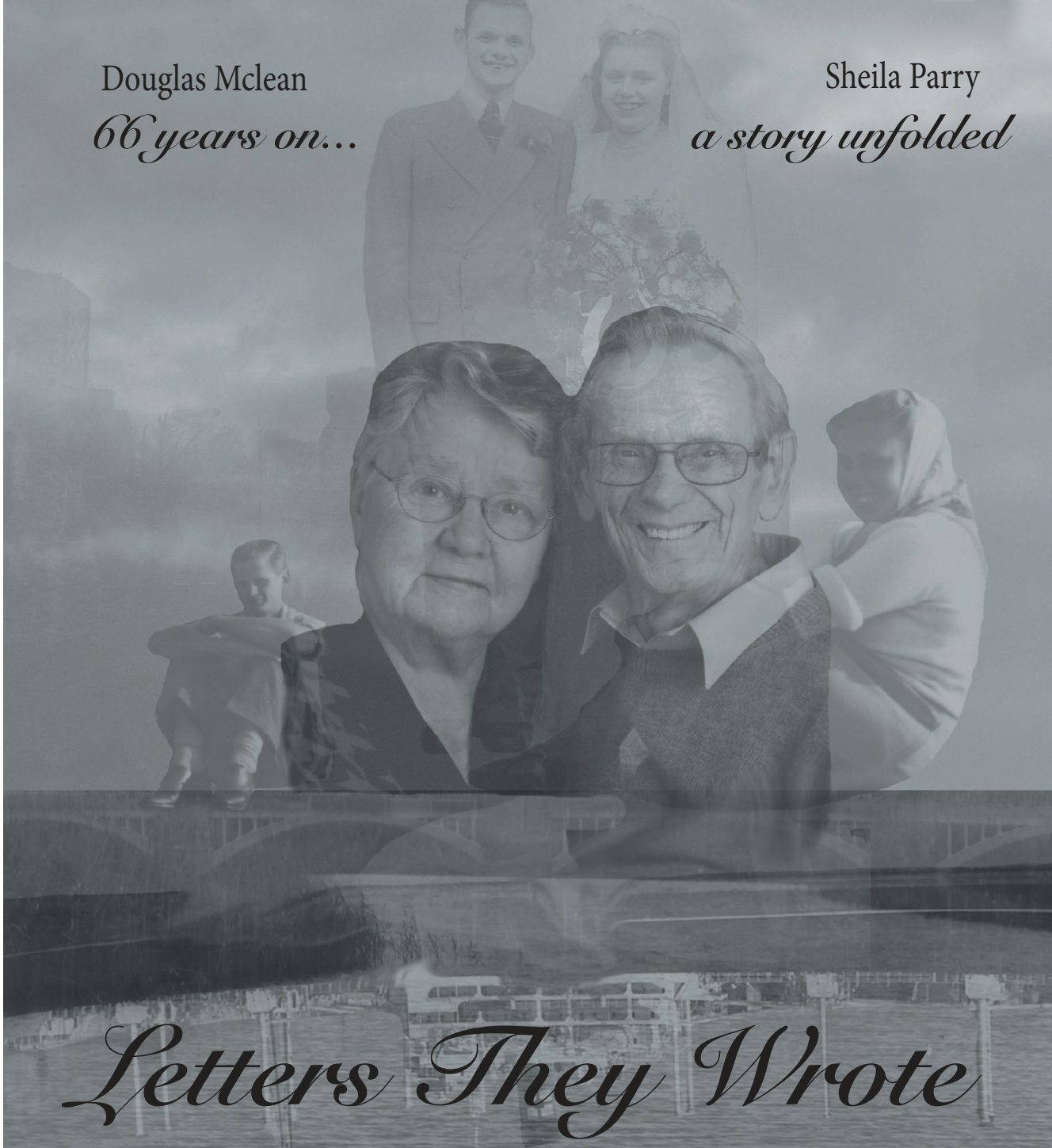
*Steffan Gwynn*

Douglas Mclean

*66 years on…*

Sheila Parry

*a story unfolded*



# *Letters They Wrote*

It was the year 1941. Douglas Mclean was on board the Merchant Vessel Norfolk heading towards a small town in South Wales. Waiting outside Maria's Café, there she was, Sheila Parry - he couldn't believe his eyes; he offered to walk her home. They could only spend two days together before he was called back to sea; just two days, it felt like it was forever. Separated for months at a time they wrote and wrote and wrote, and as time went on their relationship grew and so did their love. A love solidified by the *Letters They Wrote.*



Many deaths have occurred in the River over recent years. A number of missing persons cases have been selected because of the duration of their disappearance.

The eight images in this collection are each made up of layers of individual photographs: one taken for every day that a specific individual was missing. The resulting blurring is intensified the longer the individual remained unfound. For the time they are missing, they are in limbo; they are neither lost nor found and the meaning of these places quickly shifts from beauty spot to memorial.

Brodie Phillips

# Contributors

Rebekah Prentice is currently undertaking the 2nd year of the BA(Hons) degree in Photographic Art at the University of South Wales. Her recent project 'Winter After Forty-Four Summers' is included in the publication and accompanying exhibition.

Kate Mercer is a photographic professional based in Newport, South Wales (UK). Graduating from the University of Wales, Newport in 2011, she remained living and working locally, and has become involved in a number of Newport based projects and initiatives ever since. Primarily a photographer, she is photographic assistant to Magnum Photographer David Hurn, involved with David Barnes' Valleys Re-Envisioned project, Artist Co-Ordinator at The Project Space in Newport and involved with projects with the National Museum of Wales.

Steffan Gwynn was poet in residence at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 2014, and was recently awarded the Geraint George Scholarship for a long poem dealing with the relationship between language and landscape.

BA (Hons) Photographic Art would like to thank everyone who helped with this project, especially Kate Mercer, Steffan Gwynn, Toby Jones, Mike Lewis and Tom Maloney.