

Bla Bheinn, Skye,
looking magnificent

Kirk-Smith, slightly sweaty,
looking less than magnificent

Claire Frances Peasnall Memorial Fund Report 2021, overleaf

Aims and Outcomes from Original Submission

I applied for this award to explore approaches to landscape painting through a month spent camping and working in the Highlands of Scotland, with the underlying wish to “save me from my structured self”. It has been an emotional, productive, life-changing journey, and the aim of complete personal and artistic deconstruction has been achieved. I now in the process of rebuilding myself and my work again.

Rising from this experience is a reinvigorated belief and aims for my way of being as an artist within landscapes henceforth. This mind-shift is not yet properly mirrored in the work, as a gradual loss of set-style and accompanying increases in competence take time, learning, frustrations and prolonged effort; but the process is now very much in progress.

I aimed to explore new materials in the field, which I did, perhaps not as skillfully as I may have hoped, but my learning and mastering of new craft skills are certainly growing.

I wanted also to explore storytelling through works, the experience of living within the landscape for an extended period completely altered my sense of time, understanding for once what it feels like to exist as ‘just another species’. I learned the importance of the give and take of tides, weather fronts and the reading of plant and algal species to understand whether solid ground lay underneath my path, or concealed water and alongside all this a healthy sense of fear or wariness to keep not just safe, but alive.

I have discovered for me that painting is often not enough on its own to communicate stories, it is one aspect of a told whole: a snapshot in an album or one language in a repository of tongues. However painting can work in partnership with other tools, and I am slowly changing self and my career to develop this learning.

Below: The ethereal quartzite slopes of Arkle, Sutherland



This is a detailed topographical map of the Scottish Highlands and Islands. The map shows the following features:

- Islands and Regions:** Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands, and the main Scottish landmass including the Highlands and Islands.
- Major Roads:** A network of roads is shown, with major routes highlighted in red and other roads in yellow. Road numbers are indicated along the routes.
- Towns and Villages:** Numerous towns and villages are marked with dots and labeled, including Inverness, Aberdeen, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and many others.
- Geographical Features:** The map shows the North Atlantic Ocean, the English Channel, and various bodies of water like Loch Ness and Loch Lomond. It also depicts the rugged terrain of the Scottish Highlands.
- Other Labels:** Various other labels are present, such as "SLE OF LEWIS / LEAN LEODHAIS", "ISLE OF SKYE", "ISLE OF MULL", and "LOCH LOMOND".

Essentially over the month spent working in the field I encountered very few people. There were many passing tourists, the (appalling terminology of) 'Staycation' had convinced huge numbers of people to hire motorhomes and take to the Highlands single-track roads, but as soon as you left the rat-run of the main routes and trekked into the hills, or to far-flung beaches then it was quiet, save for the omnipresent wildlife, into whose landscape I had blundered.

Here I encountered remotely soaring eagles, night-grunting red deer, over-friendly pine martens. Perhaps more intriguing to me this time was the most glorious array of invertebrates and flora: the short-lived burst of Scotch Argus butterflies, the strange ovipositing behaviour of certain dragonflies and the quixotic delight of encountering in a upland bog a saxifrage nourishing plentiful flies, alongside sticky, gleaming sundew traps digesting them. The journey here, became not an end in itself, but a beginning to a new future.

Within these Highland landscapes, it is easy to get absorbed completely by the 'epic'. I tried to moderate the overwhelming aspects of this by studying the small details too, this is sometimes not as easy as it sounds and much of my work mirrored this easy trap. We are naturally drawn to awe, the history of the landscape genre almost demands it. However, place is defined on an array of scales and levels, and this is how I should be investigating it.

A gathering of a geologist, meteorologist, physicist, archaeologist and social historian all staring at the same view, will have different mental pictures of its import. An artist should be aware of all of them; we need active, curious, informed minds to be able to visually interpret what we encounter. It is not to say that each image is required to communicate all these strands, but we should be able to know enough to decide which to focus upon and which to reject in a painting.

The weather was a complete personality in this experience, upon whom I relied, against whom I railed and, at times, I blessed for its small mercies. Rarely have I been so thoroughly lashed, sodden and baked, and often within the same day. All these lived experiences found their way not only into my paintings and exploratory drawings, but also into written prose and audio discussions that I developed throughout the journey.

Right: Sundew in all its bejewelled,, boggy, insectivorous glory.





During the month I achieved the quietude and freedom from social pressures to concentrate on furthering not only my exploration into painting, but also, just as I had wished for in my proposal, my overall direction as an artist. I was aware of, but had underestimated the strange, beguiling and interfering demands of society upon ourselves, the multitude of distractions and the daily unimportances.

This was a tough trip though. After many years of teaching rather than practicing, it brought into sharp focus my current artistic limitations and the realisation that I need to keep pushing through new experimentations, frustrations and learning to regain the visual traction that is core to my life.

For giving me the space and time to discover this , I cannot thank St Hugh's and Claire Peasnall's family enough. As I lay in the tent at night I often thought of Claire and her exuberant, painterly, fireworking of flora and fauna. Her mantra of "letting go" and courting chance were mainstays of my journey. I am still working on this premise, so thank you Claire.

Left: Clouds over an evening Assynt landscape.



Sketch, Loch Sunart

A supposedly empty landscape just wriggles with static and cyclical vitality.

Key Changes to the Predicted

1. Not wanting to state the obvious, but Covid-19 has impacted all our lives in a plethora of ways and, as to be expected, there were repercussions for this trip. Safety measures meant that all Highland bothies were closed, social distancing was to be maintained at campsites, pubs and other social spaces, masks were to be worn indoors and no mixing of groups of people was advised.

I walked to the Strabeg bothy in the foothills of Foinaven anyway to try and understand what I may be able to achieve in future in these welcome respites, and will revisit when the coast is clearer, with a working plan (see outcomes and future section).

2. The unexpected kindness of strangers. One crofter, after talking to him, offered me accommodation for the night in an old scout tent on the top of his land (pictured overleaf). It was like a palace compared to my place, with camp beds and deck chairs, a total, unexpected treat. Overnight I left the front of the tent open to listen to the huffing red deer that came down off the hills, watch the activities of lumbering ravens, bickering stonechats, fledgling buzzards and the sun rising over a glowing Mull.

Below: Strabeg Bothy,, the nearby dense birch woodland to the left is a site of special scientific interest with a splendour of long-lived mosses and liverworts. The mountain thrust-faults down the valley to the right are also the stuff of tectonically-minded geologists' wet dreams.





Trusty hovel



Blessed mansion



Ard Neakie

Field-sketch of the
limestone quarry with
views down the Moine
Thrust .

Mixed media on board
56 x 76cm

Award Expenditure (predicted and actual)

With the exception of the two midway journey pauses that ate up the overheads budget and then some, all other predicted expenditures were reasonably in line. I prepared most of the art surfaces myself from a timber merchant, and from a discount supplier, and so managed to come in under budget with those. I did have a sneaky beer in a pub on Glencoe though... it was a very hot day.

Project Expenditure			
Item	Predicted	Actual	Notes
Travel	£260	£289	Travel to and around Scotland: fuel; ferry x2 (Corran & Mallaig); boat fees to Coriusk, Skye.
Campsite fees	£150	£134	Campsite facilities 8 days (Achmelvich & Glencoe), 2 days honesty box on John Muir site
Subsistence	£280	£282	@ roughly £10 per day for 28 days
Materials	£255	£205	Supports, primer, paint, varnish etc.
Overheads	£55	£90	Airbnb (2 nights) to break journey halfway to and from Highlands
Total	£1000	£1000	

Right: The Corran ferry to the Ardnamurchan Peninsula. I chose not to follow the footprints on this occasion.



Associated Activities



To focus on landscape painting again as a genre, there was more to do than just creating images, so:

- I undertook renewed research into the philosophies, aesthetics and contemporary contexts of landscape art to back up my investigations, including:
 - visits to relevant exhibitions/installations across venues in Scotland
 - connecting with arts practitioners working in the Highlands in online discussion groups prior to the trip
 - sourcing of key critical texts on the subject to read whilst on tour, to develop my areas of knowledge
- In an effort to understand the land as a multifaceted phenomenon I liaised with Highland geologists, visited geoparks and conservation centres, and joined Highland land management organisations.
- I learned from online discussion groups with wild campers, climbers and bothy groups where to discover the remoter areas of Highland landscape and the practicalities of accessing them safely, respectfully and leaving no trace.
- Whilst in Scotland I engaged with crofters, musicians, residents, tourists to the degree that C-19 restrictions allowed. I will develop this aspect upon my return, hopefully under more favourable, socially available conditions.
- I spent quality time in the field discussing the concepts of landscape interpretation with an art historian and since returning I undertook a similar experience with an respected author, both were luminary experiences; I revisit the audio capture of these regularly for intellectual fuel .

Lessons I Learned

I indicated previously this trip was tough, but perhaps even more challenging was the painting. I have (through tantrums and dizzy highs) come to understand much more about my approaches to creating artwork, and I have also learned some pretty decent field skills en route too, thanks to my pocket SAS Survival Handbook. Here is a summary of lessons learned:

- After 11 years of teaching and assessing work, you can become your own worst critical enemy even before a mark has been made on the surface due to the weight of learned histories, visual precedents and current practices. We all naturally want to be aware of these, but sometimes it can seriously hamper personal progress. The freedom and quietude of the spaces in which I was working assisted in not necessarily silencing the inner critic, but at least gagging it for a bit, enabling me to make loads of fantastical mistakes, without too much personal recrimination. Upon these, I can profitably build.
- I underestimated the time-consuming practicalities of day to day tent-based nomadism – from repeatedly taking down and putting up, finding suitable sites, the challenges of cooking in a force 8 gale, combatting utterly voracious midges and living in the same clothes for days on end. However it is all now second nature. My appreciation of showers, shampoo and clean bedding has, however, exponentially grown.





- In storm-force winds, large rocks are advisable to weigh down your tent pegs and ropes. If there are no rocks to be had, lie in the inner tent, safe in the knowledge that at least that bit will still be there in the morning.
- In future, to maximise my working time in the field, as an aside from worrying where I might be able to sleep that night, I will develop a base camp for longer periods of time and 'commute' out from there. In this way I will get to know a place more intimately. I look forward to setting out again next year.
- I have in the past mostly produced imagery for an array of specific purposes, and when released from this stricture one can find oneself initially lost; however I am now developing methods to encourage fresh and changing investigations. Work created in the spirit of exploration, quick and dirty, whilst not end points in themselves possess the essence of the experience and can bear more informed fruit at a later date. "Just make it, Kirk-Smith." became a mantra.
- Midges hate joss sticks and open fires, horseflies love my face and arms, and ticks are ubiquitous. Antihistamines, Smidge and head-nets are absolutely necessary for a day out in the field. Someone considerably designed head-nets with visors in them that help you see what your painting, and little gauzy midge mittens too: winner.
- I have fought over this trip to divest myself of my visual shortcuts and 'go-to stylistics' – this is an on-going learning curve for me, and I will carry the considerateness of approach into each artwork I produce henceforth. Many artists seek a 'style', I now seek to be unrecognizable, therein artistic freedom lies.



Shoreline, Loch Sunart

I made myself quite angry with this piece as I reverted to all my usual shortcut mark-making activities. It is a lesson to be slowly unlearned.

Mixed media
60 x 84cm

- Don't rely on mountains to make your day, they are invariably cloaked in mist or obscured by rainclouds. Make mosses your passion instead and you will never be disappointed.
- Large rucksacks filled with heavy art materials are not conducive to bog-trotting, however an A1 drawing board can actually save you from becoming the next Tollund Man. I need to devise intelligent methods of material load reduction that will allow me to walk further without drowning in peat or getting heatstroke on a hillside, but that still provides me with the potential to work on a largeish scale. I'm working on it.
- Portable composting toilets are remarkably good things. I'm a total convert.
- There was little or mainly no phone signal anywhere I visited. Whilst I really appreciated this quietude, it was not the safest scenario setting out into the wildness each day, as there were a few mishaps on my part. Certainly next time I would get a 2-way radio, which can cover a range of 20-50 miles.
- Don't sit down on a wet, grassy mountainside in waterproof trousers; it's a quick way down though if you're in a rush.
- I need to develop a system of shedding work and replenishing supplies – sending the completed paintings home and creating personal pick-up points for materials. Basically I need to think more like a long-distance hiker.
- Pine martens don't like banana, but adore crunchy peanut butter.



Above: Some other poor bugger that got caught in the bogs, shoe left on marker stone by a helpful shepherd. Not sure what happened to the walker himself.



Sketch, Elgol Shore looking North.

A wishing to be in the mountains rather than experiencing them from the shore.

This wish was, however, achieved after an utterly sodden boat trip to Loch Coriusk – the brooding, unknown and virtually inaccessible freshwater loch nestled in the foothills of the Black Cuillin in the background of this image. Walter Scott described it, somewhat romantically, thus:

*"Rarely human eye has known
A scene so stern as that dread lake,
With its dark ledge of barren stone..."*

The loch itself is pictured overleaf, and the Elgol boatmen have agreed to leave me and the trusty tent there for a few days on my next visit.



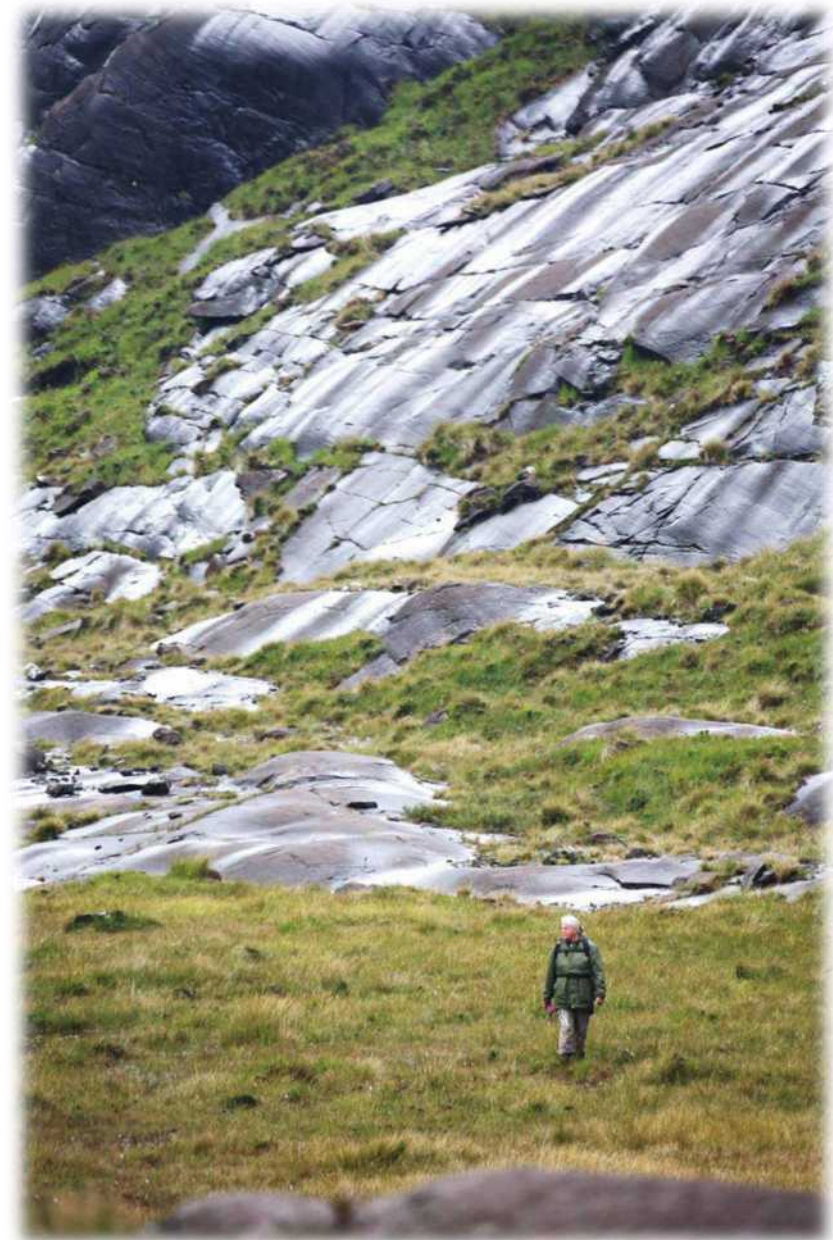
Loch Coriusk & Black Cuillin

...Or "Skull Island" as my niece has since suggested it be renamed.

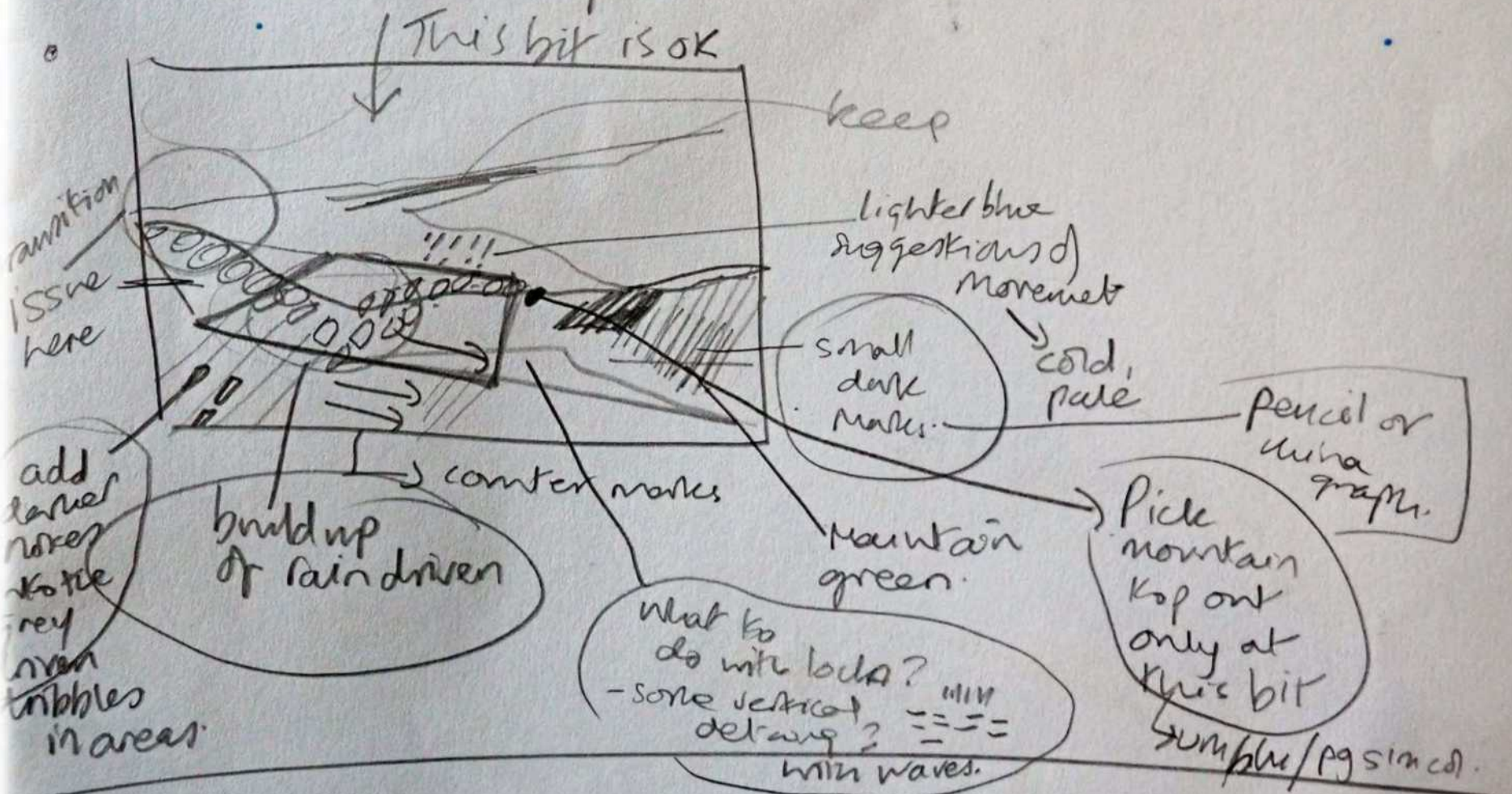
Still Exploring...

Following are some of the many arising questions and actions from this trip for on-going work that I am investigating:

- Did I bring my preconceived ideas to a landscape, or did the landscape itself initiate the work? How can I draw more upon the latter?
- Revisiting: making repeat appointments with places and objects. What are the effects of the passage of time, newly acquired knowledges and altered conditions upon my responses to them?
- Reimagining the strictures of surface, the concept of a painting bound by corners, frames, ratios and 2 dimensionality: too many rules inherent within this. I dislike rules.
- How to develop self and work to make a more spiritual rather than physical response to a landscape? (N.B. this is regarding definitions of spirit other than those hijacked by western theologies).
- Explore more meaningfully the relationship between fieldwork and studio work, the myth/legend of outdoor creation versus the reality of the undertaking and its limitations; alongside the 'truth' of the work- is this diminished by post-experiential development? Is 'truth' important? Actually, now we've begun this, what even is 'truth' in an artwork?
- Developing imagery that holds layers of communication, not just the answer to a question the landscape may have asked of you, but the anticipation of further questions by the viewer: layered artworks. I have absolutely no idea how to do this yet, but I am working on it.



- Confuse into a whole feeling. - details contrast with large sweeps.
- > push strokes.
- no meaning aside from awe.



Working the piece out

Fighting with the Eriboll weather piece (next page).

Mixed media on board
60 x 84cm

Summary: Cross cutting beds - Eriboll



Weather Study, Loch Eriboll

Half a day in the life of a remote coastal loch with the lowest population density in the UK; experienced and summarized. It's totally overworked, but at least I know that, and therefore that's a good start.

Mixed media on board
60 x 84cm

Outcomes & the Future

- I have enough material gathered during this one trip to fuel investigative artworks for at least 3 years. Experiments undertaken in the field, which are rough and improvisatory by dint of physical carrying and making limitation, are being developed into more resolved pieces/interventions which I will return with to the Highlands and reintroduce them to the place of their conception as temporary, documentable pieces. Examples are: development of a series of illustrated prayer flags to be flown within the southern Skye landscape, an underwater piece from Glen Etive that I wish to reintroduce to the mountain stream to document and some site-reactive night-based beach pieces that will require moonlight and rising tide to be shown.
- Many places I visited coincided with the Moine Thrust geological fault system where older Torridonian sandstones and ancient gneiss have been thrust on-top of younger Cambrian rocks (limestones and quartzites). This was not a predetermined aspect of the trip. I chose the places along this feature for their remoteness without registering the underlying connection, but I then quickly noticed certain geologies were becoming more pertinent to my studies as I progressed. I foresee a collaboration with the Northwest Highland UNESCO Geopark growing out of my research, and I have been learning more from their resident geologists as research towards a shared investigation.
- Due to the Covid-19 situation limiting some aspects of integration, I plan to return to the Highlands in 2022 and 2023, with the developed work to more thoroughly undertake interactions with both residents and transients to the area. The bothies should (theoretically) be open by then, and I will approach the Bothy Association to place more developed pieces within their properties, relevant to walkers, shepherds, deer stalkers and other visitors. With the hope of learning about their experiences through discussion over the work.
- Having experienced the fantastic conservational and access work the John Muir Trust have undertaken in looking after the most remote and biodiverse Highland landscapes, I have joined them and will be investigating how I can work with them as an artist to assist their vision, protection and interpretation of these last remaining wild places. I owe this landscape and the species that occupy it so very much. One can't just take, I need to find an impactful way to give and support it too.
- The visual experimentation, time of quiet reflection and the personal space I have had the luxury of on this trip has greatly inspired new and more exploratory approaches to a book I am currently writing and illustrating. The experimental interplay of narrative and imagery/audio/video I played with over this past month will take me in a completely new career trajectory. It's about time for that diversification. Simply put, the scope of this Highland project has fuelled my creative development of this book concept in ways I had previously not envisaged. I am ready for this next step now.

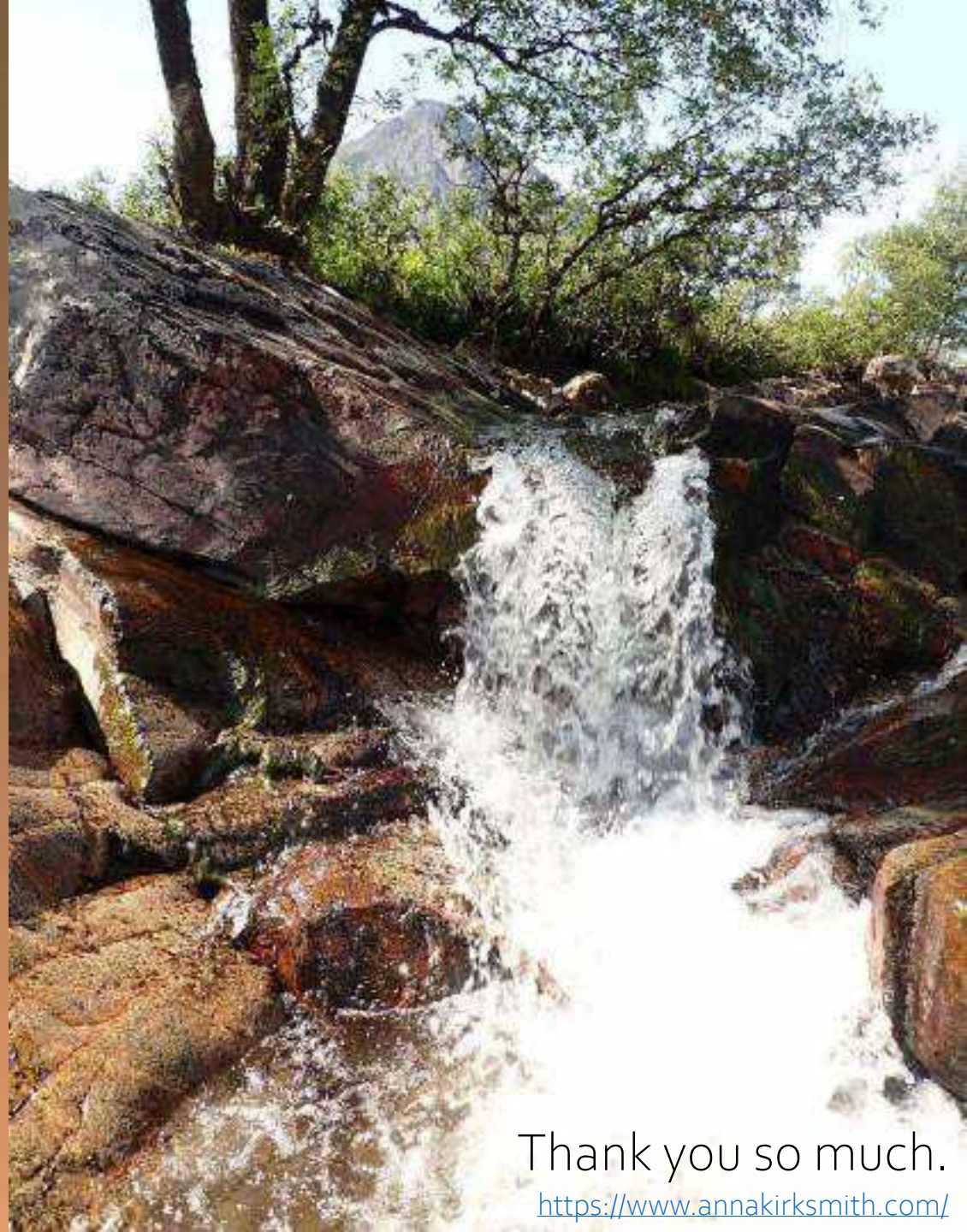


The Pap of Glencoe

Gold-ringed dragonfly
ovipositing i.e. laying eggs,
in Glencoe Lochan within
the nurturing reflection of
the Pap.

Oil on board
60 x 84cm

ST HUGH'S FOUNDATION — *FOR THE* — ARTS



Thank you so much.

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